

# Interdiscursivity in McCormick's *Sold*: A Critical Discourse Analysis<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the manifestation of interdiscursivity in Patricia McCormick's novel *Sold* in the light of supportive, essentialist, traditional, patriarchal discourse conventions versus contradictory, hybrid, mixed discourses of change. The paper approaches the subject from the perspective of critical discourse analysis, feminist discourse analysis, and James Paul Gee's semiotic system of seven building tasks of language. McCormick's representation of girl trafficking in Nepali rural areas and her exoticizing of the society is found to be guided by her prior assumption and generalization of the third world countries. In spite of the presence of counter-discourses like government action, social protest organizations, joint effort against trafficking, the author only highlights Western discourse conventions vis-à-vis the third world like submissive womanhood, patriarchy, poverty, subsistent economy, and illiteracy. The paper discovers that the novelist, like a researcher, uses vignettes as tools for investigating into Nepali society, but they show her subscription to Western interdiscursivity, which makes her blind to the reformative measures afoot in Nepal to arrest the situation of girl trafficking. The novel is about a social problem but the novelist's efforts are seen to be invested in effeminizing, romanticizing or exoticizing the Nepali society rather than in improving the situation.

**Key Words:** seven building tasks, critical discourse analysis (CDA), discourse convention, essentialist identities, interdiscursivity

## I

Patricia McCormick's novel *Sold* (2006), offset in the remote areas of Nepal and the red-light areas of Indian brothel, raises serious issues of child prostitution, sex slavery, and girl trafficking as faced by a thirteen year old girl, Lakshmi who is rescued by an American. The American readers, for whom the book has been written, read it as contemporary South Asian literature about political injustice and an effort of transformative global action. Prevalent poverty, subsistent rural economy, and women's maltreatment in the Nepali society due to the stereotypical patriarchal domination are the issues figuring in the novel. The American writer appears to be an enthusiastic observer of the village people's life, their values and culture. She seems to be interested in finding out the causes of girl trafficking in a third world country like Nepal. Although McCormick mentions Anuradha Koirala and her *Maiti Nepal* shelter for women and children, in her acknowledgements she misses the possibly presence of social movement counter discourse against girl trafficking. The police checking at the border are very tight that Lakshmi and Uncle Husband have to improvise themselves as a couple to escape the police at the border. This also indicates that social protest organizations and civil society against girl trafficking must have been active; otherwise, government authority would not have been so watchful at the border checkpoint. The writer's portrayal of the problem seems to be one-sided. McCormick presents an exotic image of Nepali society for the American readership at home.

Interdiscursivity in the novel, *Sold*, is created by the supportive and likely discourses of poverty, traditional patriarchy, submissive womanhood etc., sustaining and backing up the main discourse of girl trafficking into sex slavery. The interdiscursivity highlighted in the text creates photographic and static society rather than society in dynamic and living form, the society beyond transformation, and hence prone to colonization and victimization. Contradictory discourses causing interdiscursivity are back-grounded in the novel. Counter discourses like government action against girl trafficking, social protest movement are so implicitly depicted that it is almost impossible for the American readers to infer about the presence of counter discourses contributing for the contradictory interdiscursivity.

Manika Subi Lakshmanan (2011) has rightly read *Sold* as an American imperialist allegory. She examines the cover of the book, its design, text, color, and image and finds it "exotic" (p. 78), the representation of "repressed Oriental woman" (p. 78), only to be rescued by an unnamed "American" (p. 84), possibly representing all Americans. I quote Lakshmanan (2011) at length:

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It is unfortunate that considering the courageous work done by several Nepali and Indian women, *Sold* portrays the “Third World” women as one whose liberation and identity cannot emerge from within her own society and culture. One can almost dismiss the American presence as the necessary narrative ploy that makes the text relevant to an implied American reader. It can also be read as an instructive narrative about a nation’s export of goodwill, individual freedom, and enlightened modernity. From humanitarian point of view, one may argue that the right to protect is above and beyond nations, cultures, and ideology. Others may contend that imagination is an artistic license which should not be conflated with political nuances. (p. 87)

Lakshmanan observes the cover of the book and finds the design exotic and strange to the American readers. The cover looks strange. It attracts the readers. So it is good piece of advertisement. Yellow saffron color of the cover page, Lakshmanan has associated with “Indian subcontinent” (p. 78). The passivized verb form SOLD and the submissive gaze of the Third World woman at the onlookers, her covered head, seemingly *burka*, exotic for the Western onlookers, lead her to the conclusion that it is the American allegory of “neocolonialism.” The onlookers of the gaze are Americans. So Lakshmanan finds the novel “relevant to the implied American reader,” and she reads it as an “instructive narrative about a nation’s export of goodwill, individual freedom, and enlightened modernity.” Lakshmanan finds an obvious politics in the novel.

Lakshmanan has critiqued *Sold* from the perspective of American neo-imperialistic attempt in the representation of a third world country society, however, this paper attempts to explore the gap between back-grounded social protest activities taking place in the researched culture at the time of the novel’s inception and the contentious representation of the culture in the novel. In spite of the seriousness of the issue the book has raised, it lacks critical investigation from the counter perspective from that of the author. This type of research can assist in positing counter perspective to the western hegemony and imperialistic paternalism, i.e., American rescuing third world women from the clutches of the third world men, is hence significant for strengthening consciousness of the third world readership.

My points of contention in this paper, therefore, develop from the overwhelming problems in the novel *Sold*, that include: the depiction of women characters like Bajai Sita, Aunt Bimala, Aunt Mumtaz and Shilpa as evil to women themselves; depiction of Lakshmi, the narrator, as an object; stereotypes prevalent in society support patriarchy; and male figures like Stepfather, Uncle Husband, and Krishna are effeminized, lacking masculine stereotypes, hollow without the traditional masculine ideals of protector of their women, ambivalently portrayed male figures. McCormick assumes so strongly established patriarchy in the society where the patriarchal figures are effeminized, and the patriarchy being practiced upon continuously against their favor by women themselves. Seemingly unlike ingredients have been concocted, to the readers from the society portrayed. The women in need of rescue suspect rescuers like police, American, good men like uncles and fathers, that they are under the hegemony of bad people. The most serious of the problems in the novel is the portrayal of traditional society, that follow the discourse conventions; and denial of the existence of dialectical relationship and heterogeneous discourses. One dimensional depiction of discourse has blocked the possibility of discussing gender identities in new ways. There is no problem with the issue the novel has raised; however, the manner and procedures of portrayal can be noticed to be questionable. The type of writing demands in-depth knowledge and research on the society but the writer seems to be writing for the purpose of justification of her predetermined assumption on the social problem in relation to a particular society. The writer’s positionality, her portrayal of an American as the rescuer in the novel, the omission of the prevalent contradictory discourses against trafficking and so on, have been the problematic critical issues the discourse has generated. But McCormick in one of the interviews published on her personal website justifies that she wrote the novel for the American audience, at the time of extensive media coverage on the issue, especially for the adults who would want to read about the in-depth analysis of the problems faced by their peers round the world. In this sense the novel seems to be the writer’s effort in exoticizing and romanticizing the third world problems rather than developing empathetic identification with the victim. Despite all this it should not be forgotten that in the globalized world social problems at one place cannot remain unnoticed for a long time even if the society that exercises them does not pay heed to them. Research hits where the problem is.

Another point of contention can be on the use of vignettes as the most important methodological procedure, in McCormick’s words, in her interview, to explore the “inherently fractured” society “to call on the reader to engage his/ her imagination in the story telling process to fill in the blanks”. When the serious social problem is portrayed with writerly imagination, in the vignettes written by her without in-depth exploration, demanding to fill the gap by reader’s imagination in such a way, the intent becomes exaggeration and exoticization of the problem. Richard Bownas has used vignettes as empirical methodological approach in order to measure caste discrimination in urban and rural Nepal, but he asked his respondents to complete their stories in vignette form. According to Bownas, when there are little data available, sociologists anthropologists use mixture of closed and open-ended questionnaire in order to collect ideas from the respondents on contentious issues, in the form of vignettes (p. 1). Sometimes the problems with vignettes can occur when the stories are filled with generic and

politically correct answers, when author's positionality, ideology, and pre-assumption are at work, and when the writer skips through some vignettes.

The tentative conclusion the paper reaches to, after in depth textual analysis is: all the problematic moments created in the novel are meant for the presence of several subtopics or the micro discourses like poverty, subsistence economy, illiteracy, traditional patriarchy and so on, the writer has sought to establish in the text, supporting the macro discourse of sex slavery. Writers use certain grammar structure and special words to build performativity in language. Certain structures are used to build or destroy relationship. The expression, *kubul hai*, the utterance denoting agreement from the marrying couple, for instance, in Arab culture, performs the action of marriage, *talak*, in the same way, destroys the relationship in divorce. Performativity and continuation of discourse convention, making women's position vulnerable, in traditional patriarchal society, by women themselves, has been strongly established in the text. Whenever we speak or write, we build one or more of seven areas of reality, what James Paul Gee has called seven building task of language. These tasks are the seven building tools for discourse analysis; namely, significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign system and knowledge. In order to enforce the argument, I have applied James Paul Gee's seven building tasks of language to analyze the text. In order to see the relation between different discourses that create interdiscursivity, I have also utilized the feminist CDA of Izabel Magalhaes, and to see the transformation of the past into new identity of womanhood, I have also observed the notions of Norman Fairclough and Mary Talbot in this context.

## II

Lakshmi's background is evoked in the opening scene of the novel *Sold*. Lakshmi and Ama inspect their leaking thatched house and compare it with neighbor's house with tin roof thus:

A tin roof means that the family has a father who doesn't gamble away the landlord's money playing cards in the tea shop. A tin roof means the family has son working at the brick kiln in the city. A tin roof means that when the rain comes, the fire stays lit and the baby stays healthy. (p. 1)

The lines inform creative writers careful and interesting investigation on the prevalence of poverty in the traditional patriarchal society where the patriarch is irresponsible and unresponsive to the family problems. The novel in the form of vignettes, the short description and character sketch, looks like creative writer's diary. There are altogether 177 of such vignettes in the novel. The passage under the first vignette entitled "A Tin Roof," depicts Lakshmi's poverty and their hope into bleaker context. A Tin Roof is the bleaker dream that repeats in every sentence in the passage. The passage reveals their poverty caused by gambling and drunkard father and the absence of son in the house. The passage fore-grounded in the beginning of the novel, is significant. Paul Gee's first building task of significance can be applied here. The micro-discourses significantly contribute to the principal discourse of trafficking and sex slavery. This moment also fulfils Paul Gee's sixth building task of connection. The moment has connection to the incidents that follow in the novel. Scarcity of food, drunkard and gambling stepfather are the causes of the leaking roof, and of course poverty can be linked to Lakshmi's fate in the incidents of the novel that follow. Irresponsible and irresponsible patriarch in the house yet preference of male figure is significant. Warm and secure tin house is the result of responsible patriarch, and on the other hand, leaking house, poverty, scarcity of food are the results of irresponsible patriarch. This fact has been significantly emphasized throughout the novel. The significance building task has been associated to connection as well.

Women in traditional society identify themselves with men. Even though there is crippled and mangled body of a male, it is valued to a woman, and she has to identify with him. In traditional society, males' texts are consumed by women. Magalhaes (2005) terms the phenomena as "traditional family discourse" (p. 178), in which "voice of the culprit, prosecutors, defense lawyers, judges, and even victims' voice... represent positive image of the culprit (men) and negative image of the victim (women)" (p. 186). Under the vignette "The Difference Between a Son and a Daughter", for instance, in *Sold*, Stepfather is depicted as a man having withered and useless arm. While other men go to cities for work, "he goes up to the hill each day to play cards" (p. 8). Yet Ama says, "We are lucky, we have a man at all..., I am to honor and praise him, respect and thank him for taking us in after my father died" (p. 8). We see the connection of these lines with traditional family discourse. Santos as cited in Magalhaes (2005) comments, "traditional family discourse... institutionalizes women's inferiority in relation to men" (p. 186). Woman's identity in the novel is made like this: "But a girl is like a goat. Good as long as she gives you milk and butter. But not worth crying over when it's time to make a stew" (p. 9). Paul Gee's identity building task can be explained here, that women form their identity this way, under traditional family discourse of patriarchy. This way of identifying women in the novel has clear connection with Stepfather's being ready to sell Lakshmi later.

Research conducted by Lima, as cited in Magalhae (2005), has cautioned “girls are concerned about what men say about them, mothers contribute to reproducing their own oppression by shaping their daughters according to traditional values...” (p. 186). This is the case of traditional patriarchal society like in *Sold*. The mother in the novel shapes her daughter the way she herself had been shaped long before. As the novel begins with innocence of Lakshmi’s childhood, everything changes after her first blood. Under the vignette, “Everything I Need to Know”, Ama shapes Lakshmi thus:

‘Before today,’ Ama says, ‘you could run as free as a leaf in the wind. ‘Now,’ she says, ‘you must carry yourself with modesty, bow your head in the presence of men, and cover yourself with your shawl. ‘Never look a man in the eye. Never allow yourself to be alone with a man who is not family. And never look at growing pumpkins or cucumbers when you are bleeding. Otherwise they will rot.’ (p. 16)

This particular moment of first blood is referred to by deictic markers of time “before”, “now”, “never”. Modal verbs follow the deictic. “Before” is followed by “could”, indicating freedom, “now” is followed by necessity marker modal verb “must”, and the future is locked in unconditional “never.” Paul Gee’s connection building task can be noticed here. Lakshmi used to play with each cucumber by naming them and watching them every day, in her childhood, but now, with her bleeding, she is changed totally. We can notice Paul Gee’s identity building task, that she is able to make her new identity of womanhood in connection with her menstruation. Her identity keeps on changing in connection to patriarchy, in connection to poverty, and in connection to the first blood. Lakshmi is able to establish connection between past, present and future being shaped by mother’s guidance. The orally transmitted rules of traditional discourse from mother to daughter have been instrumental in continuing menstrual taboos, restrictions about where you can go and where you cannot, about what you can do and what you cannot, the creation of magnetic field for the effect of menstruation, and how negligence results in punishment -all flourishing and continuing in the absence of alternative multiple discourses.

Though there is the absence of feudal structure for the negotiation and repositioning of the exclusion in the novel, traditional society has an intricate system for the functioning and continuation of such taboos based on superstitions. However, lots of cases of interventions from NGOs, feminists, and social activists have not been considered about in the novel. Coming out of the problem needs education and awareness from within, spontaneously. Does the novel focus on raising consciousness of the victims and social actors from the society and give them agency, or something just manipulated from outside? Awareness from within must have been more effective idea for bringing about transformation. Giving agency to Nepali actor would lead to the solution of the entire problem. But McCormick has given agency to an unnamed American who in fact cannot come to Nepal and solve the problems, and more than that, effeminization of Nepali actors conspires for the serious problem. Because when the novel was written in 2006, there were lots of organizations like *Maiti Nepal*, doing their activism against violence and trafficking of women. Though the writer interviews the victims in *Maiti Nepal* shelter that she acknowledges, she does not mention of the activism of the organizations in her book. In her interview, she labeled them as “silent bystander”, “what hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of the oppressors, but the silence of the bystander”. Thus she makes sentimental appeal so as to accumulate sympathy of the audience and the victim directed to the American agency. Alternative discourses, traditions of protest, the respondents’ awareness have been neglected about in the novel.

From the point of view of Lakshmi, the victim of the trafficking, McCormick has done justice by writing *Sold*. The story in the form of vignettes seems to be narrativization of the victim’s trauma. Good trauma writing traumatizes the reader creating secondary trauma in him. Good narrativization of trauma is written in middle voice, in free indirect speech blending and balancing the first person and the third person, according to Dominick LaCapra (p. 19). It has the quality of repetition and “transference” (LaCapra, p. 36). The Lakshmi’s acting out her trauma by telling it to the writer is the ‘transference’ of her trauma to the reader. This acting out has healing potentiality. Hole in the psyche can be healed by acting out and ‘transference’ of the trauma, but the problem with trauma writing is perspectivization, ethical tilt, and positionality of the writer: the book seems to be written with assumptions, to establish a statement due to political motivation and ideology at work. In her interview, McCormick takes the side of the victim, “doing justice to the women’s stories . . . that their experiences be known and understood by the outside world”. But at the same time she pours her anger against all, whom she labeled, oppressors and silent bystanders, who might not be actually so. She also makes very clever remarks in the interview, “if I had to do it over again, I’d rewrite it to show the brave work that local people are also doing to fight trafficking”. This reveals her politics.

The next set of rules, “City Rules”, also show the same type of feminine submissive discourse. Ama passes the conventional discourse from her generation to her daughter’s generation. There is no possibility of dialectic interdiscursivity and problematization of “essentialist identities” in the novel, whereas “the logic of indeterminacy and contingency allows us to discuss gender identities in new ways” (Bhabha as cited in Magalhaes, 2005, p. 197). But the structural blindness caused by patriarchal order of society gets highlighted in *Sold*:

‘Get up early in the morning before anyone else in the house and be the last one to bed at night. Never sit down in the presence of your mistress or her husband or even in front of the children. And never eat your meal until they have gone to bed. This will prove what a hard worker you are. (McCormick, 2007, p. 53)

All the sets of rules described in *Sold*, also deliver Paul Gee’s sign system and knowledge building task. Lakshmi understands the world around her through the sign system and knowledge manipulated by the structural conventional patriarchy. Magalhaes (2005) sees the “need to invest in women’s education in order for women to be valued as citizens with rights to a position in political life...” (p. 197).

Female evil characters in the novel like Sita Bajai, Aunty Bimala, Aunty Mumtaz and Shilpa also sustain and strengthen patriarchy. All of them are related to brothel, which is opened for males. Aunty Bimala utters serpent’s words to attract Lakshmi, in the city “the girls have sweet cakes everyday... city girls have pretty dress” (p. 46) Just like Ama supports patriarchy by following structural patriarchal rule and delivering them to her daughter, the women related to brothel also betray women in order to sustain the evil patriarchy. Lakshmi is depicted as commodity. She is sold for “no less than eight hundred rupees” (p. 57), as agreed by her Stepfather to Aunty Bimala, who resold her to Uncle Husband for “a bundle of rupees... enough to buy a water buffalo” (p. 78). She was again sold for “ten thousand rupees” (p. 96) to Aunty Mumtaz. There are lots of instances like this where the reader finds authorial comments and control in the vignettes. The creative writer molds the vignettes according to her benefits. Vignettes, the tool for collecting anthropological sociological data, are handled by the writer to fulfill her assumption, but not venturing deep into the phenomena in order to explore many sided problem objectively. The victims are the object of pleasure for men in the brothel, not treated as human beings; rather, as cited above, treated like a goat. Such is the conventional patriarchy, but the patriarchs depicted in the novel, Stepfather, Krishna and Uncle Husband are nothing like masculine characters. Stepfather does not fulfill his fatherly duty, “he goes up to the hill each day to play cards” (p. 8), he is selfish “buying vest for himself” (p. 2), “sold Ama’s earring” (p. 25), and gambled away the money. Krishna is represented by Lakshmi as “the boy with sleepy cat eyes, the one I am promised to in marriage” (p. 3), nothing like masculine figure. The mismatching collocation of the words ‘uncle’ and ‘husband’ in Uncle Husband cannot be masculine figure either. Readers can see Paul Gee’s relation building task and politics building task in this improvisation game. In order to escape the border police they form the new relationship. All the characters described here are ambivalently depicted in the novel. They are the agents of traditional patriarchy and following the “discourse convention” (Magalhaes, 2005, p. 197).

Women characters in the novel are depicted very passive, contributing slavishly to the traditional structural patriarchy. Vance as cited in Mary Talbot (2005) has rightly commented “if women increasingly view themselves entirely as victim through the lens of the oppressor and allow themselves to be viewed that way by others, they become enfeebled and miserable” (p. 167). Lakshmi questions women’s fate in the novel, “Why must women suffer so?” Ama’s answer is “simply to endure is to triumph” (p. 17). They do not refuse to be victim; rather Lakshmi is determined to triumph against all odds at the Happiness House, the brothel. Taking endurance and passivity as triumph and bravery is the result of “programmed submissive behavior” (Dworkin as cited in Talbot, 2005, p. 167). The discourse related to border police (p. 80), in the novel is made bleaker by the “sequential interdiscursivity” (Fairclough, p. 169) of traditional patriarchy, that is, interdiscursive situation caused by hybrid and mixed discourses is blocked and sequential traditional discourses are strengthened. The women in need of rescue suspect and fear police (p. 162), the American, good men like uncles and fathers (pp. 208, 212), because according to Magalhaes (as cited above), under traditional patriarchy, voices of the culprits, lawyers, judges and even victims speak and believe in the prosecutors’ voice. Contradictory discourse remains back grounded and discourse convention prevails to continue in this situation.

Patricia McCormick has done praiseworthy job by writing this novel and raising the heart touching issue of girl trafficking into sex slavery. The task of writing the novel *Sold* would not have been possible for a foreign writer without much research into an unfamiliar society. But her politics behind writing the book and portrayal of the American rescuer brings her tireless research to the surface. As pointed out by Lakshmanan (described above), the novel is targeted to American readers, “It can be read as an instructive narrative about a nation’s export of goodwill, individual freedom, and enlightened modernity” (p. 87). When we read the novel carefully we find many exoticizing moments in it. For instance, the description of loo (hot wind during summer) in the mountain (p. 11), the moments of Stepfather, having withered and useless arm (p. 8) winning motorcycle in gambling and riding it in the mountain (p. 49), while Aunty Bimala and Lakshmi walk for two and a half days to reach the cart trail (p. 63), and so on, are untrustworthy to Nepali readers. The portrayal of American as rescuer from the brothel has also writer’s politics in it.

Agency has been given to an unnamed American in the novel who rescued the victim from the brothel. The victim must have written about the true rescuers and the rehabilitation organization in her vignettes, from the fact that the writer used vignettes as the methodological approach in order to make investigation into the issue at hand. Had the writer given agency to native activism or agency to the victim it would have been better justice. The victim is portrayed as passive, like an object, represented by passivized verb form “Sold”. She has no ability to make choices. With agency comes empowerment, which

includes improvement, well-being, security, and public life. But agency and empowerment are denied either to the victims or to the activists fighting against the girl trafficking into sex slavery.

### III

To conclude, Patricia McCormick's novel *Sold* explores multiple layers of meaning when read in the light of Paul Gee's seven building tasks of language. In spite of the fact that the novel has raised the issue of girl trafficking, it has some romanticization of native society, its poverty, patriarchal discourse convention with some misinterpretation. The foreign writer in exploring traditional rural society develops curiosity in peculiar way, observing things minutely, and creative writer's beautiful handling of language that a native would fail to do. The writer misinterprets things from incomplete knowledge of the society. The novel has depicted Nepal as the fertile ground for girl trafficking, having bleaker obstacles with almost blocked hybrid and mixed discourses against girl trafficking. Women characters are depicted as passive, assisting the traditional patriarchy, prosecutors' voice represented even by the victims. "Conventional discourse" of "essentialist identities" transferring from one generation to another, in which there is bleaker possibility of discussing gender identities in new ways, has remained the unresolved issue in the novel *Sold*. Evil patriarchy is dominant in the novel. Even victims see things through perpetrators' perspective. Women and children have little value in the subsistence economy depicted in the mountains. Poverty is the recurring theme throughout the novel. In this way, all the problematic moments created in the novel are meant for the presence of several subtopics or the micro discourses supporting the macro discourse of sex slavery. But the novel denies or shades the bleaker light to the existence of counter discourse against the evil. Open ended text of *Sold* has greater potential for further research and creative writing. The price of human life, women's situation in Nepali villages, is still to be investigated. Is it really a biased Western interpretation, or the third world countries are overwhelmed by the big blow on their psyche that they remained silent and indifferent to the serious problems like the ones depicted in the novel, and endured them for ages till the beginning of the twenty first century?

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