

# **Sold Study Guide**

**Sold by Patricia McCormick**

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## Plot Summary

“Sold” is a young adult novel by Patricia McCormick and details 13-year-old Lakshmi’s experiences after being sold into sexual slavery by her stepfather. Lakshmi lives with her mother and stepfather in a rural mountain village in Nepal. Her mother is a devoted homemaker and her stepfather is a wasteful spender, preferring to use money to buy himself clothes, beer, and cigarettes instead of food for his family. When Lakshmi’s stepfather’s debts become too immense, he sells her as a sex slave, during which time Lakshmi is taken to an unnamed city in India, and sold to Mumtaz, the proprietor of Happiness House.

There, Lakshmi is beaten and drugged into submission after she initially refuses to have sex with any of the customers, at which time she is forced to have sex with men in order to pay off the cost for which she has been purchased. Lakshmi befriends some of the other prostitutes, like Shahanna, and does her best to figure out how much longer she has before she earns her freedom. She does her best to continue looking forward to going home, but as each day passes, she feels as if her situation is becoming more and more hopeless. Nevertheless, she focuses on her friendship with some of the other prostitutes, and befriends one of their children.

As time goes on, Lakshmi becomes more desperate to get away from Happiness House, and to get home. She takes on more and more clients and does extreme things in order to make more money, but things begin to change for her when she meets a blonde-haired American man who does not have sex with her, but talks to her, instead. He surprises her by asking her what her name is, and if she is at Happiness House against her will. Lakshmi is too startled and scared to answer. The American leaves a card behind with Lakshmi.

Lakshmi regrets having not spoken to the American, and having not told him the truth about her situation. As her situation grows even worse –she is expected to take on even more men after another prostitute escapes –she decides she has had enough and needs out, now. She later sends out the American’s card with her friend, a tea-seller, to deliver back to the safe place where the American works. A second American man later comes to visit Lakshmi based on the return of the card. While he is there, he comforts her a little by asking her who she is, if she is there against her will, and if she wants to come to the safe place. She finally finds her voice, gives her name, and says she does indeed want to come to the safe place. The American returns several agonizing days later with an American woman, and a group of good Indian men to free Lakshmi. She is then taken away from Happiness House, now 14 years old.



## Section 1, pp. 1 – 51

### Summary

The novel opens in the small, unnamed Nepalese village in the Himalayan mountains where Lakshmi grows up. The story opens with Lakshmi and her mother, Ama, inspecting the thatch roof of their hut. Lakshmi's mother fears what will happen when the heavy rains come since the family is too poor to afford a tin roof.

Lakshmi's best friend Gita has left the village to work in a nearby city as a maid, and Lakshmi tells Ama that she can do the same, to earn wages she will then send home to her family. Though Ama tells her she must stay in school, Lakshmi suspects that her stepfather feels otherwise, and that he sees her - like the cucumbers she is growing in front of their house - as a way to make more money to buy luxuries for himself. Though many men from Lakshmi's village leave for months at a time to work in factories, Stepfather has trouble finding work as a result of an injury in his youth that has left him with only one good arm, and spends his days playing cards and drinking tea.

Life for Lakshmi and her family is hard and they are frequently hungry. Many children in the village die young of sickness and hunger. Four of Lakshmi's siblings died in their first year of life aloe. But though her family is desperate for money, Lakshmi finds joy in everyday life. She recalls the times she had with her friend Gita before Gita left to work in the city: Lakshmi remembers playing hopscotch with her friend in the yard between their huts, brushing each other's hair, and having mud fights in the rice paddies. They daydreamed about their future marriages and what they would name their children. Lakshmi misses her friend, but now that Gita works in the city her family has many luxuries such as electric lights, fancy clothes, money for school.

Lakshmi wakes up one day with a tender, achy feeling in her body and knows that she has had her "first blood" (menstruated for the first time). Ama tells her she must shut herself away in the goat shed for a week until she has been purified. Having her period marks the beginning of Lakshmi's adulthood and Ama tells her what being a woman means - that she will soon be married, and must obey her husband and try to give birth to sons. When Lakshmi asks Ama why must women suffer so, Ama tells her that this has always been the fate of women. "Simply to endure is to triumph," she says. Lakshmi thinks of Krishna, the goatherd from the nearby Himalayan meadow to whom she's promised in marriage, and wonders about her future life with him.

The coming of the dry season in Lakshmi's village means that the village headmen ration water. The crops suffer without rain. Lakshmi's stepfather warns Ama that if the rains don't come soon they will have to sell the earrings that Ama is saving for Lakshmi's dowry. Stepfather has gambled away all of their money, and sells Lakshmi's cucumbers without her permission to pay their debts. When the monsoon finally comes, Lakshmi and Ama dream about what they will buy with the money from their rice crop. Lakshmi, however, knows that her family is badly in debt. The situation worsens when



eight days of nonstop rain washes away Lakshmi's family's rice crop. Ama sells her earrings, but Stepfather takes the money. He spends it on a new coat and hat for himself and gambles the rest away on a motorcycle at the festival of the goddess Lakshmi. When he loses the motorcycle too he tells Ama that Lakshmi has to go to the city and work as a maid.

Though Lakshmi is nervous, she is eager to go to the city and earn money she can send home to her family.

## Analysis

"Sold" is a young adult novel written as a series of vignettes from the point of view of 13-year-old Lakshmi, which entails her experiences in sexual slavery. When the novel begins, Lakshmi is much like any other 13-year-old girl. She has a family and a home, and has dreams of a better life. Her current life, however, is not ideal. Her stepfather is a profligate wastrel, selfishly spending money on cigarettes, beer, and clothing rather than spending the money for food for his family. Immediately, the themes of poverty and corruption can be seen – both in the moral corruption of the stepfather to see to his own desires first, and in the fact that something as basic as food can barely be afforded as it is. The combination of debt, poverty, and moral corruption all serve to underscore the stepfather's need for a quick fix – but what this quick fix is, is not yet totally clear. Lakshmi herself is under the assumption that she'll be sent into the city, like Gita, to earn a living to send money back to care for her family – a prospect which she finds appealing.

The reader should also take note here of the local socio-cultural and legal structure of Lakshmi's world. It is a world dominated and controlled by men. This isn't merely a question of equal pay or voting rights, but a question of control down to the most basic level imaginable. A woman's life is meant to be in service to men, specifically, her husband. As Lakshmi's mother explains, everything that is done must be in deference to a husband. For example, women may not even eat at the same time as men, and must sit back and watch the man eat, serving and tending to him until he is full – and then the woman may help herself to whatever is left. A husband's sexual urges are never to be turned away. A woman must gear herself towards producing a male child for the husband to carry on the family, and must do whatever it takes to become pregnant. The list goes on. Local politics are also headed up by men, who are interested primarily in maintaining custom and tradition rather than securing any greater freedom or rights for women. When Lakshmi asks her mother about all of this, her mother explains that it has simply always been so, and victory – triumph – for a woman comes through endurance. Gender inequality thus becomes an important theme in the novel.

All of this – the impoverished state of Lakshmi's family, the moral corruption of the stepfather, the mounting debt, and the loss of the crops – leads to dire straits and desperation. The stepfather has dug himself into a hole from which he cannot get out. This all also occurs in conjunction with Lakshmi's first menstrual cycle – signaling her entry into womanhood, and suitability for marriage (which itself will be arranged, and will



require a dowry – a dowry that the stepfather could not even pay if he wanted to). Lakshmi's maturation will prove to be irresistible to take advantage of by her stepfather in the coming events.

## Discussion Question 1

What is Lakshmi's life in her Nepalese mountain village like? Is she happy with her life? What does she dream about?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways can the theme of gender identity be glimpsed in this first section of the novel?

## Discussion Question 3

Lakshmi's mother tells Lakshmi that gender inequality has simply always been, and always will be. What advice does she give Lakshmi about triumphing in her role as a woman? Do you believe this is sound advice given the situation? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

thatch, elephant grass, first blood, goddess Lakshmi, auspicious, rupee



## Section 2, pp. 52-113

### Summary

Lakshmi and Stepfather go to the trader Bajai Sita's store to tell her that Lakshmi wants to go to work in the city. Stepfather asks for a thousand rupees for Lakshmi's services, but Bajai Sita says Lakshmi has no hips, which confuses Lakshmi. Bajai Sita ultimately pays 800 rupees for Lakshmi. From there, Auntie Bimla, a well-dressed woman from the city, takes Lakshmi to the city with her. They walk for two days before riding in a truck - the first time Lakshmi has ever been in a car. Once they reach the city, they take a bus, which takes them to another city. Lakshmi is overwhelmed by all the new things she sees, from popcorn makers and barbers to children picking through trash and women weaving materials.

She is brought to a large building with many rooms, and is given new clothing to change into by Auntie. The clothing makes Lakshmi feel more naked than dressed. She observes Auntie discussing something with a turnip-nosed man, during which time Lakshmi is asked her age - 13 - and the man then proceeds to give Auntie a large amount of money. Auntie leaves, and the man tells Lakshmi that he will see Auntie again after they cross the border. He tells her to call him "Uncle" and also "Husband". The border is very dangerous, and Lakshmi must refer to the man as "Husband" there. He gives her a sweet. Lakshmi begins referring to the man as Uncle Husband. Crossing the border, a guard asks Lakshmi if she is with her husband, and Lakshmi says she is. While on a train, Uncle Husband tells Lakshmi they are in India, now. Lakshmi takes the time to write in her notebook about all the things she has seen and experienced so far, including Indian words. Lakshmi sees a young girl surrounded by a group of angry, yelling men, who have shaved her head. Uncle Husband explains this is her punishment for running away from her husband. With a shaved head, no one will help her anymore if she runs away, for she is now disgraced.

Uncle Husband brings Lakshmi to a poor village and a large house where there are many young girls sleeping, with their faces heavily made-up. The place smells of liquor and incense, and Uncle Husband tells Lakshmi it is called "Happiness House", and there, Lakshmi meets Auntie Mumtaz, a fat ugly woman. Lakshmi is then sold to Happiness House for 10,000 rupees. She is taken into a small room and locked in. She grows homesick quickly, and the window in the room has bars on it. The next day, Lakshmi is brought to a meeting with all of the girls - some very young, and others that are older - where they watch TV. It is a first for Lakshmi. Later, some of the girls put nail polish and makeup on Lakshmi. She is then brought to an old man who forces himself on her, and as he tries to have sex with her, Lakshmi bites down hard on his tongue, causing him to flee. Lakshmi then runs to her room to pack her things, but Mumtaz confronts her and explains that Lakshmi is a prostitute. Shahanna, who has had her own head shaved, is then called in to shave Lakshmi's head. For the next three days, Mumtaz beats Lakshmi in the mornings and the evenings. Lakshmi refuses to be with men, and is then denied food for five days, during which time she stops dreaming.



## Analysis

Poverty, debt, selfishness, and Lakshmi's burgeoning womanhood prove to be too much for Stepfather to resist – and he sells her into the sex slave trade for a quick influx of money (about \$300 or so, according to the author's explanation). He cruelly allows Lakshmi to believe that she is going to be heading into the city to work the way that Gita does, but sells her instead. Lakshmi herself has no real clue what is going on, though she has the notion that something is a little off – including when the size of her hips is questioned. She wonders what on earth the size of her hips should have to do with her ability to clean. Here, the theme of sexual slavery begins in earnest.

The sex slave trade is devious and cunningly structured. Lakshmi is led away from her village, through numerous other villages and cities, and never told where she is. She travels by foot, by vehicle, by train, and by cart – all disorienting her, and all confusing her as to where she truly is. This makes the penchant for escape and return home unlikely, as Lakshmi – like countless other girls – does not even know where she is. She is sold from one individual to another along a chain of sex slave traders, until she ends up in Happiness House – in another country, India. There, Lakshmi at last realizes what is to become of her.

The reader should note the irony of the name of the place to which Lakshmi is sold – Happiness House – for there is no happiness there at all for Lakshmi or the other girls. Here, the themes of corruption and gender inequality can again be seen. The men who visit brothels are not only engaging in an illegal activity, but are morally corrupt as well, even more so when it comes to sleeping with what are more or less children – mere girls.

Gender inequality can also be seen in the fact that it is men patronizing brothels like Happiness House, where they use the girls as cheap sexual conveniences for themselves – a man, once more, dominating other women in the most intimate way possible, making it a mere business transaction. It is not only men who support this arrangement, but women as well, for the owner of Happiness House is actually a woman, Mumtaz. She herself has no qualms about supporting the existing male-dominated social and cultural situation, or exploiting young girls and children – or making money from it. And here, the theme of sexual slavery can be glimpsed as a product of both gender inequality and corruption.

## Discussion Question 1

When does Lakshmi realize what will become of her? How does she respond? Why?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Lakshmi taken so far away from her home, and sold along a chain of so many people, all to become a prostitute?





## Discussion Question 3

Why is it so shocking to the reader that a woman would be running a place like Happiness House? How does this contribute to sexual slavery, gender inequality, and corruption?

## Vocabulary

inauspicious, coaxing, rube, permanent, dowry



## Section 3, pp. 114-171

### Summary

Lakshmi is given a cup of tea by Shahanna, who gently tells Lakshmi that her hair is already beginning to grow back. Shahanna also says it is not so bad at Happiness House, but Lakshmi disagrees. A day later, Mumtaz appears and explains she has decided to let Lakshmi live. She is then drugged with lassi, during which time a man named Habib comes in to take Lakshmi's virginity, during which time all Lakshmi can do is cry. She realizes she is now like the other females at Happiness House. Lakshmi is kept in a drugged state during business hours, during which time innumerable men come in and rape her. As a result, Lakshmi is badly hurt between her legs, and is torn and bleeding. Shahanna secretly gives Lakshmi a condom to use whenever the men will let her, to avoid disease and pregnancy. No matter how many times Lakshmi washes herself, she never feels clean. Eventually, Mumtaz can no longer pass Lakshmi off as a virgin, and she is allowed to go and sleep with the other girls, for Mumtaz needs the room Lakshmi has been sleeping in. As Lakshmi leaves, a new girl – even younger than Lakshmi – is put into the room. Lakshmi is welcomed by Shahanna, who feeds Lakshmi and brings her to watch TV. The girls love to watch "The Bold and the Beautiful", an American show which is their favorite.

Lakshmi is then brought to the room she shares with some of the other girls. The beds are divided by sheets which are pulled around the bed when there is a customer. The people who share the room with Lakshmi include Shahanna, Anita, Pushpa and her two children, an infant named Jeena and an 8-year-old boy who wears a David Beckham shirt. Pushpa came to work after her husband died, and always coughs. Anita, like Shahanna and Lakshmi, is also from Nepal. To go home to Nepal, Lakshmi must pay off her debt of 20,000 rupees. To do this she must take on customers and let them do whatever they want to her. She is also to tell the customers she is 12. She is also to ignore the Americans and what they say, for they encourage the girls to run away. It is later revealed that the young new girl who took Lakshmi's room has hanged herself.

Lakshmi later learns many things about the girls living at Happiness House. Many of them have children, and all of them want children – they will be the only family they have. Once they have children, they do not leave, for they will not otherwise be able to find work or marry. The general rate for Lakshmi is thirty rupees, the price of a bottle of Coca-Cola at Bajai Sita's store. Lakshmi figures if she sleeps with half-a-dozen men a night, she'll be able to go home in about 100 days. However, Shahanna explains that Mumtaz takes a cut of the profit each month to the tune of hundreds and hundreds of rupees. Lakshmi notices how one girl named Monica gets most of the customers and gets well-paid, even though she is not very pretty. Monica explains that Lakshmi must learn tricks to get more men who will pay more money. She also learns that the David Beckham boy runs a kind of business, bringing liquor and cigarettes for the customers, or running errands for the girls. During the days he attends school, and Lakshmi hates that he can live such a normal life. Lakshmi wonders about returning to a normal life, but



she is warned that if she escapes and is caught, she will be severely beaten with metal pipes by the goondas, men who work for Mumtaz. Anita was caught trying to escape, and now only half her face works, so she always appears to be frowning. The police are paid to look the other way, which makes Lakshmi wonder if anyone in the city is not bad. One afternoon, Lakshmi sees the David Beckham boy being made fun of by other boys, who tell him his mother is a whore. The David Beckham boy proceeds to teach Lakshmi Hindi and English. The boy's real name is Harish, and Harish teaches Lakshmi other phrases as well – which include giving her name and her age. She writes all these things down in her notebook.

## Analysis

Lakshmi does not willingly submit to her fate as a prostitute. Although she has been raised in a male-controlled society and culture, there is still a sense of conscience in certain areas –and Lakshmi's conscience, as well as her modesty, are a fire burning inside that leads her to lash out and fight what is happening to her. As a result, because she cannot be overcome in any other way, she is denied food, beaten, and drugged to make her pliant. It is an admirable fight that she puts up, but in the end, is a losing battle. In her drugged state, she is powerless to defend herself, and is ultimately thus raped by an unknown number of men. This symptomatic of the moral corruption of men, is typical of the sex slave trade, and demonstrates the gross gender inequality between men and women – that men should see young girls as mere sexual outlets, even when drugged and unresponsive.

Indeed, the moral corruption among the customers who frequent Happiness House is so strong – and their sexual appetites so perverse – that the other girls encourage Lakshmi to give her age as 12 rather than 13, all in the name of securing more customers and making better money. (Horribly, the going rate for a prostitute at Happiness House is 30 rupees – the price of a bottle of Coke. This demonstrates just how cheap, expendable, and inhuman sex slaves are considered.) The girl who follows in Lakshmi's footsteps is even younger than Lakshmi – and the experience is so terrifying and traumatizing to the young girl that she tragically hangs herself. This speaks to the moral culpability of Mumtaz and the sex slave traders as well as the customers, whose primary concern is monetary. Additionally, Lakshmi gets an up-close and personal look at how Mumtaz manages to stay in business despite the illegality of what she is doing. She pays off the local police to look the other way. This breaks Lakshmi's heart, as she is stunned to learn that even people supposed to be good are bad as well.

It is also in this section of the novel that Lakshmi first has her real encounter with the Western world, and in specific, America. The appearance of Western culture in India comes by way of the boy with the David Beckham soccer jersey; and American culture, particularly, is seen through not only Coca-Cola, but through television. The girls who are trapped at Happiness House love to watch television, especially American shows like "The Bold and the Beautiful". It is a measure of escape, and allows them to focus on happy, optimistic people and situations in a world away from their own. The reader



should note that American influence does not end here – and will prove to be of tremendous importance in the coming chapters.

## **Discussion Question 1**

While she is first defiant, Lakshmi is eventually broken by Mumtaz. How is this done? Why is it done? How does Lakshmi respond?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How is Mumtaz able to maintain her business – especially in the sex trafficking of young girls – despite the local police presence?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does television prove to be so appealing to the girls at Happiness House?

## **Vocabulary**

retch, parched, mongrel, pronouncement, gossip, dote, mirthlessly, pariah, furtively



## Section 4, pp. 172 – 223

### Summary

Harish tells Lakshmi that Americans, despite what has been told to Lakshmi, are nearly all good and kind people, and that they do not shame the children of the brothels. One day, a man who is clean and well-groomed comes in and simply holds Lakshmi. Lakshmi returns his embrace, grateful for the gentleness and tenderness for once. When he leaves, Lakshmi considers herself in the mirror, thinking she is a girl growing into womanhood, or a girl aging before her time, and knows that either way, no one will ever want her romantically, now. Lakshmi hopes the hugging man will come back.

One evening, Monica tells Lakshmi that she is earning money for her family – from her daughter's school fees to her father's medical procedures. She leaves Happiness House a short time later. During the Festival of Brothers and Sisters, Harish gives Lakshmi a new pencil, which causes Lakshmi to cry. She gives him her old clothes, balled up, to use as a soccer ball in return, and takes comfort in the fact that at least some part of her will be able to leave Happiness House. Lakshmi later gets sick, and is given medicine by Mumtaz, which she must now also work off. Looking at her reflection in a mirror, Lakshmi thinks she now resembles a corpse. A few days later, Monica returns, saying her family is disgusted with her and did not want her back. They have told Monica's daughter she is dead. Pushpa, who is very ill, agrees to sell her child, Jeena, to Mumtaz in exchange for letting her stay. In a few years, Mumtaz explains, the infant Jeena will bring in a lot of money. Pushpa vows to Jeena that this will not happen, though the deal has already been made. Pushpa, Jeena, and Harish then flee Happiness House, after Harish gives Lakshmi an American storybook. Lakshmi believes now that enough time has passed to where she must now be 14.

One day, a pink-skinned American with blonde hair and blue eyes comes into Happiness House. He asks Lakshmi for her name, and if she is being kept there against her will. Still fearful of the rumors Mumtaz has started about Americans, Lakshmi doesn't answer. The American tells her there is a place she can go that is safe and clean, and where she will be taken care of. She does not believe such a place can exist. He gives her a card and then leaves. Lakshmi considers the man to be strange for paying for a girl and then doing nothing but talking with her. Lakshmi knows having the card is dangerous, but she does not know how to get rid of it. Lakshmi tells Shahanna about the visit, who reminds Lakshmi about Americans liking to shame prostitutes by making them walk naked through the streets. They both hope Anita is wrong, and Shahanna begs Lakshmi to bring her with her if she goes to the American. Lakshmi later learns that Monica has been thrown out of Happiness House, for she has contracted the virus – HIV/AIDS.

A raid is made on Happiness House, during which time Shahanna goes missing. The girls speculate as to whether it was the Americans or the police that took her. With Shahanna gone, the other girls must take on her customers, and so Lakshmi must have



sex with even more men. One of them is a drunk American – a bad American. Lakshmi does some calculations in her notebook, and discovers she will be able to pay off her debt by that time the following year.

## Analysis

In the fourth section of the novel, the theme of Americanism becomes incredibly important and influential. The reader should recall that, up until now – and apart from television and the products of the American economy – the only knowledge that Lakshmi has had of America has been largely secondhand, mainly from the other girls. They have told Lakshmi that Americans are not to be trusted, and want only to humiliate prostitutes by having them shamed by way of walking through the streets, naked. Lakshmi is completely convinced of these warnings, but she isn't completely convinced otherwise, either. All of this truly begins to change when she meets a blonde-haired American who purchases time with Lakshmi – not to force himself on her, but to talk to her. He addresses her as another human being, an individual worthy of respect and conversation, and asks her not only who she is, but if she is at Happiness House against her will. He leaves his card for her, so that she can get back in touch with him if needed.

It is also in this section of the novel that the issues and consequences of sexual slavery and the sex trade continue to manifest themselves. Lakshmi is required to take on more customers when Shahanna disappears. Monica's family turns her away for her work in the sex trade, though they do not turn her money away, hypocritically. Cruelly, they have told Monica's daughter that Monica is dead. Perversely, Anita arranges to sell her infant, Jeena, to Mumtaz in exchange for letting Anita stay despite being sick – though Anita manages to escape with her daughter and son after all. The reason for the sale is a matter of lucrative business for Mumtaz, who disgustingly knows that in a few years, Jeena, as a young child, will fetch a hefty sum of money from the men willing to pay for her – moral and legal corruption of the highest order.

Some of the most heartbreaking changes in the novel, however, also come by way of the consequences of the sex trade – all with respect to Lakshmi herself. Lakshmi takes time to consider herself in the mirror, and the reader should pay careful attention to the fact that Lakshmi sees herself both as a girl growing into womanhood, but also as a girl who is aging before her time. When she becomes ill and regards herself in the mirror, Lakshmi comes to view herself as something of a walking corpse. However Lakshmi views herself at the time, there is one constant thought that plagues her – that after what she has been through, no man will ever truly want to marry her because of it all.

## Discussion Question 1

What are some of the varying opinions about Americans at Happiness House? What is Lakshmi's own experience with Americans like? Does this change her mind about her perception of Americans? Why or why not?



## Discussion Question 2

The simple gift of a pencil to Lakshmi from Harish makes Lakshmi cry. Why is this so?

## Discussion Question 3

Monica's prostitution exacts a tremendous cost on her. What harms does prostitution do to her?

## Vocabulary

paltry, disheveled, calculations, chattering, strewn



## Section 5, pp. 224 – 263

### Summary

Lakshmi shows her calculations to Mumtaz, who corrects her, saying that Lakshmi has at least five more years to go before she is free. Lakshmi decides she will do whatever it takes to get out of Happiness House. This includes increasing her clientele and what she will do for money. Shilpa, another girl at the house, sees Lakshmi as a rival, and warns Lakshmi to stay away from her own regulars, and laughs that Lakshmi believes Mumtaz's five year estimate. Shilpa tells Lakshmi that none of the money she earns is going back to her family, and that Mumtaz will work Lakshmi until she is sick or useless, and will then be thrown out. A local boy who sells tea begins leaving tea for Lakshmi for free, and then gives her a Coca-Cola for free, too, saying that he and Lakshmi are both alone in the city. He is beaten by his boss for it. When his boss gives him a new route to sell tea and soda on, Lakshmi gives him the American's card.

A few days pass, and then a different American comes to see Lakshmi. He takes her picture, and then shows her photos of a safe place for girls to go and recover, and be taken care of. He asks her if she wants to go. He tells her that what the fat woman has done to her is very bad, and that she cannot force Lakshmi to do these things. He tells her he will come back for her with good men who will bring her to the safe place. Lakshmi says she wants to go. He leaves, and days pass. She does her best to keep her hope alive. There is another raid, this time at night. The American is leading it. Lakshmi refers to him as "my American". Anita begs Lakshmi not to go with the American, but Lakshmi refuses. She rushes down to see the American man, an American woman, and a group of Indian men, and she tells them who she is. She is saved.

### Analysis

Lakshmi is determined to escape from sexual slavery one way or the other, whether she must earn it or find some other means of getting out. The second American – whom Lakshmi will come to refer to as "my American" – that arrives, also brings along a digital camera, in order to take a photograph of Lakshmi, and to show her photographs of the safe place. Here, interestingly enough, the male dominance in society works in favor of Americans (the reader should realize the irony of gender inequality providing the avenue for the dominant gender to actually save and protect, rather than exploit, the subjected gender), posing as customers, to seek ways to rescue sex slaves.

When Lakshmi confirms the American's worst fears – that she is indeed a sex slave, and wants to be saved – he promises to get her out. Here, Americanism can be glimpsed in its finest hour, in the effort of securing the freedom and safety of those taken advantage of and repressed. There is something morally edifying in this, in being able to right a wrong at least in part. The damage that has been done to Lakshmi – and





here, the theme of sex slavery is strong – can never be undone. Lakshmi will forever carry the psychological pain and emotional humiliation at what has been done to her. This reinforces just how cruel, traumatizing, and outright evil sex trafficking is. Regardless as to whether Lakshmi was saved or eventually managed to secure her own freedom from Happiness House, in a larger sense, she will never truly be free of the place or what was done to her – again, because what has happened has happened, and has indelibly emotionally and psychologically scarred her.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why does Lakshmi ultimately decide to trust the American? Why does Anita refuse to trust the Americans?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How are the Americans able to rescue Lakshmi? On what, and on whom, do they rely for help?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How is hope kindled in Lakshmi? How does she come to view hope? Why?

## **Vocabulary**

bleating, tedious, aroma, frantic, cackle, bray



# Characters

## Lakshmi

Lakshmi is the main character, principal protagonist, and narrator of the novel “Sold” by Patricia McCormick. A pretty native of a rural mountain village in Nepal, Lakshmi is at the tender age of 13 when the novel begins, and lives with her mother and stepfather. Lakshmi has been given a marginal education, and dutifully helps tend to her family and their crops. When her stepfather gets into heavy debt, he sells Lakshmi into sexual slavery for quick cash. Lakshmi, under the assumption she is going to work in the city as a cleaning girl like her best friend, Gita, is taken through numerous towns and cities, and across the border into India, where she is sold like a commercial good to Mumtaz of Happiness House. Lakshmi is horrified to realize what is now expected of her, and she attempts to fight back to avoid having to have sex with men – only to be starved, beaten, and drugged into submission. She keeps her hope alive by focusing on her home and on the future, when she will be free – but this will take years, according to Mumtaz. Eventually, a blonde-haired American comes into contact with Lakshmi by paying for her – not to sleep with her, but to speak with her, wanting to know if she is there against her will. When she doesn’t respond, he leaves her his card, which Lakshmi later sends out through the tea-seller.

## Ama

Ama is the mother of Lakshmi, and the wife of Lakshmi’s stepfather. Ama is kind and patient, and enjoys being able to care for her family, though she knows they are in dire circumstances because money is very scarce. Ama sees her daughter into the early stages of womanhood after her first menstrual cycle, and she explains that women must always be submissive to their husbands. Ama also explains that triumphs for women involve being able to successfully endure their submission to men in all things.

## Stepfather

Stepfather is the husband of Ama, and the stepfather of Lakshmi. Incredibly selfish and self-absorbed, Stepfather always spends what little money he earns or comes into possession of on himself, for things like cigarettes, beer, and clothing rather than on food for his family. Deeply in debt, he ultimately decides to sell Lakshmi into sexual slavery.

## Auntie Bimla

Auntie Bimla is a well-dressed and wealthy woman who engages in the sexual black market by procuring girls from remote villages and rural towns for use as prostitutes.



Lakshmi is one such girl that Bimla procures. She brings Lakshmi through a string of villages and cities, where she ultimately resells Lakshmi to Uncle Husband.

## Uncle Husband

Uncle Husband is one of the buyers and sellers in the sexual black market trade. He buys girls like Lakshmi from people like Auntie Bimla, and then brings them across the border into India, where he resells them either to brothels, or continues to sell them along in the chain of buying and selling. Uncle Husband sells Lakshmi to Mumtaz at Happiness House in India.

## Mumtaz

Mumtaz is the grossly obese and callous owner of Happiness House, a brothel in an unidentified city in India. Mumtaz is likened to a fat, overripe melon, and she is notorious for beating her girls and doing everything she can to make money off of them, no matter how young they are. This includes girls Lakshmi's age, and even younger. Most of the prostitutes that work for Mumtaz she has purchased as sex slaves, and must work off their debt to Mumtaz to earn their freedom by sleeping with customers. Mumtaz descends to new levels of depravity when she agrees to buy Pushka's infant daughter, knowing that in just a few years, men will pay extravagantly to be with a young child. Mumtaz manages to remain in business by paying off the local police, but is powerless when an American-led group comes to free Lakshmi.

## Shahanna

Shahanna is a young prostitute at Happiness House who befriends Lakshmi quickly. Shahanna is kind and gentle, and when she learns that an American has promised to take Lakshmi away to safety and freedom, Shahanna begs to go, too. But before this can happen, the police raid Happiness House, and Shahanna is never seen again.

## The Tea-Seller

The Tea-Seller is a young man and peddler of tea, soda, and other such items, who follows a particular sales route for his boss, which brings him to Happiness House. There, he feels very sorry for Lakshmi, and begins to leave her free tee and Coca-Cola. He is the one to carry the American's card to the safe place for Lakshmi, ultimately leading to her freedom.

## The Blonde American

The Blonde American is a young man who poses as a customer to gain access to Happiness House, where he interviews Lakshmi to determine whether or not she is



being held against her will. Though Lakshmi does not speak to the American, the American suspects that Lakshmi is indeed being held against her will, so he leaves her his card.

## **My American**

My American is an American who works at the safe place, and who poses as a customer to speak to Lakshmi based on her sending back of the blonde American's card. Lakshmi confirms she is being held against her will, and that she wants to go to the safe place. The American, whom Lakshmi comes to call "My American", returns as promised with a group of good people, including an American woman, who free Lakshmi from Happiness House.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Tin roof

A tin roof is desired by Lakshmi and her mother to cover their house, for their thatch roof is failing quickly. A tin roof is a luxury that will help to shelter and protect the family from bad storms. However, Stepfather refuses to buy a tin roof, preferring to spend the money he has come into possession of on himself.

## Rupees

Rupees are the currency of Nepal and India, and are used for the selling and purchasing of goods. The sexual slave trade is also conducted using rupees, from the buying and selling of young girls as sex slaves to the payment for prostitution. The average rate for Lakshmi is thirty rupees – the price of a bottle of Coca-Cola.

## American storybook

\$300 is the rupee-equivalent that Lakshmi is initially sold for by Stepfather. Three-hundred dollars is the average low price, according to the author, that girls will be sold for by their families into sexual slavery.

## Coca-Cola

Coca-Cola is a fizzy American soft drink that is wildly popular around the world. In impoverished places like Nepal and India, Coca-Cola is considered a luxury item, and sells for about thirty rupees a bottle –the cost of an encounter with a prostitute. In the novel, Lakshmi has her first taste of Coca-Cola by way of the Tea Seller, who gives her the bottle free of charge. As a result, the seller is beaten by his employer for failing to have money for a missing product, and his route is changed. This enables the seller, however, to get the card to the Americans at the safe place.

## Television

Television is a rare luxury in impoverished places like Nepal and India. The girls who work at Happiness House love to watch television, which makes their lives at Happiness House bearable. They love the show “The Bold and the Beautiful”, and the happy and optimistic American programming which allows them to escape their daily lives. Though Lakshmi knows what a television is, she has never watched one, knowing only about them through the marriage of a man to a wealthy woman, with the television being a part of the dowry.



## Notebook

A notebook is given to Lakshmi by her teacher during the marginal education she receives, and becomes her journal and written account of her time spent in sexual slavery. In it, she records the things she sees, the foreign words and phrases she learns, and her thoughts and feelings.

## Yellow pencil

A yellow pencil is given to Lakshmi by Harish on the day of the Festival of Brothers and Sisters. The yellow pencil is a small, simple gift, one given in such kindness –and in such contrast to the world around her –that Lakshmi cannot help but cry out of gratitude and emotional stress.

## Old clothing

Old clothing belonging to Lakshmi is kept by Lakshmi through the duration of her time as a sex slave. She keeps the clothing because she plans to escape in it, and because they smell like home. Eventually, the smell fades, and the clothes become more of a painful remind of the past than of pleasant memories. She rolls them up into a ball and gives them as a gift to Harish to use as a soccer ball, happy that at least some part of her has been able to escape Happiness House.

## Digital camera

A digital camera is carried by My American as he poses as a customer at Happiness House. He uses the camera not only to take a picture of Lakshmi, but also to show her photographs of the safe place –including numerous young girls in school, safe and happy. This helps to convince Lakshmi to speak out to say she wants to go to the safe place.

## Card

A business card with information is left by the blonde American for Lakshmi. Lakshmi carefully hides the card from Mumtaz and the other girls, and gives the card to the tea seller to bring to the Americans at the safe place. The return of the card brings another American –My American –to Happiness House to speak to Lakshmi again.

# Settings

## Nepal

Nepal is a rugged, impoverished, mostly mountainous country that borders India. It is the home of Lakshmi, her mother, and her stepfather, where they reside in a mountain village several days from the Indian border. It is in Nepal that Lakshmi is first sold by her stepfather into sexual slavery, and is then trafficked across the border into India.

## India

India is a country that borders Nepal. It is into India that Lakshmi is trafficked in the sexual slavery black market, having been sneaked across the border posing as the wife of Uncle Husband. An unknown city in India serves as the host to Happiness House, where Mumtaz purchases and imprisons Lakshmi.

## Happiness House

Happiness House is an ironically-named brothel owned and operated by Mumtaz. Happiness House is anything but happy for the girls who work there as prostitutes, most of them against their will as sexual slaves. Lakshmi is sold to Mumtaz at Happiness House, where Lakshmi is forced to become a prostitute to earn her freedom by way of paying off the price for which she was purchased by Mumtaz. Happiness House appears to be a large, solidly-built building with kitchens to private rooms upstairs. Most girls share larger rooms downstairs, with private rooms reserved to break new girls in and to offer higher paying customers better privacy. Happiness house stays in business with the willing cooperation of the local police, who are paid off.

## The United States of America

The United States of America is a democratic republic located in the Western Hemisphere of the world, and is the globe's lone superpower. Apart from its economic power and culture, the products of which range from Coca-Cola to television shows, America is seen as a force for good in the world. This is certainly true when it comes to the two Americans who are responsible for securing Lakshmi's freedom from Happiness House.

## The Safe Place

The safe place is a refuge and school founded and run by Americans of good will in India. The safe place is where abused girls, especially those in the sex slave trade, are taken to be freed from the trade, given proper medical care, are educated, and treated

to be reintegrated into society. Two Americans from the safe place visit Lakshmi at Happiness House, the second of which is able to get Lakshmi to admit she wants to go to the safe place. At the end of the novel, the second American leads a group to free Lakshmi from Happiness House, and to bring her to the safe place.





# Themes and Motifs

## Gender Inequality

Gender inequality is an important theme in the novel “Sold” by Patricia McCormick. Gender inequality constitutes the intentional or unintentional difference in treatment, behavior, social standing, and rights – moral and legal – between men and women, to the detriment of one gender at the infliction of the other. In “Sold”, it is men who hold power over women, and women who must submit to men. Gender inequality greatly influences the plot of the novel, and is responsible for much of the misery and suffering experienced by Lakshmi.

In her home village in Nepal, men have the upper hand against the women. Men run the village, have the power in politics, are dominant in the legal system, and hold sway over their women at home to the point that women are not even allowed to eat at the same time as men, but must eat after them, and may only eat leftovers. Though some females are educated, their education does relatively little for them, as they are expected to largely be homemakers, wives, and mothers – and not much more. Girls are very often seen as a burden, as when girls marry, their families must provide a dowry to the man’s family. Girls are also often arranged in marriage at a very young age whether they like it or not. Lakshmi asks her mother why this is so – about marriage and about women being submissive to men – and Ama responds that this is how it has always been. The only way to overcome it is to find a way to endure it – and that is a triumph.

Gender inequality is also on clear display through Lakshmi’s time at Happiness House. Indeed, Lakshmi herself has been sold like cattle for the price of a Coca-Cola into sexual slavery. Her worth as a human being is utterly utilitarian, based upon the attitude that she is nothing more than a piece of meat, and should be purchased and sold as such. At Happiness House, girls – some not even teenagers, yet – are valued purely for their ability to make money through sex, and as such, are used and dispensed with by cruel and callous men who see them as nothing more than a means for sexual release. Indeed, females are thought so little of – whether they are married or are working as prostitutes – that running away from the home or the brothel is enough cause to have the girl beaten (such as in Anita’s case), or have their head shaved as a physical demonstration of being disgraced (such as the girl near the train or Lakshmi early on).

Tragically, gender inequality is not something maintained merely by the dominance and control of men, but the willing complicity of some women. For example, Mumtaz owns and operates a brothel, which exists purely for the sexual release of men, and the profits of Mumtaz. What is disgusting about this is that the girls in the brothel become a mere commodity, and many of them are there against their will – such as Lakshmi, Anita, and Shahanna. Mumtaz could be in a position to help girls against the cruelty of men, but rather than helping them, she is exploiting them.



However, there is a positive aspect to gender inequality in the novel. Because women are unable to fight for their own rights and freedom – a situation in which Lakshmi finds herself – it allows other men – good men, like the Americans and some of the Indians – to advocate for, and take action on the behalf of the girls and women. The male power structure allows the American men to open up a safe center for victimized girls, and allows them to do things like raid Happiness House in order to secure the freedom of Lakshmi. The reader should note, here, the irony of gender inequality providing the avenue for the dominant gender to actually save and protect, rather than exploit, the subjected gender – though it takes Americans, rather than locals, to spearhead the effort to help do this.

## Sex Slavery

Sex slavery is an important theme in the novel “Sold” by Patricia McCormick. Sex slavery – the selling of an individual to another for the purposes of exploitation for sex by way of money – goes to the very heart of the novel, which is a look at the sex slave trade through the eyes of a young girl, 13-year-old Lakshmi.

The sex trade – sex slavery and prostitution – is a dangerous and cruel thing that is kept in operation due to the male-dominant power structure in Nepal and India, and the willing complicity of women to feed into that dominance in order to reap monetary profit for themselves. The girls forced into sexual slavery are often children, with some barely into their teenage years, such as Lakshmi. Lakshmi herself, not long after having her first period, is sold by her stepfather into the sex black market, where Lakshmi is sold and resold – trafficked – before being purchased by Mumtaz for Happiness House. The process is devious. A girl is knowingly or unknowingly sold and resold at a great distance from her home, many times in another country (in this case, Lakshmi is sold from Nepal into India), making the penchant for escape highly unlikely, and making the penchant for justice all but impossible.

In the sex trade, there are girls who willingly sell themselves, and others, like Lakshmi, who do so against their will. Indeed, Lakshmi is drugged and beaten in order to make her pliant. The men who force themselves on Lakshmi have no cares or concerns whether she is there voluntarily or not, or if she is drugged or clear-headed. All they want is sex. Girls who try to escape from sex slavery are severely beaten, sometimes killed, and if they survive, have their heads shaved to demonstrate to others they have been disgraced.

In sex slavery, girls are held for the price at which they are purchased by the owner of the brothel. The owners give the girls relatively little of what they earn, racking up profits and charging the girls outrageous prices for things like medicine and electricity, all in order to keep them trapped at the brothel. The girls can eventually earn their way to freedom, but this process takes years and years, if the girls are lucky. Oftentimes, the owners hold freedom over the heads of the girls as a way to make them work harder by taking on more clients and doing more and more sexually extreme things – leading to more money for the owner. Justice is rarely had for their girls, for the local police are



often paid to look the other way. It is only in certain situations – such as occasional raids by police or security forces not local to the area, or in the involvement of foreigners like the Americans – that any form of justice for the sex slaves is ever had.

## Poverty

Poverty is an important theme in the novel “Sold” by Patricia McCormick. Poverty – living with little to no income, and with scant possessions or comforts (including shelter, food, and clothing) – is a driving force for the plot.

Nepalese villagers are often without much money. Things taken for granted by many people in the world – such as a bottle of Coca-Cola – are considered luxury items by impoverished people, and are affordable only to those in power or those with tremendous wealth. When villagers do come into possession of money, like Stepfather, it is often spent on frivolous and unneeded things. For example, Lakshmi dreams of having a solid tin roof put onto their house with a sudden influx of money, while Stepfather wants to buy cigarettes, beer, and a new vest. Because of Lakshmi’s stepfather’s ease with money, the family often goes hungry.

In order to make a quick amount of money, families routinely sell their children – specifically, their daughters – into sexual slavery. This is often done for as little as \$300. The girls themselves are seen as nothing more than cattle, as what becomes of them matters little beyond the amount of money they can be sold for. The selling of young girls into sex slavery underscores not merely gender inequality, but the dangers and extremes to which some will go while in poverty.

Indeed, the sex trade proves nearly limitless in terms of financial lucrativeness for those girls who are willing to become prostitutes. Monica, for example, is able to pay for her daughter’s school fees to her father’s medical operations. Monica has no shortage of customers or money as a result – but the problem is that, in the awful irony of the sex trade industry, an impoverished family would rather sell their daughter into sex slavery than have a member willingly participate no matter how impoverished they are. Monica’s own family is so ashamed of what she has done – hypocritically using the money she has made but condemning what she does to make it – that they tell her daughter Monica is dead.

## Corruption

Corruption is an important theme in the novel “Sold” by Patricia McCormick. Corruption – injustice at the expense of what is morally and legally right, and injustice at the expense of those who are wronged – exists in many places and at many levels in the novel, and each form of corruption contributes to the plot. Corruption takes place everywhere – from the most remote villages in the mountains of Nepal to the bustling cities of India.



At the local level, corruption exists in the family unit – what is supposed to be the most integrity-driven, loyally-operating social structure in the world. Lakshmi’s stepfather is morally corrupt as a man and a stepfather, and is legally corrupt in his dealings with the sex slave black market. Rather than protecting and caring for his family, Stepfather is a wastrel who would rather lavish himself with gifts than feed his family properly. He is morally corrupt because of this, and because of his decision to sell 13-year-old Lakshmi into sexual slavery for a few hundred dollars. As such, he is also legally corrupt by illegally selling his stepdaughter into sexual slavery.

Corruption also appears at the level of law enforcement. Border guards do not thoroughly investigate the men who bring extremely young girls across into India. They perform a cursory check, merely asking these incredibly young girls if they are the wives of the much older men whom they are traveling with – mainly because they are tasked with doing so as part of their job, and also because it is not uncommon to see much older men with child brides. That men are marrying children is a moral corruption, and that the guards do not more meticulously check the people crossing the border is a legal corruption. The same is true of the police who are paid to look the other way when it comes to brothels by the brother owners – a gross miscarriage of justice, and a clear display of both moral and legal corruption.

At Happiness House, moral corruption is rife. The owner, Mumtaz, callously and cruelly employs young girls – some barely into their teenage years, others still children – against their will. Morally corrupt, Mumtaz cares nothing for the girls themselves, but only for the profits that they can bring her by the exploitation of their bodies. Likewise, that she forces young girls and children into the sex trade is not also only immoral, but illegal. She must bribe police officers to look the other way. The men who patronize Happiness House are themselves not only morally corrupt for doing so – especially when it comes to the young girls and children employed at the house – but are engaging in, and contributing to an illegal activity, which in turn fuels the market for sex slavery.

## America

America, thematically, forms an important theme in the novel “Sold” by Patricia McCormick. The United States of America – known for its strong moral values and ethics, as well as its freedom, opportunity, and goodhearted people – subtly influences the plot of the novel at first, and then exerts tremendous influence on the novel in its late stages.

At first, America – and all that it represents – is seen merely through its byproducts of television and exports like Coca-Cola. Indeed, while most Americans consider television and soda common conveniences, many others in the world, such as in Nepal and India, see television and soda as luxuries. Indeed, in Lakshmi’s village, only the wealthiest people can afford Coca-Cola, and only the wealthiest people in general can afford things like television. Ironically, it is while Lakshmi is forced into sex slavery that she is first exposed to American television and Coca-Cola. Lakshmi is amazed by television,



for it is full of happy and optimistic people, and represents a stark contrast to her own situation.

What little Lakshmi knows about America comes from the people around her. Mumtaz and Anita, for example, say America is full of cruel people who look down on girls in the sex trade and force them to walk naked through the streets. Others, like Harish, who have had personal contact with Americans, say that Americans are nearly all good and decent people who are very kind and comforting. There are occasional, cruel Americans – such as the American who pays to have sex with Lakshmi, but on the whole, Americans are good and wonderful people, as she comes to find out.

Lakshmi is visited by a blonde American man who pays not to have sex with her, but to talk to her, and get to know her. He can tell how very underage she is, and can tell that she is there against her will. He leaves a card with her. The second American man who comes to see Lakshmi likewise pays not to have to sex with her, but to talk to her, take her picture, and show her pictures of the safe haven the Americans have created for victimized girls. Lakshmi decides to trust the second American, who is just as kind as the blonde American, and he promises to get her out of Happiness House – and follows through on his word several days later. As such, Lakshmi comes to call this second American “my American”, which confirms in Lakshmi’s mind the goodness and honesty of Americans.

# Styles

## Point of View

Patricia McCormick tells her novel “Sold” in the first-person limited-omniscient narrative mode from the point of view of main character and narrator Lakshmi. This is done for several different reasons. Most prominent is that those young girls sold into sexual slavery are denied their freedom and their voice, and allowing Lakshmi to tell the story of her time spent in sexual slavery gives a voice to the voiceless. The first-person aspect of the narrative also allows the reader to understand the inmost thoughts, and feel the inmost things that Lakshmi thinks and feels as she experiences them – and allows readers to see what such barbarity is like through the eyes of an innocent 13-year-old girl. The limited-omniscient aspect of the narrative is also important for two reasons. First, it allows for a sense of suspense and drama, with neither the reader nor the narrator knowing what is next going to happen. Second, it allows for a sense of realism, for no one – especially a 13-year-old child – is aware of everything going on at all times in life – and thus adds a level of realism to the story.

## Language and Meaning

Patricia McCormick tells her novel “Sold” in language that is simple, straightforward, and tender. This is done for a variety of reasons. First, the narrator is a 13-year-old girl who is just beginning to experience life, and has comparatively little education. As such, the language she uses will be simple and straightforward. The narrator, however, is also a deeply sensitive girl who is keen to things around her, and feels things on a very deep and personal level. She has an eye for beauty and goodness, and as a result, the language she uses is tender rather than coarse, and gentle rather than offensive – which is admirable given the dire situation in which she finds herself. This adds an atmosphere of realism to the novel by making her character believable by way of the language that is used.

## Structure

Patricia McCormick divides her novel “Sold” into 177 vignettes – some of which are only a few words long, some of which last a few pages. Each vignette focuses on a particular event, situation, encounter, or conversation that Lakshmi has, and each vignette paves the way to the next. The novel itself is told in free-form concrete poetry, and is divided into stanzas rather than paragraphs. This arrangement of the text reinforces the gentle, simple, and tender nature of the language used by Lakshmi, but also enables her to make salient points that might otherwise get lost in large paragraphs. A few words are worth many, and the simple observation by Lakshmi that she looks like a corpse, for example, carries great emotional weight.



## Quotes

You will make us proud, Ama says, as the first member of our family to leave this mountain.

-- Ama (Section 1, City Rules paragraph 8)

**Importance:** Here, Lakshmi's mother explains that Lakshmi will be the first member of the family to leave their mountain village. It also belies the fact that Ama is just as much in the dark about what is happening as Lakshmi –that her stepfather has sold her into sexual slavery.

I awoke today – before even the hen had begun to stir – aware of a change in myself.

-- Lakshmi (Section 1, First Blood paragraph 1)

**Importance:** At 13, Lakshmi has her first period. She is now considered a woman, and will eventually be set up in an arranged marriage. But Lakshmi's entrance into womanhood is noted by her stepfather for a different reason that aging or marriage, for he plans to sell her into sexual slavery.

This has always been our fate," she says. "Simply to endure," she says, "is to triumph.

-- Ama (Section 1, Everything I Need to Know paragraph 11)

**Importance:** Here, Ama speaks to the gender gap of inequality in all things. She explains that women are to submit to their husbands in all ways, and that it has always been so. To endure this inequality is in and of itself a virtue. Interestingly enough, however, Ama's advice about marriage will be sound advice for Lakshmi in the coming year as well, though Lakshmi doesn't know it yet. Faced with unspeakable cruelty and rape, Lakshmi will have to do everything she can to endure.

Something is not right here. I don't know what is going on, but it is not right, not right at all.

-- Lakshmi (Section 2, Old Man paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Lakshmi is dressed up for prostitution, and her first customer is an old man. She isn't aware of what is going on until it begins to happen. She recoils against her situation by biting down hard on the old man's tongue, causing him to flee.

You have become one of them.

-- Lakshmi (Section 3, One of Them paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Drugged and beaten into submission, Lakshmi is forced to take on customers. In the morning, she looks at herself in the mirror and realizes she is now just like all the other prostitutes.

I cannot tell which of the things they do to me are real, and which are nightmares.

-- Lakshmi (Section 3, Twilight paragraph 8)



**Importance:** The men that pay to rape Lakshmi are as varied as the things that they do to her. For much of her early time as a sex slave, Lakshmi is kept drugged. As a result, she isn't always aware of what is real, and what she is hallucinating. In reality, everything that happens to her is truly a nightmare.

I don't understand this city. It is full of so many bad people. Even the people who are supposed to be good.

-- Lakshmi (Section 3, Caught paragraph 7)

**Importance:** When Lakshmi discovers that the police are on Mumtaz's dole to turn their backs on the business, Lakshmi is very disheartened. Even people like the police who are supposed to be good are just as bad as Mumtaz and the people who have traded and sold Lakshmi.

Harish had taught me how to say thank you in his language, but it seemed a paltry word for my debt to this man.

-- Lakshmi (Section 4, An Accidental Kindness paragraph 10)

**Importance:** One unusual encounter offers Lakshmi a brief respite. The man who pays for her does not force himself on her, but merely holds her. It startles and then comforts Lakshmi, who thanks the man for not forcing himself on her. She is so grateful that she doesn't believe the words "thank you" are enough.

It doesn't matter, of course. Because no one will ever want me now.

-- Lakshmi (Section 4, Am I Pretty? paragraph 3)

**Importance:** After Lakshmi meets an American man, she looks at herself in the mirror. She sees a girl who is growing into womanhood, but also sees a girl who is old before her time – and is being used and thrown around in the sex slave trade. She believes that no man will ever want to marry her after what she has done.

A few days later, when I am finally strong enough to get out of bed, I pass by a mirror. The face that looks back is that of a corpse.

-- Lakshmi (Section 4, An Old Woman paragraph 1)

**Importance:** Following a sickness, Lakshmi's poor opinion of herself continues to grow. The illness she has contracted leaves her looking haggard and old. The illness, however, is more of a physical representation of the emotional hollow and deadness inside of her, which leaves her looking like a corpse.

I will do whatever it takes to get out of here.

-- Lakshmi (Section 5, Any Man, Every Man paragraph 5)

**Importance:** Lakshmi learns from Mumtaz that she has at least five years to go in Happiness House. Lakshmi is not happy about this, and decides she will do everything





she can to get out. She decides that she will take on more men, and will allow them to do more things to her in order to get out.

This affliction – hope – is so cruel and stubborn, I believe it will kill me.  
-- Lakshmi (Section 5, A Kind of Illness paragraph 3)

**Importance:** After a second American visits Lakshmi, she admits to him that she wants to go to the safe place where he works and helps care for other girls. The American tells her he will be back with good men and good police to free her. Days pass, but there is no sign of help. Nevertheless, hope remains for Lakshmi, who becomes almost tortured by having hope, so desperate is she to get out and get free.

My name is Lakshmi,” I say. “I am from Nepal. I am 14-years-old.  
-- Lakshmi (Section 5, The Words Harish Taught Me paragraph 29)

**Importance:** When the American man, woman, and good Indian men come to free Lakshmi, she runs to them, saying in English who she is, where she is from, and how old she is. These are things that Harish taught her how to say – and as a result, he becomes something of an unsung hero, and guarantees that Lakshmi will be free.