

## Sunil Gangopaddhaya's 'An Unsent Letter': A Harrowing Outburst of Long Smothered Wail of a Lacerated Psyche

Mohammad Mozammel Haque\*

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Jazan University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Mohammad Mozammel Haque, E-mail: mozambiu@yahoo.com

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### ABSTRACT

The statement that the poets are born after their death is universally known. There is hardly any writer who writes the criticism of his writings. They are the critics who criticize their works. It can be said that the writer himself may have only a single idea or message when he produces his piece of writings, but the critics have different views on the same work. Even one critic sometimes innovates miscellaneous ideas and messages from the same poetry, play, novel, short story, fiction, non-fiction etc. Furthermore, a post-colonial critic always tries to find the message of his area of study even in the writers of Anglo Saxon, Middle English, Romantic or Victorian era. A romanticist finds his theme in the writings of other periods. Similarly, a fan of feminism attempts to discover the messages related to females in the writings he studies. In the same way, the author of this paper, because of his being a writer for those who find themselves trapped in the social four walls, and who have no control over the situations around them, focuses on how Sunil Gangopaddhaya, in his short lyric titled 'An Unsent Letter', has picturesquely delineated the indescribable plight, predicament and quandary of a sub-continental girl who has been sold to a brothel for six thousand rupees. The paper also, besides showing how the women are neglected, abandoned, deserted and ignored in the male-chauvinistic society, emphasizes to show the real backdrop of the women in the society the poet lives.

**Key words:** Discriminations, Feminism, Long-Smothered, Male-chauvinism, Outburst, Selling, Treatment, Wail

### INTRODUCTION

The terms "feminism" or "feminist" first appeared in France and The Netherlands in 1872, Great Britain in the 1890s, and the United States in 1910. The Oxford English Dictionary lists 1894 for the first appearance of "feminist" and 1895 for "feminism". The UK Daily News first introduced "feminist" to the English language, importing it from France and branding it as dangerous. "What our Paris Correspondent describes as a 'Feminist' group..... in the French Chamber of Deputies". Prior to that time, "Woman's Rights" was probably the term used most commonly, hence Queen Victoria's description of this "mad, wicked folly of 'Woman's Rights'".

Defining feminism can be challenging, but a broad understanding of it includes the acting, speaking, writing, and advocating on behalf of women's issues and rights and identifying injustice to females in the social status quo. (Contributors)

Feminism actually began with the publication of Margaret Fuller's 'Women in the Nineteenth Century' (1845), John Stuart Mill's 'The Subjection of Women' (1869), Oliver Schreiner's 'Women and Labour' (1911), Virginia Wolf's 'A Room of One's Own' (1929), Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women' (1792). (Barry 121)

But many writers of different countries are seen to write about the rights of women before this certified starting. The condition of women in the society of the then Europe was so deplorable that only priests were allowed to preach religious doctrines and theories. This unambiguous history is written by Margaret Walters as he says: 'Hildegard of Bingen, who was born at the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and became a nun, and later the abbess, of a small Rhineland convent, has long been as a remarkable and impressive writer; recently, her great musical talent has been rediscovered and celebrated. But she was sometimes plagued with doubts about her 'unfeminine' activities, and wrote to one of the leading churchmen of the time, Bernard of Clairvaux, asking if she—an uneducated woman—should continue with her writing and with composing. He encouraged her, and within a few years she was known and honoured all over Europe. When she was 60 years old, she embarked upon preaching tours all through the German empire, even though at that time only priests were allowed to preach.' (Walters 6 & 7)

### STATEMENT OF A PROBLEM

In the course of writing this research paper, it was quite difficult to find required writings related to the title on this Indian

poet. Thousands of writings and criticisms are available about the poet, but only very few criticisms on feminist point of view are available. So, the writer of this paper had to study the critical works of the prominent feminists to come to the goals of the research which is to show how a sub-continental woman indescribably suffers in her family as well as in the society; how she is insulted, humiliated, sidelined, and persecuted. I hope this research article will open the paths for other researchers to study Sunil Gangopaddhaya from feminist point of view.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

'The history of modern western feminist movements is divided into three waves. Each is described as dealing with different aspects of the same feminist issues. The first wave refers to the movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> through early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which dealt mainly with suffrage, working conditions and educational rights for women. The second wave (1960s-1980s) dealt with the inequality of laws, as well as cultural inequalities and the role of women in society. The third wave of feminism (late 1980s-early 2000s), is seen as both a continuation of the second wave and a response to the perceived failures.'

The first official wave of feministic movement started in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued till the early period of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The exponents and writers of feminism of this period actually dealt with suffrage, working conditions, and educational rights for women. Often taken for granted, women in the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries realized that they must first gain political power (including the right to vote) to bring about change was how to fuel the fire. Their political agenda expanded to issues concerning sexual, reproductive and economic matters. The seed was planted that women have the potential to contribute just as much if not more than men.

What is sometimes termed 'second-wave' feminism emerged, after the Second World War, in several countries. In 1947, a Commission on the Status of Women was established by the United Nations, and two years later it issued a Declaration of Human Rights, which both acknowledged that men and women had 'equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution', as well as women's entitlement to 'special care and assistance' in their role as mothers. Between 1975 and 1985, the UN called three International Conference on women's issues, in Mexico City, Copenhagen, and Nairobi, where it was acknowledged that feminism: "constitutes the political expression of the concerns and interests of women from different regions, classes, nationalities, and ethnic backgrounds... There is and must be a diversity of feminisms, responsive to the different needs and concerns of different women, and defined by them for themselves. (Walters 97)

In 1949, French writer Simone de Beauvoir wrote her world-famous book *The Second Sex* where she argues, 'All through history, woman has been denied full humanity, denied the human right to create, to invent, to go beyond mere living to find a meaning for life in projects of ever-widening scope. Man remodels the face of earth, he creates new

instruments, he invents, he shapes the future; woman, on the other hand, is always and archetypally other. She is seen by and for men, always the object and never the subject.' (Walters 98)

Today and unlike the former movements, the term 'feminist' is received less critically by the female population due to the varying feminist outlooks. There are the ego-cultural feminists, the radicals, the liberal/reforms, the electoral, academic, eco-feminists etc.

The main issues we face today were prefaced by the work done by the previous waves of women. We are still working to vanquish the disparities in male and female pay and the reproductive rights of women. We are working to end violence against women in our nation as well as others.

We are still fighting for acceptance and a true understanding of the term 'feminism;' it should be noted that we made tremendous progress since the first wave. It is a term that has been unfairly associated first, with ladies in hoop skirts and ringlet curls, then followed by butch, man-hating women. Due to the range of feminist issues today, it is much harder to put a label on what a feminist looks like.

## FEMINISTIC THEMES IN 'AN UNSENT LETTER'

### A Girl, a Burden in a Family

That women in the sub-continental countries didn't have any rights to enjoy or were neglected in the society becomes crystal clear to any reader when he goes to peruse the lyric 'An Unsent Letter.' The poetry is nothing but a harrowing outburst of long smothered wail of a lacerated psyche. To give birth a baby girl is a matter of indescribable disgrace for the parents in the society the poet lives. When a girl is born to a family, she is considered as an unbearable burden for the family. It seems that the parents will be able to sigh a relief as soon as they can get rid of this 'burden'. Therefore, they bring about so many plans to hide the baby girls even before her birth. How pathetic, heart-touching, heart-rending, petrifying, pitiful, painful, terrifying the situation is in the Indian Sub-continent! A healthy brain of Adam's son cannot help shedding tears after hearing this deplorable and disgraceful condition of women. That women are not considered as humans rather they are regarded as The Second Sex is clearly discerned from the study below.

Anyway, a girl who has been sold to a brothel only for six thousand rupees writes a letter to her mother. Every word written by the girls bears a sarcasm and a direct threat to the social structure of her society. The girl reminisces her past memories that she had when she was in the house. Recollecting so many memories related to her life she asks her mother about how her pet is, where it sleeps at night, whether it goes to Ali Sahib's garden or not. She reminds her mother that she has beaten Tuli (her sister) so many times, and she won't beat her anymore. It seems that the girl is sobbing and talking to her mother. She won't beat Tuli again because she cannot beat her now as she is no more in the house. How pitiful and deplorable the situation is here! The picture here seems to echo Nietzsche's statement who says: 'she is God's second mistake'. (Gupta 6)

It means if God didn't create her, she wouldn't have to bear with such insult. Thus she is born to suffer.

The girl, though sold to a brothel, asks her mother not to be worried about her, rather she requests the mother to repair their cottage with new shack as it is raining a lot this year. She says:

*I am fine. Do not worry for me  
Mother, did you repair your house with new shack?*

How appalling the situation here is! The girl has been sold and she is far away from her parents; she is undoubtedly in unhappiness and discontent, but she is pretending to be happy. Rather she is worried about her parents and others who live in the worn out bungalow. A painful image is located here. The girl seems to be wiping out her eyes and writing the letter.

### Orthodoxy of Indian Society

The girl reminds her mother that she used to go to Ali Sahib's garden where she got few types of fruits. Ali's brother Mizan adored her what her father didn't like, and for this the father once beat her severely. She still has the spots on her back. But what could she do if anyone adored a child like her? Here the girl's words remind us the orthodoxy of the society that doesn't allow the boys and girls to enjoy their time together even though there is no claims of morality. The girl expresses herself by saying:

*Ali Sahib's brother Mizan used to adore me very much.  
Once father beat me by a wooden stick,  
What's wrong with me, how I can say no if someone cares?  
I still have the spots on my back.  
No more I did go to Ali Sahib's garden.  
I did not go to any garden  
I remember my father when I put finger on that spot  
I get a lot of hardship when I think of my father  
I'm fine, very fine  
Let father not to be anxious about me.*

Here, the girl doesn't have any accusation against her father. She is still worried about the father because she is his daughter. She is again found here to pretend to be happy though she is in unspeakable and tremendous hardships.

### Women are not Allowed to Think for the Family

The family doesn't show any love or affection for the wretched girl but the girl still has concern about the family. Her family lives from hand to mouth, and thus her brother was in need of a job to run the family. When she was in the house, she heard that Nokul Babu, a broker, would take him to Baharampur to get him a job. So, in the letter she is asking her mother the updates about that job. As she writes:

*Oh yes, good, brother got any job?  
Nokul babu said that he would take him to Baharampur?*  
But the irony here is that the parents and the brother don't want the girl to think for the betterment of the family.

These lines seem to remind us what Kazi Nazrul wrote in his famous poem 'Nari', the women:

*The sword of males alone couldn't bring victory to the world*

*Rather, these are the females who inspired, enthused and gave mental strength to men.*

### The Society even denies to ensure basic Human Rights to Women

Sunil is then observed to criticize the social notions of the family about spending money for the food of the children. The girl has a brother named Kalu who loves cakes made of palms. But the family is hardly ready to prepare it as the oil is so expensive. Thus the girl requests the mother to prepare these palm cakes for Kalu though they have to pay a lot for the oil. She says:

*In the month of Vadra palm ripens, it falls from the tree with sound.*

*Are the two palm trees in the house still there?*

*Kalu loves fried palm, make one day please,*

*I know oil is expensive now, but still make one day?*

The poet here attacks the mean-mindedness and misery of the social people who are not even ready to spend money to feed the boys let alone to feed the girls.

Can a human being of cool head think that the parents sell their girl children to earn money and in fear of feeding them? The poet scornfully attacks these objectionable malpractices of his society by writing:

*You got six thousand rupees by selling me,*

*Have you bought a cow with that?*

*Does that cow give good milk?*

*Cows are much better than a girl like me*

*Selling cow's milk is a good thing in the world*

*Cows give birth to calves, so how much joy in it!*

*If there is a girl in the house how much irritation!*

*Give rice twice, give sari, manage to get married,*

*Save the girl from the claws of Hablu, Mizan and Sridhar!*

*Don't I understand? All I understand*

*I understand why I was sold,*

*That's why I do not have any anger, no boast.*

*I'm fine, I have no problem of eating.*

*Please repair your house with that money, if possible.*

*Send Kalu-Bhulu to school*

*Send Tuli to Dr. Brozen for treatment, please.*

*You buy a sari, a dhoti for father with that money*

*Dada's watch is a love, is it possible to buy one with that money?*

The situation pictured here even defeats the picture of the girls during the historical Dark Age when the girl children were graced alive in fear of feeding and clothing them. It is known to all that during the Dark Age, it was a matter of great dishonor for the parents to give birth a baby girl. The parents felt shame to come to public place if they became father or mother of a girl. Therefore, they graced their girls alive. The condition of the Indian women drawn in the above stated lines is by no way less pathetic and heart-touching than that of the age when Mohammed (PBUH) stepped into this material universe. Here we can see that the parents have sold their child for six thousand rupees. Now the use of sarcasm and irony by the poet is remarkable here. The girl asks



whether her parents have bought a cow with that money or not. The statement '*Cows are much better than a girl like me*' seems to sting to the social structure. The girl seems to laugh while saying this. She says cows give milk, give birth to calves by which a family can earn money. But if there are girls in a family, they have to be very much worried for them. They have to feed them, clothe them, arrange marriage for them, and also protect them from the clutches or claws of vulture-like human animals who also live in the same society. The girls don't deserve to enjoy any basic human rights. So, it is quite better to have a cow rather than having a girl in the family!

The girl also advises her mother to repair their house, send Tuli to doctor, buy a sari for her, a dhoti for father, and a watch for her dada (brother) with the money they got by selling her. How disgraceful, terrible, and appalling the condition of women in the society is! These lines are sharp enough to cut and bleed a society. The poet here is by no means less sarcastic, ironical and cynical than a professional feminist writer. That the girl is lacerated, torn and slashed with long smothered wail is understood here. She seems to express out her harrowing outburst in these lines.

The condition of the girl here seems to be similar with that of Mary Astell, one of the true earliest feminists who was born in 1666, had to leave her house at the age of 12 as her father died then and nobody came to patronize her since she was a girl. Going to London with only a little money and the addresses of a few family contacts, she sought shelter to some of her distant relatives who didn't pay any heed to her. Desperate and depressed, she was not able to get any livelihood; she wrote to William Sancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury, asking for help: 'For since God has given Women as well as Men, the intelligent souls and how should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of thinking, why should we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our thoughts on himself, their noblest object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaities and secular Affairs?' (Walters 27)

By 1694, she wrote her first book 'A Serious Proposal to the Ladies' urging other women to take themselves seriously: they must learn to think for themselves, work to develop their own mind and skills, rather than always deferring to masculine judgment. One of her books was entitled 'Thoughts on Education.' Girls, she argued, must be taught to think for themselves, to judge clearly and sensibly, rather than waste all their time in acquiring graceful social skills and accomplishments." She also writes, "We value them (men) too much and ourselves too little." (Walters 28)

For centuries, and all over Europe, there were families who disposed of 'unnecessary' or unmarriageable daughters by shutting them away in convents. 'The most widely read books for girls on the subject of moral instruction, Dr James Fordyce's Sermons to Young Women (1766) and Dr. John Gregory's Father's Legacy to His Daughters (1774), echoed what the luminaries (VIPs) of London's literary world implied or directly advised – that the proper duty of the female was to make herself pleasing to men. Such skill was women by nature. She didn't need to be dedicated to academic study

to play the role of a charming wife or loving mother satisfactorily.' (Wollstonecraft xxxvii-xxxviii)

Catherine Macaulay argued in 1790 that the apparent weakness of women was caused by their Miseducation. She also argued by saying, 'Women were limited mentally and physically by their environment. She urged physical exercise and academic studies for women, equal to those of men, dismissing the concept of innate inferiority and claiming in a principle which Wollstonecraft would urge tirelessly, 'there is but one rule of right for the conduct of all rational beings. But the issue of female emancipation was not a central concern for Macaulay. Macaulay is concerned equally with the management of infants and the education of princes. It was for Marry Wollstonecraft to take the argument of natural rights and make their application to women the subject of a sustained argument. It was for Wollstonecraft to isolate and emphasize the issue of education for women, taking Lady Mary's 'unmined gold' and urging it to be used to enrich all of human society.' (Haque 15-42).

The society where this girl lives is undoubtedly a male-dominated one where men subjugate woman to his will.

From the above stated lines of the poetry it won't be, I think, an overstatement to opine that Sunil Gangopaddhaya is quite similar to Anita Desai who also wrote for the Second Sex of the society as she says:

"There are those who can handle situations and those who can't. And my stories are generally about those who can't. They find themselves trapped in situations on which they have no control." (Bheda 14)

### Women are Humiliated Everywhere by Everybody

Anyway, though the girl was sold and her parents didn't meddle about her, they had other 'lucky' and 'fortunate' boy children, but the girl had nobody except her parents. So she once decided to visit the house and give an earring to Tuli that she bought by the money she earned. She also wanted to give some money to her mother. Once she got down from train, she met her brother who scolded her by saying bastard, scoundrel etc. She told she didn't come to stay at home rather she just wants to meet the parents. But then her brother's friends shouted saying: 'It is a prostitute, rogue.' The girl expresses her grief-stricken heart by:

*I wished I could see the house only once  
When I was going through Rathtola, somebody shouted:  
Who goes? Who goes?  
I saw Dada playing cards with Habul-Sridhar  
He told me, "Bastard, scoundrel, why are you back?"  
I was afraid and said, "I did not come back, even not to stay".  
Only to see once,  
Habul said, "It is a prostitute, rogue".  
How did they know, is it written on my forehead?  
And a boy, I do not know him, said, "Fie! Fie! Fie!  
Disrepute of our village."  
Throwing angry glance at Rickshaw puller, Habul told  
him to turn back  
I said, brother, I got some money for mother*

*And for Tuli.....  
Dada blew a slap on my cheek  
The money earned by selling me is pure money,  
And my earning money is dirty money,  
Dada would not touch the money of that sin, Sreedhar  
took it away  
And drove me away.*

### **Even Mothers Deprive their Daughters of Motherly Affection**

It seems that the girl is not a member of the galaxy of human beings; she doesn't live under the sky where these 'gentlemen'-her parents, brothers, and other relatives- live; they are specially created by God Himself. The God who feeds these privileged people doesn't feed the girl. To quote William Shakespeare, the brightest star in the sky of English literature, 'If you prickle these parents and brothers, they become sensitive. But the girl doesn't feel any sensitivity if same behavior is done with her. If one cuts these special 'creatures', they will bleed. But if you cut the girl, there will be no blood.' What a remarkable discrimination we see here between the creatures created by the same God!

A reader cannot but shed tears when he or she goes through:

*I'm not your daughter, but you're my mother  
You have more children, but where I can get mother?  
That's why I'm writing this letter to you, mother,  
I have a very request to you  
Take care of Tuli, and she is very weak and helpless,  
Whatever the want you have, but you please.  
Tell my father, mother, I fall on your feet,  
Let not Tuli send to lead a comfortable life like me,  
By any means, let Tuli get married  
Let her have a family, a life-partner,*

I really fail to get how a mother can stay alone by selling her child to a brothel. It is the right of the girl to enjoy motherly love and affection, but the mother doesn't hesitate to deny this right to her daughter. I doubt whether this lady (the mother) did really bore this girl or not. Even being driven out of the parental house, the girl doesn't have any accusation against anybody. She only requests her mother not to deny that she is not her mother. She is found to be ironical when she writes that she is leading a 'comfortable' life and she urges mother not to send Tuli to the same 'cozy' life. Falling on her mother's feet, she tells her to request father for managing a marriage for Tuli, and then she (Tuli) will find a life-partner. This indicates how much happy the girl is. It is now clear to everybody that one of the main reasons behind selling the girl to a brothel is the difficulty to arrange marriage for her. Furthermore, the family has to spend a lot of money for her marriage which is 'an unprofitable sector' in the society.

### **The Girl has Nobody to Depend Upon**

In Indian Vedic age Manu, the law giver of Hindu Dharma Shastra, clearly assigns woman a subordinate position to man:

During childhood, a female must depend upon her father, during youth, upon her husband, her husband being dead,

upon her sons; if she has no sons, upon the near kinsmen of her husband; in default, upon those of her father, if she has no parental kinsmen, upon the sovereign; a woman must never govern herself as she likes. (Bader 55)

But this girl seems to be living in a different galaxy. She has her parents, brothers and sisters, and also other relatives, but she has nobody to depend upon for which she has been sold like a commodity to a brothel.

### **The Girl's Plight is more Deplorable than even Mary Wollstonecraft**

Before the actual commencement of the feminist movement, women were treated like a fruit. It was accused that the men peeled the 'fruit' out and threw it away. Mary Wollstonecraft, mother of modern feminism and the writer of the first sustained argument for female emancipation, was directly deceived by her husband, Gilbert Imlay, who continued his illegal relationship with another woman while Mary was struggling frantically to keep afloat in the sea of plight with her child. This becomes clearer when we read Miriam Brody's introduction to *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* where she writes:

'In London once again in 1795, Wollstonecraft could no longer delude herself about him (Imlay), for Imlay was living openly with another woman. Wollstonecraft had met the various crises in her struggle for economic independence with characteristic resilience and determination, but Imlay's infidelity and all it implied of her misplaced trust left her desperate. Finally, too, travel weary, with no appetite to begin again, she was as far as she had ever been from her fantasies of a harmonious and stable home. Her response to all of this was suicide. She left instructions for the care of her child and walked out at night to look for a secluded spot along the Thames where, making sure her clothes were heavy with water, and assuming she was unobserved, she at last leapt from a bridge. But in spite of her precautions she had been noticed and was pulled unconscious from the water by a passer-by. Later she told William Godwin that the pain associated with the attempt on her own life was so great she was resolved never to try again. Perhaps the suicide attempt exhausted the worst of her despair for after a few embarrassing meetings with him she was able at long last to resolve to forget Gilbert Imlay, and began to make plans for her own and her daughter's future, moving about within her London circle of reassuring friends.' (Wollstonecraft xxiii-xxiv)

Mary Wollstonecraft was deceived by her husband, but our girl was cuckolded by her parents. Thus the predicament of this girl is undoubtedly more petrifying than that of the mother of modern feminism. A husband may cheat his wife (though I also feel pity for it), and it is normal everywhere, but how the parents especially a mother who bears her child for more than ten months can betray the child, and more pathetically how they can sell their child. Is it not the duty of the parents to guarantee the basic needs of their children whether they are 'lucky' boys or 'unlucky' girls?

### Being a Girl is a Matter of Great Sin

At the end of the poem, the girl is seen to think that being a girl is a matter of great sin to this society where she is not treated as a human being. Here she seems to be a bit revolutionary. She asks God whether a girl has a place to live as a human in this world or not. Then she advises her parents saying that they can let Tuli go anywhere in the world where she can live as a human being, where nobody will insult or kick her because of her being a girl.

*Oh God! Doesn't a daughter of poor family have right to live if she is not married?*

*If she is not married, everyone will thump over her?*

*If possible, let her go anywhere*

*Crossing the ground, crossing the river, crossing the jungle*

*Far away, further away, where the two eyes go,*

*There is definitely a place, definitely a place*

*Where human beings are like humans,*

*Nobody there to pinch, to bite, to kick*

*Where a girl, not just a girl, can live like a human.*

### CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, it can unquestionably be stated that the parents must have killed this girl when her mother was bearing her if they could know that the baby who was coming to this world was a girl. They would feel comparatively happy if they could do this. But they are really 'unlucky' because the science still did not reach that level. God created human beings, He didn't create any 'discriminations'. He says: 'O Muhammad! Say I seek refuge in the Lord of Mankind. The King of Mankind. The God of Mankind.' Here, it is clear that God doesn't belong to any particular religious group, rather He is the Lord for human beings (poor, rich, white, black, Muslims, Hindoos,

Christians, Jews, and Buddhists). But we are the people who bring about discriminations among ourselves. Because of these man-created discriminations and differences, human beings are treated differently in the world. And in particular, women in the whole world are treated differently. They are not provided with what they actually deserve; rather they are neglected, insulted, and humiliated in every society. The girl who is seen here to be sold to a brothel is the representative of the women of the world. In the same way, most of the women in the world are bereft of basic human rights. The discussion above clearly clarifies the idea that the poem 'An Unsent Letter' is really an upsurge of a tortured girl who has been sold to a brothel as her parents took her as an unbearable burden for the family.

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