Spatiality in McCormick's *Sold*

Josie Pressnall

Human trafficking and sexual slavery have persisted for thousands of years and have affected billions of people. It is a human experience that deserves to be written about, recorded, and understood to the same degree that wars are. American author Patricia McCormick brings this issue into focus for young readers in her young adult verse novel, *Sold*, published in 2006. The novel focuses on a young girl named Lakshmi who is sold into sexual slavery by her stepfather, a reality most young Western readers never have to face. Using Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of topophilia and what Robert T. Tally Jr. labels "topophrenia," this paper examines how McCormick works to cultivate empathy in young Western readers.

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Introduction

What makes a banned book controversial? Often, it's daring to open the doors of rooms that hide the ugliest parts of humanity that make a book the subject of heated debates. Banned books face opposition because they expose what we'd like to ignore: things like racism and violence. Sex, in particular, is a great offender in the library of banned books. We pretend it can't be disgusting or vulgar and when a book depicts its ugliness that book is rejected. In reality, sex, or the corruption of it, is the source of so much pain and suffering. The graphic depictions of violent sex in *Sold* (2006) by Jennifer McCormick make the book a prime target for critique and banning.

In scholarly spheres, *Sold* faces a different challenge: it is contentious because the author is a Western woman writing about a non-Western injustice, and many scholars believe it to be more harmful than helpful in ending human trafficking across Nepal and India. The chief objection is to the way McCormick frames America saviors in the narrative. How then, do we account for the impact the novel has on its intended readership of young Westerners? Intended for high school audiences, the book aims to raise awareness about the crucial issue of human trafficking—and it does just that. Does banning this book prevent readers from engaging in an important conversation?

By examining the novel through a spatial lens, I argue that McCormick's novel has a unique capacity to reach across the divide of Western discomfort to stir readers against this injustice. McCormick's use of space is a distinctive quality that connects readers to the pressing issue of trafficking. The way in which its spatial elements elicit sympathy can be understood by utilizing Yi-Fu Tuan's idea of topophilia and his writing about its opposite, which Robert T. Tally names "topophrenia." This essay argues that McCormick's attempt to shed light into the barred windows of the brothel rooms in India, where victims and survivors

are subjected to horrible things, is worth the attention it has received. Despite its shortcomings, it can serve as one contribution to a full picture of spaces that need more examination—spaces that have been ignored for so long in the name of our comfort.

Acclaim and Critiques

McCormick's book has been met with enormous praise alongside enormous controversy. Some of its awards include ALA's Top 10 Best Books for Young Adults in 2007 (Young Adult), National Book Award Finalist in 2006 for Young People's Literature (National Book Foundation), and the Quill Award for Young Adult Literature in 2007. In 2014, book was adapted into a feature film starring Gillian Anderson.

Sold is the seventh most-banned book in America, despite these successes, according to a 2022-2023 list by PEN America (Asaadoon). In 2023, moms in Berkeley County, South Carolina brought their district's attention to the book. One of the moms, referred to only as "Dixon" states, "I don't think that exposing young minds to graphic depictions of rapes, sexual assaults and beatings of a minor child really has any literary value" (Harris). McCormick has expressed her frustrations with the book's controversy, alleging that these bannings are being orchestrated by a power that has a vested interest in keeping the stories of trafficked children out of America's collective consciousness. In an opinion piece in *The New York Times* she says,

> These challenges are not grass-roots responses to books coming home in students' backpacks; they are campaigns orchestrated by a national clearinghouse with shadowy funding and apparent links to groups such as the Heritage Foundation. (McCormick, "Opinion")

The book's banning is evidence of its importance and actively goes against McCormick's goal of spreading awareness of sexual trafficking to sheltered Western kids.

While concerned parents critique the book's "explicit content," literary and social analysts critique the book's ending, asserting that the ending promotes "white saviorism" and exoticises Nepal and India for its Western readers. Critics argue that the book paints an inaccurate portrait of the lives of people in South Asia. Binod Sapkota cites Manika Subi Lakshmanan and Edward Said to

frame the book as a neocolonial allegory and mirror to orientalism. Sapkota writes, "American consumer products and cultural exports function hegemonically" (54). Given the valorization of great American inventions like Coca-Cola and TV in the novel, the ending, in which an American saves Lakshmi,

> feels like a marketing tactic to engage readers, but it distorts reality by absolving America's role as a wealthy consumer of the trade while reinforcing the idea that Nepali people cannot save themselves without Western intervention…By doing so, it subtly enforces the notion that salvation must come from the West rather than from within. (54)

Dipak Raj Joshi similarly critiques McCormick's failure to mention local agencies such as Anuradha Koirala and the Maiti Nepal shelter for women and children in the body of the narrative—these are tacked on at the end in her acknowledgements. Joshi writes, "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" (1). In addition to McCormick's representation of the social landscape, Joshi raises concerns about the graphic representation of Lakshmi's experiences. Joshi cites Dominick LaCapra's[1] work on trauma writing, saying that McCormick's use of "writerly imagination" has the effect of "exaggeration and exoticization of the problem."

Keeping the critiques of the mentioned scholars and parents, the following spatial analysis of Sold aims to appreciate McCormick's writing of space while utilizing the theoretical lenses of Yi-Fu Tuan, additionally recognizing that McCormick cannot, and is not, speaking directly in place of, or for the non-Western survivors of sex trafficking and American imperialism."

McCormick's Project

Sold is a story written entirely in vignettes, short moments in time that capture powerful images. The vignettes are written in verse, which lends a fleeting feeling to these scenes within the novel. McCormick chooses to center the

1 LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. New York: Johns Hopkins UP

narrative on a thirteen-year-old girl named Lakshmi who lives in a rural Nepali village with her Ama (mother), her baby brother, and her stepfather. She dreams of a tin roof for their house, and this dream becomes her doom when she agrees to go into the city to work and send money home to her family. She is lied to and sold into the sex trade by her stepfather for gambling money. Lakshmi is taken from her village by a strange woman and carted across the Nepali-Indian border with the help of someone she calls her "Uncle-Husband," who pretends to be legally married to her to get past Indian authorities. Mumtaz, the owner of the brothel "Happiness House," forces her into sex work by drugging her and selling her body to men. She abuses Lakshmi verbally and physically by starving her, berating her, beating her, and much more. Lakshmi makes friends with some of the residents, but when the brothel is raided by the Indian police with the aid of an American who is part of an organization based in the U.S with the purpose of liberating victims of human trafficking, Lakshmi goes free and has to leave them behind.

McCormick initially set out to write a journalistic piece on the state of human trafficking in Nepal. She wanted to shed light on the situation, but after staying a month in India, she found she had much more to say on the matter than a single article could cover. She interviewed both victims and perpetrators (Alsaadoon). She strove to understand the places and experiences of the girls she depicts, stating in her afterword that,

> As part of my research for *Sold*, I traced the path that many Nepalese girls have taken—from remote villages to the red-light districts of Calcutta. I also interviewed aid workers who rescue girls from brothels, provide them with medical care and job training, and who work to reintegrate them into society (20-26).

McCormick describes her approach to writing and her motivations behind the book's creation saying,

> There hadn't been anything that looked at the experiences from start to finish of how a vulnerable family, a vulnerable girl can be drawn into being trafficked. I feel like that kind of story opens up your heart in all ways that statistics in general stories do not. (Alsaadoon)

McCormick's desire to portray the

perspective of a "vulnerable family" necessitates a portrayal of that family's environment; it necessitates a portrayal of the countries and spaces McCormick visited during her research. McCormick's portrayal of these things is best viewed through lenses provided by the works of Yi Fu Tuan, a Chinese-American author and geographer-philosopher. Tuan writes extensively about the formative power of topohrenia, or love of place, and later describes how its opposite, fear of place, wields similar power. Robert T. Tally describes this anxiety as topohrenia. These concepts provide a valuable framework for understanding and simplifying a character's relationship to their narrative space while simultaneously keeping its complexity.

While acknowledging powerful critiques of the novel of the mentioned scholars and parents, the following spatial analysis of *Sold* aims to consider the novel's influence in terms of how the writing connects Western audiences to the difficult subject matter that many of them would prefer to ignore. Additionally, it recognizes that McCormick cannot, and is not, speaking directly in place of, or *for* the non-Western survivors of sex trafficking and American imperialism. The spatial reading that follows is an attempt to understand that impact through theories of spaciality.

Spatial Analysis

Yi-Fu Tuan, in his book titled Topophilia: *A Study on Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values*, defines "topophilia" as a neologism:

> useful in that it can be defined broadly to include all the human being's affective ties with the material environment. These differ greatly in intensity, subtlety, and mode of expression. The response to environment may be primarily aesthetic: it may then vary from the fleeting pleasure one gets from a view to the equally fleeting but far more intense sense of beauty that is suddenly revealed. More permanent and less easy to express are feelings that one has toward a place because it is home, the locus of memories, and the means of gaining a livelihood. (93)

This idea of being closely tied to one's environment applies particularly to those that work outside or in the home daily, directly interacting with their material world. Tuan writes that

farmers have a special connection to their environment because, "Nature is known through the need to gain a living… Muscles and scars bear witness to the physical intimacy of the contact" (Tuan, *Topophilia* 97). Lakshmi in *Sold* lives in rural Nepal and thus depends upon the earth. Her daily ritual is recited when she says, "Each morning as I go about my chores—straining the rice water, grinding the spices, sweeping the yard" (McCormick, *Sold* 5). This tactile, verb-heavy line shows just some of the ways a Nepali girl might interact with her environment by taking care of it and preparing the food grown from the soil outside her door. In Tuan's words, Lakshmi is established early in the novel to have "physical intimacy of material dependence" with the valley she lives in.

To fully empathize with Lakshmi's attachment to the valley, readers are supplied with vivid sensory imagery. Tuan explains why this is the case: "The person who just 'sees' is an onlooker, a sightseer, someone not otherwise involved with the scene" (Tuan, *Topophilia* 10). The age-old "show, don't tell" rule in writing fiction comes into the conversation when McCormick attempts to have audiences experience the Himalayas through Lakshmi's eyes, ears, and nose. Lakshmi doesn't just see the valley every day; she lives in it, fully present. To evoke "emotions deeply," the author must rely on more than just visual descriptions because the character's experience of their environment does not end at what they see, especially when that character has topophilic feelings towards their surroundings as Lakshmi does.

McCormick employs this technique most heavily in the vignette titled, "Beyond the Himalayas." The vignette starts with a visual description, because as Tuan suggests, "seeing is believing," and what better way to establish a scene than by illustrating the vivid colors of dawn, "already torched with sunlight, while the village below / remains cloaked in the mountain's long purple shadow" (*Sold* 9). The vignette continues by adding movement to the scene:

> Napping babies will sway in wicker baskets, / and lizards will sun themselves outside their holes. / In the evening, the brilliant yellow pumpkin blossoms will / close, drunk on sunshine, while the milky white jasmine will / open their slender throats and sip the chill

Himalayan air. (9)

At first glance, most of this vignette seems to be composed primarily of visuals, but when readers think about it through Lakshmi's experience, we can see tactile and olfactory descriptions, too. She is not talking about how the "chill Himalayan air" feels in her own throat, but instead the throats of the milky white jasmines. The sensory details are second-hand and thus they imply an even deeper understanding of her surroundings than if they were delivered presently in first person. Tuan writes that, "It is difficult for an adult to recapture the vividness of sense impressions that he has lost (except occasionally) as in the freshness of a view after the rain…A child, from about seven or eight years old to his early teens, lives in this vivid world much of the time" (*Topophilia* 56). Maybe adult readers have forgotten what it means to see the world through a child's careful eye, but McCormick allows them to see it again through Lakshmi.

The valley does much more for Lakshmi in topophilic terms besides materially providing her with stimuli and nutrients; she stores her memories inside of it and makes sense of the world at large with the help of its mountains. Tuan describes this side of topophilia by saying that when it (in this case the writing) is compelling, we can, "be sure that the place or environment has become the carrier of emotionally charged events or perceived as a symbol" (Tuan *Topophilia* 93). This is most evident in the vignette titled, "Something Beautiful," where Lakshmi likens her mother to the "swallow-tailed peak" and the goddess Lakshmi, her namesake. The vignette starts by drawing parallels between Lakshmi and her mother, showing that they have a similar relationship to their shared environment by doing chores within it: "Up and down the mountain, a heavy basket braced on her / Back and held fast by a rope around her brow, she is bent. / Under the weight of her burden" (McCormick, *Sold* 7). This piece from the vignette serves many purposes, one of them being an example of how the Nepali people get their water. McCormick highlights the fatiguing reality that many people in rural Nepal face: an abundant supply of water, but scarce means of retrieving it. Deeptima Shukla explains,

> Nepal is a country rich in water resources. Three major rivers—Kosi, Gandaki and

> Karnali originate from Nepal's Himalayas and join Ganga in the Indian territory. Nepal due to its incapability to harness its water resource owing to lack of capital and technology is dependent on India for this purpose. (365)

This detail illustrates the rural nature of Nepal for readers while also setting up up a complex relationship with neighboring India.

The passage ultimately lifts up Ama's character, emphasizing her strength and role in the family's survival alongside Lakshmi's love and admiration for her. The second stanza in the vignette characterizes the land itself, personifying the very mountain Ama climbs up and down for water as the goddess Lakshmi, "Whose brow is fierce and noble, / whose breast is broad and bountiful, / whose snowy skirts spread wide above us. / She is beautiful, mighty, and magnificent" (McCormick, *Sold* 7). Tuan would characterize this description as a symbol in Lakshmi's imagined geography that serves to help her make sense of the world around her. He writes, "The artificial environment they have built is an outcome of mental processes—similarly, myths, legends, taxonomies, and science. All these achievements may be seen as cocoons that humans have woven to feel at home in nature" (*Topophilia* 13).

Perhaps Lakshmi realizes this, because in the next two stanzas she returns her attention to her mother, the one "objectively," not topophilically, deserving of her worship: "And her slender back, which bears our troubles—and all our / Hopes—is more beautiful still" (McCormick, *Sold* 7). If readers apply the same topophilic logic to Ama as they do to the mountain, they can see that Lakshmi has a sense of place *within her mother* that she loves. She is a place of safety, sustenance, and beauty, just as the mountain provides these things. In another of his books titled *Landscapes of Fear*, Tuan writes how crucial one's first environment is to their development:

> The first nurturing environment every human infant explores is its biological or adoptive mother. The first stable objects in the dawning consciousness of an infant are other people, and without objects a human sense of the world cannot emerge. (7)

With the established understanding of how Lakshmi loves her Himalayan valley home, readers can empathize with how

she feels when she is taken from it. Tuan writes in *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* that,

> To be forcibly evicted from one's home and neighborhood is to be stripped of a sheathing, which in its familiarity protects the human being from the bewilderments of the outside world. (99)

Lakshmi tries to hold onto this "sheathing" in the vignette titled "A New World." She says in the last few lines, "The mighty swallow-tailed peak. / It grows smaller the farther we walk" (McCormick, *Sold* 58). Her symbol, the swallow-tailed peak, serves as her sheathing, her anchor to the valley and her topophilic feelings. But later in the novel, she loses sight of this and is fully ripped from her initial understanding of the world. Tuan writes about the fear of getting lost extensively in *Landscapes of Fear*: "We may safely assume that fear of disorientation—of getting lost—is universal. Above all, the small child needs to feel anchored in a center of nurture and of security" (21). Lakshmi's fear of disorientation is evident when she tries "to remember each hut, each village. / I try to memorize / each twist in the path so I can find my way home at festival / time next year" (McCormick, *Sold* 58). This is where her topophrenia, or fear of place or landscape, begins.

Her fear of disorientation is heightened later in the vignette titled, "Crossing the Border." Lakshmi doesn't differentiate between countries when she says, "Soon we are moving, the feet of the rickshaw puller padding noiselessly on the dirt path. I ask Uncle Husband when we / will cross the border. He says we already have" (McCormick, *Sold* 79). Shukla explains that the Nepal-India border is historically porous in order to encourage trade. It additionally lacks any geographic border to distinguish between the land of two countries (2). This adds to Lakshmi's fear, and thus the reader's. It acts as a "nail in the coffin" for her lost sense of direction and path to home.

In Tuan's *Landscapes of Fear*, he dedicates chapters to "Fear of Disease" and "Fear in the City." These are the two primary fears Lakshmi has towards her new surroundings, and both are evident in the vignette titled, "On the Bus": "The man next to me empties his nose out the window, / pinching one side shut and blowing on the other, and for a / moment I am afraid

that I will lose my meal again" (McCormick, *Sold* 67). Tuan's concept of the fear of disease and the city is present in this vignette. Humans are naturally disgusted by smells that might bring about pestilence. Tuan highlights the city's ability to produce illness and the consequence of people being in close proximity to one another. This is especially designated to the poor, as Tuan writes, many people have a "distaste for and fear of the poor as a potential source of moral corruption and of disease" (*Landscapes* 157). The fear could specifically come from the volume of people on the bus. In rural Nepal, people wouldn't be so densely packed together. He explains that fear of the stranger is explained as inextricably linked to the fear of the city because one cannot have a city without its "human denizens" (156). He goes on to say that,

> It is suggestive that many Occidental children want to be firemen or policemen when they grow up, thus expressing a need to assume authority and overcome their sense of impotence and anxiety before both the physical environment and strange adults.

Lakshmi might not have any prejudices against the poor or sick, but her natural state is one of fear—fear of catching something. This passage can also be read as the expression of the Westerner's fear and perception of what it is like to be on a South Asian mode of public transport. Her fear is employed again when she gets off an equally crowded train and witnesses the lack of waste management in the vignette titled "City Ways," where she says, "Then, all around me, the women lift their skirts, squat like / crows, and relieve themselves on the open ground" (McCormick, *Sold* 84). Lakshmi's disgust could serve to act as our own to make her travels more perilous and a far cry from her aesthetically beautiful Himalayan home.

When Lakshmi finally gets to the brothel, she is forced to combine topophilic and topophrenic experiences to survive. More accurately, she must pit them against each other in a battle over her mind. This battle and contrast are best represented in two vignettes: "Between Twilights" and "What You Hear." The former contains the memories she clings on to and uses as a shield against the horrors happening to her in the latter.

In "Between Twilights," Lakshmi smells the fabric from her

old skirt to conjure up memories of home and comfort herself. The skirt smells of "mountain sunshine…. freshly turned soil and clean laundry / baking in the sun" and the "woodsy tang of a cooking fire" that she associates with tea and roti. She does this to "get by / until the next twilight" (McCormick, *Sold* 126). This mirrors the motions she goes through with her mother in the vignette titled "Maybe." She is talking with her Ama about all the things they could do with their money if they didn't already owe it to other people. The ending stanza reads, "...we linger over a luxury that costs nothing: / Imagining what may be" (29). In both instances Lakshmi indulges in the sensory wonders stored inside her mind to cope with her present reality.

Oftentimes, relying on past or imagined pleasures is not enough to escape the present pain. In the vignette titled "Remote Control," Lakshmi describes how she often employs dissociation when she is with men: "Sometimes, I pretend that what goes on at night when the / Customers are here is not something that is happening to / Me. I pretend it is a TV show that I am watching from far, far / Away. I pretend I have a button I press to make everything / Go quiet. And another one that makes me disappear" (McCormick, *Sold* 157). This is an imagined, mental space she retreats to in an effort to escape all forms of stimuli. Combatting abuse directly with memories of the Himalayan air will not realistically always work to survive ongoing abuse like the kind that is depicted in "What You Hear." The vignette is unaltered to preserve the powerful saddening effect it is intended to have on the reader:

> Before it starts,
> you hear a zipper baring its teeth,
> perhaps the sound of a shoe being kicked aside in haste,
> the wincing of the mattress.
>
> Once it starts,
> you may hear the sound of horns bleating in the street below,
> the peanut vendor hawking his treats,
> or the *pock* of a rubber ball as the children shout and play in the school yard nearby.
>
> But if you are lucky,
> or if you work hard at it,
> you hear nothing.
>
> Nothing, perhaps, but the clicking of the fan overhead,

the steady ticking away of
seconds
until it is over.

Until it starts again.
(127)

This devastating vignette exhibits Tuan's characteristics of topophilia derived from the senses in an opposite way. The ability to take in her surroundings—once a skill that enriched her life—now enhances her pains. Both "Before Twilight" and "What You Hear" use intense sensory imagery to invoke as much empathy in the reader as possible, and to showcase not only what is physically happening when Lakshmi is being abused, but what is happening mentally and emotionally. She is numbing herself and escaping from the present moment.

The blending of fear and love are displayed again in the vignette titled "The Cost of A Cure," where Lakshmi gets a fever and has nightmares in which the imagery of her home gets distorted by the imagery of the brothel. An American woman with a clean white robe and the treat made from snow she longs to enjoy is replaced by Mumtaz giving her medicine. She dreams that she runs out of the claustrophobic house and into the only images of the streets filled with the images she keeps repeating she knows: the peanut vendor, kids playing with a ball, street dogs digging through trash (McCormick, *Sold* 188). This vignette can be seen as an example of what happens to someone who is overtaken by their topophrenia in illness. As Tuan explains, "The body's integrity is the foundation for our sense of order and wholeness. When we sicken, so it seems does the world" (87).

Lakshmi would be forever stuck in this cycle of having dark and light imagery battling for the control of her life consciousness if it weren't for the controversial ending where she is "saved by the American." It's important to note, however, that Lakshmi is the one who must decide her fate. In the vignette titled "The Words Harish Taught Me," Lakshmi remembers words taught to her by Harish, the young boy living in the brothel, and takes a huge risk to give the American's card to the tea vendor. Her actions get her to safety and kickstart her life outside the brothel. What's more explicit is that she has to make the choice not to go into the closet with Anita after Anita tries to convince her to.

Lakshmi's moment of conflict and climax ends with her decision to shake her head and go a different path: "Then, slowly, she lets go of my arm, closes the door between / us, and I hear a sad and final sound: the lock sliding into place" (McCormick, *Sold* 262). Lakshmi must decide between staying at the Happiness House and going into the closet, thereby settling for finding peace only in the TV in her mind and the common area, staying in the hallway and never acting, or stepping out to face the unknown. This scene is a literary description of what Tuan describes as the "awareness" in "the difference in emotional temperature between 'inside' and 'outside'" (107). Lakshmi is suddenly made very aware of the barrier between the two and is forced to decide. We the readers of course know she chooses the "outside."

Conclusion

One can see after close reading and spatial analysis within Lakshmi's environmental experience that the presence of topophilia enriches the reading of *Sold* and highlights the internal workings of Lakshmi's character. Topophilia's presence in the novel, as Tuan would argue, invokes empathy because the experience of loving or fearing a place is universal, sensory details are especially forgrounded, and the feelings are directly translated across space, time, and cultures with little friction.

McCormick's novel invites readers to look closely at spaces that are inaccessible to them and kept behind closed doors. Banned books like McCormick's do this so readers can witness human cruelty and the indomitable human spirit that responds to it. Despite the novel's flaws and inherent Orientalism, it draws Western readers to the story of a Nepali girl in a Himalayan mountain and Indian brothel in a way that stays impactful after critical reading, illuminating the spatial experiences of non-Western people for the consumption of Westerners so they might act. By utilizing spatial theories like Tuan's in reading and writing controversial or untold stories, we can understand how *Sold* reaches readers of all nationalities, bringing people closer together by giving voices to those that would have otherwise stayed in a darkened brothel room.

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