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## From Decrepitude to Defiance: Deconstructing the Visceral Spectres of Human Trafficking in Ruchira Gupta's *I Kick and I Fly*

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**Abstract:** This research paper delves into Ruchira Gupta's novel, *I Kick and I Fly*, as a powerful narrative lens through which to understand the multifaceted issue of human trafficking. It explores how the protagonist, Heera, navigates the grim realities of sex trafficking in rural Bihar, India, and how her journey of empowerment through martial arts challenges societal norms and economic desperation. The paper will analyse the deep-seated societal factors that propel human trafficking, including poverty, gender inequality, and systemic vulnerabilities, supported by global and Indian statistical data. Furthermore, it will examine how other thematic elements within the novel, such as bodily autonomy, community, and resilience, contribute to the perpetuation of or resistance against trafficking. Finally, the paper will propose comprehensive, multi-stakeholder solutions, drawing from both the novel's insights and current academic research and policy interventions, to combat this pervasive human rights violation.

**Keywords:** Exploitation; Human Trafficking; Vulnerability; Denotified Tribes; Resilience

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## Introduction

Human trafficking represents one of the gravest human rights violations of the modern era, a complex criminal enterprise that thrives on human vulnerability and systemic inequalities. Human trafficking is fundamentally defined as the criminal exploitation of human beings for financial gain, treating individuals as mere commodities. This abhorrent practice involves the recruitment, transportation, harbouring, or receipt of persons through various coercive means, including threats, abuse of power, or the exploitation of a person's vulnerability, all for exploitation. The forms of exploitation are diverse, encompassing sexual exploitation, forced labour, forced marriage, and even the removal of organs. This illicit trade is recognised as one of the top three organised crimes globally, standing alongside drug and arms smuggling. Its unique profitability stems from the fact that, unlike drugs or weapons, a human being can be repeatedly traded and exploited, generating continuous revenue for traffickers. The scale of this global scourge is alarming, with an estimated 49.5 million people trapped in modern slavery at any given time, encompassing both sex trafficking and forced labour. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reported approximately 27.6 million individuals in forced labour in 2022 alone. Disturbingly, the number of detected victims globally sharply increased in 2022, surpassing pre-pandemic levels by 25%. The observed sharp increase in detected victims in 2022, exceeding pre-pandemic levels, suggests a complex interplay of factors. While this rise might partly reflect improved detection capabilities by law enforcement and anti-trafficking organisations, it also points to a heightened global fragility. Global instability, conflicts, economic downturns, and climate change create new and amplified vulnerabilities, which traffickers are quick to exploit. This indicates a causal link between widespread societal disruptions and increased opportunities for exploitation. Furthermore, the dynamics of trafficking are evolving; the UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2024 notes a significant shift, with forced labour now accounting for the largest share of victims globally, surpassing sexual exploitation. There is also a concerning rise in trafficking for forced criminality, where victims are compelled to conduct online scams and other illicit activities. This evolution in criminal models implies that anti-trafficking efforts must broaden their focus beyond traditional forms of exploitation and develop more sophisticated strategies to target larger, more structured criminal networks and those at the top of these hierarchies. The shift in prevalent forms of exploitation suggests that while detection capacity may be improving, it might also be unevenly distributed, potentially masking the accurate scale of certain types of trafficking.

Amidst the grim statistics and complex realities of human trafficking, Ruchira Gupta's debut novel, *I Kick and I Fly*, emerges as a potent narrative that brings the issue to a human scale. Gupta is an Emmy-winning journalist, a renowned activist, and the founder of *Apne Aap*, an anti-sex trafficking non-governmental organisation (NGO) dedicated to helping women and girls escape systems of prostitution. Her life's work is centred on creating a world where no child is bought or sold, a mission that deeply infuses the novel's core message.

The novel introduces Heera, a fourteen-year-old girl living on the borders of the Red-Light District in Bihar, India. She faces the harrowing prospect of being sold into the sex trade by her father to repay family debts, a fate she has been told is an inevitable destiny of the women in her community. This highlights the severe social injustices and economic pressures that drive human trafficking. The turning point in Heera's life arrives when a local hostel owner, Rini Di, intervenes, repaying her family's debt and offering her a transformative opportunity: learning kung fu with other girls. Through the practice of martial arts, Heera begins to reclaim her body, understanding it not as an object to be commodified but as a vessel for self-protection and empowerment, enabling her to fight back against the forces that seek to exploit her.

The novel's themes revolve around bodily autonomy, community, women's empowerment, resilience, and social justice. The book's power lies not just in its narrative but in its deliberate function as a catalyst for social change. The novel is characterised as a "propulsive social justice adventure" (Amazon.com) and a "call to action" (Simon & Schuster). Literary critics and activists, including Gloria Steinem and Alice Walker, have lauded its potential to save lives and further the cause of liberating women. Gupta herself explicitly states her intention to "warn them of danger and equip them with tools so they can save themselves and their peers". (Gupta, interview) This demonstrates a conscious strategy to leverage fiction as an accessible and empowering educational tool, particularly for young adults, enabling them to grasp complex social issues. The book serves as a mentor text for representing complex experiences and uplifting marginalised stories, fostering empathy, critical thinking, and a sense of agency among readers to challenge the societal norms that perpetuate trafficking. This approach underscores the profound belief that art and narrative can serve as crucial components of anti-trafficking interventions, especially in prevention and awareness, by inspiring individuals to recognise and resist exploitation.

This book offers a poignant and detailed exploration of human trafficking through the lived experience of its protagonist, Heera. In one instance from the book, which elucidates her inherent anguish, she expresses her pain: "But perhaps, now that I am not in school, it will be easier for Baba to sell me." (Gupta 11) Heera's initial circumstances vividly illustrate the extreme vulnerability that often precedes human trafficking. She lives in a filthy place, where the sale of girls into the sex trade is presented as a grim cultural and economic condition. The driving force behind her father's decision to sell her is explicitly stated as the desperate need to feed their family and repay his loans. The narrative powerfully conveys the immediate and overwhelming pressure of 'hunger pangs' that grip the family, pushing them towards unimaginable choices.

The novel also sheds light on the deeply entrenched, intergenerational nature of prostitution within specific marginalised communities, such as the Nat tribe to which Heera belongs. In these contexts, prostitution is depicted as being passed on from mother to daughter, and pimping from father to son, highlighting a profound societal acceptance and economic dependency that traps generations in a cycle of exploitation: "Behind each hut made of bamboo, thatch, straw, and brick, there is a back room... On

one of those beds is my cousin, Mira Di. She is a prostitute, and one day, if Baba has his way, I will be one too". (Gupta 15) This raw statement reveals the intergenerational nature of trafficking within red-light areas like Lalten Bazaar. This normalisation of child sexual exploitation reinforces the pervasive belief that girls' bodies are inherently objects to be commodified and preyed upon, an inevitable destiny or fate from which escape seems impossible. She witnesses this horrifying Reality through her cousin, Mira Di, who lives the worst fate imaginable day in and day out.

The narrative further reveals how various vulnerabilities intersect and compound, increasing an individual's susceptibility to trafficking. Heera's expulsion from school following a bullying incident pushes her closer to the very fate she dreads. This demonstrates how seemingly minor social issues, such as bullying, body-shaming, food insecurity, and homelessness, can erode a child's protective environment and exacerbate their risk of falling prey to traffickers: "We starve because he wants us to starve... So that he can buy me on the cheap from my father and sell me to the dance companies in the fair." (Gupta 18). Here, Heera exposes the calculated economic exploitation by traffickers like Ravi Lala. Systemic poverty and starvation are not accidental; they are tools to coerce families into selling their daughters. The convergence of these disadvantages illustrates the concept of 'intersecting inequalities'. It is not merely poverty in isolation, or gender inequality alone, but rather the cumulative effect of economic hardship, restrictive gender roles, lack of educational opportunities, and social marginalisation that creates an extreme susceptibility to exploitation. This complex web of vulnerabilities makes individuals prime targets for traffickers, who expertly prey on these multiple layers of disadvantage. Consequently, effective anti-trafficking interventions must adopt a holistic, intersectional approach that addresses not only economic deprivation but also gender discrimination, educational barriers, and social stigma to build comprehensive resilience.

A pivotal turning point in Heera's narrative, and a central theme of the novel, is the transformative opportunity provided by Rini Di and the local hostel: learning kung fu. Rini Di says about Heera: "No one owns her. She has the right to a life without fear" (Gupta 40). These empowering words from a woman activist in the book symbolise resistance. They challenge the deeply rooted ownership of women's bodies and represent the possibility of transformation. This introduction to martial arts becomes far more than a physical discipline; it is a profound journey of self-discovery and a direct reclamation of bodily autonomy. Through kung fu, Heera begins to understand her body not as an object destined for commodification, but as a vessel through which she can protect herself and those around her. This shift in perception is fundamental, moving her from a potential victim to an empowered individual capable of self-defence and agency.

The physical practice of kung fu yields significant psychological benefits for Heera. It helps her to shed the deep-seated "The shame, the guilt, and the fear that have been embedded in every cell of my body" (Gupta 101). As she trains, she develops self-confidence, learning to connect her mind and body in a unified, powerful way. The philosophy imparted by her teacher, Rini Di, "Be like water. Flow. Do not crash" (Gupta

102) symbolises the adaptability and resilience Heera cultivates, enabling her to navigate immense pressures without breaking. This profound internal shift directly challenges the traffickers' belief that her body belonged to them, signifying a complete reassertion of her self-ownership and dignity.

The impact of martial arts extends beyond Heera's transformation. The novel, drawing on Ruchira Gupta's real-world activism, highlights how girls in Forbesganj who learned martial arts gained immense respect from their town and families, found new confidence, and contributed to transforming red-light areas into non-red-light areas. This demonstrates that individual empowerment, particularly through embodied practices like martial arts, can catalyse community-wide change. The significance of this approach goes beyond mere self-defence; it is about cultivating intrinsic resilience and a profound sense of bodily autonomy.

Heera's realisation that her body "listened to me—and only me" (Gupta 284) represents a decisive shift from external vulnerability to internal strength. This embodied form of empowerment directly challenges the very premise of trafficking – the belief that one's body is a commodity belonging to another. Consequently, anti-trafficking interventions that incorporate physical empowerment, such as martial arts training, can be highly effective in building resilience and agency among vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls. This approach addresses the psychological trauma of potential or actual exploitation by restoring a fundamental sense of control and dignity, complementing legal and economic interventions.

### **Societal Fabric of Exploitation: Root Causes of Human Trafficking**

Human trafficking is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply interwoven into the societal fabric, propelled by a complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, and systemic factors. Extreme poverty stands as a consistently identified primary driver of human trafficking, both in India and globally. Heera states: "School is not just a luxury for girls like me. It is an avoidable luxury, filling our heads with impractical dreams." (Gupta 38) This bitter realisation by Heera after her sister's death underscores the despair and hopelessness created by poverty. It reflects how survival takes precedence over aspiration. Millions of families, struggling to meet even the most fundamental necessities, are compelled to make agonising decisions, sometimes resorting to selling their children in the desperate hope of a better future or to repay mounting debts. Heera's narrative directly illustrates this dire Reality, as her father contemplates selling her to feed their family and repay his loans. The vivid depiction of "hunger pangs" (Gupta 26) gripping the family underscores the immediate and overwhelming economic pressure that can drive such desperate measures.

India, with a significant poverty rate of 22% and approximately 73% of its population residing in rural villages, presents a fertile ground for traffickers to exploit economic vulnerabilities. (Pondicherry) Poverty severely restricts access to essential resources such as education, healthcare, and legitimate economic opportunities, thereby reinforcing a vicious cycle of deprivation. Research indicates that child



trafficking is particularly prevalent in poverty-stricken regions like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, areas characterised by high levels of economic distress.

Poverty, in this context, is not merely a static condition but a dynamic, multi-generational trap. It not only pushes individuals into immediate situations of trafficking but also perpetuates a vicious cycle that entrenches vulnerability across generations, particularly within marginalised communities. This is starkly evident in the intergenerational commercial sex observed among some Denotified Tribes, where it has become a primary source of livelihood, and in the prostitution passed on from mother to daughter within certain nomadic tribes, such as Heera's community. This systemic entrenchment means that poverty severely limits future opportunities and makes breaking free from exploitative cycles exceptionally difficult. Therefore, sustainable anti-trafficking solutions must extend beyond immediate rescue to address systemic poverty through long-term economic empowerment initiatives, viable livelihood alternatives, and robust social safety nets, designed explicitly for vulnerable communities. This includes targeted efforts to dismantle debt bondage, which is a common form of forced labour in India.

Gender inequality is a fundamental and pervasive driver of human trafficking, with women and girls consistently disproportionately affected by this crime globally and in India. Amy Novotney studied that "7 in 10 human trafficking victims are women and girls". (Novotney) Discriminatory cultural norms often devalue girls, perceiving them as financial liabilities rather than assets. In the story, Heera is repeatedly told that being sold into the sex trade is the fate of the women in her community. These narratives mirror deeply ingrained gender roles and societal expectations. The novel directly explores the complicated relationships between male and female roles, highlighting how these dynamics contribute to the vulnerability of girls.

Empirical research substantiates this portrayal. Cultural practices such as son preference (78%), the denial of land inheritance to daughters (77%), and the exclusion of women from decision-making processes (70%) actively push girls into vulnerable situations. Furthermore, harmful traditional practices like *Devadasi*, where young girls are dedicated to temples and subsequently subjected to sexual exploitation, persist in parts of India despite being officially outlawed. Child marriage also remains a significant contributing factor to trafficking; in 2022, an estimated 23% of women aged 20-24 in India were married before the age of 18. (UNICEF) These early marriages often lead to forced labour or sexual exploitation, effectively becoming a form of trafficking.

These cultural norms and traditional practices do not merely contribute to trafficking; they actively normalise and justify the exploitation of women and girls, presenting it as an inevitable destiny: "Nat girls are meant to be prostituted. That is what the gods want," (Gupta 39). This reflects the caste-based cultural fatalism and superstition justifying the trafficking of girls. The denial of education and dignity to girls from denotified tribes is rooted in a patriarchal interpretation of tradition. This societal acceptance reduces the perceived criminality of such acts and makes it exceedingly difficult for victims to resist or for communities to intervene, as the boundaries between tradition and exploitation become dangerously blurred. The 'demand side' for victims,

particularly for young, fresh-looking girls, is directly fuelled by these deeply ingrained, devaluing cultural attitudes towards women and children. Therefore, effectively combating human trafficking necessitates a profound societal shift, one that challenges deeply embedded cultural norms and gender biases through sustained awareness campaigns, comprehensive education, and rigorous legal enforcement. Such efforts must unequivocally prioritise women's and girls' rights and bodily autonomy, moving beyond mere law enforcement to dismantle the demand side and the underlying cultural justifications for exploitation.

A critical vulnerability factor in human trafficking is the widespread lack of access to quality education and a general unawareness of trafficking dangers within vulnerable communities. Children and individuals from impoverished and marginalised backgrounds, lacking educational opportunities, can become easier targets for traffickers. Heera's expulsion from school in the story, after a bullying incident, makes her feel that her fate is closer than ever to be sold, vividly illustrating how the absence of education removes a vital protective barrier and severely limits her future opportunities. Children without education are more vulnerable to traffickers, who exploit their lack of awareness. Education equips individuals with knowledge about human rights, provides livelihood opportunities, fosters critical thinking, and encourages community awareness campaigns, making it a crucial long-term strategy for prevention.

Corruption within law enforcement agencies and government officials constitutes a significant impediment to practical anti-trafficking efforts, contributing to alarmingly low conviction rates and fostering a culture of impunity for traffickers. The novel directly addresses this issue, explicitly stating that "the police are the worst of all!" (Gupta 72). Gupta's own experience with her NGO, *Apne Aap*, further highlights this challenge, as her organisation faced attacks from traffickers, necessitating the construction of higher walls around their hostel and the filing of numerous police complaints. This narrative detail reflects the real-world systemic complicity and resistance encountered by those fighting trafficking. The deeply entrenched caste system and the marginalisation of specific social groups represent a critical, often overlooked, driver of human trafficking in India. Marginalised communities, particularly those belonging to 'lower' castes (Dalits) and various tribal communities, including Denotified Tribes, are disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. These groups face severe social, economic, and political challenges, including systemic barriers to education, access to resources, and political representation.

### **Pathways to Freedom: Solutions and Interventions**

Combating the complex and deeply entrenched issue of human trafficking requires a multi-faceted and comprehensive approach. Gupta's extensive advocacy work directly exemplifies the real-world impact of such efforts, as her contributions influenced the passage of the first Trafficking Victims Protection Act in the US Senate and the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons. This demonstrates how dedicated activism can translate into significant policy changes.

Conversely, the novel's portrayal of corrupt police underscores the critical need for effective and impartial enforcement of these laws. India has recently undertaken significant legislative reforms. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, particularly Sections 143 and 144, and the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023, replace older penal codes. These new laws define trafficking broadly, outline severe punishments, including up to life imprisonment for adult trafficking and a minimum of 10 years for child trafficking, and classify trafficking as a cognisable and non-bailable offence. Notably, "beggary" has been introduced as a recognised form of exploitation under the BNS, 2023. Other crucial legislation, such as the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, and the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, also applies to cases involving trafficked children. Furthermore, India has established Anti-Human Trafficking Units (AHTUs), with 827 units currently functional across the country, and a National Database on Sexual Offenders (NDSO) to aid in tracking offenders. On the international front, India has signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with several countries, including Bangladesh, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Cambodia, and Myanmar. It has ratified the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC) Protocol, signalling a commitment to cross-border cooperation.

### Conclusion

Gupta's narrative serves as a powerful and accessible narrative that humanises the complex and devastating issue of human trafficking. Through the journey of Heera, the novel vividly illustrates the profound impact of extreme poverty, entrenched gender inequality, and systemic failures, such as corruption and inadequate law enforcement, in creating and perpetuating vulnerability to exploitation. The story compellingly demonstrates how the commodification of the human body, particularly that of young girls, becomes a tragic Reality when societal structures fail to protect the most vulnerable. The analysis of the novel, supported by extensive global and Indian data, underscores the alarming scale of human trafficking, particularly the disproportionate impact on women and children. The empirical evidence reveals a hidden epidemic of child trafficking and a significant discrepancy between estimated prevalence and reported cases, highlighting the challenges in accurate identification and prosecution. Furthermore, the persistence of low conviction rates and the normalisation of exploitation through discriminatory cultural practices highlight the deep-seated systemic issues that must be addressed.

However, *I Kick and I Fly* is ultimately a story of enduring hope and resilience. Heera's transformative journey, driven by the reclaiming of her bodily autonomy through martial arts and the unwavering support of her community, presents a compelling model for resistance. This narrative insight aligns with broader research emphasising the importance of cultivating intrinsic resilience and collective efficacy within vulnerable populations.

Gupta's novel is not merely a story; it is a 'beacon of hope'. It reminds the global community that despite the grim realities, change is possible through sustained, collective effort. The vision of a world where 'no child is bought or sold' is a realistic



and achievable goal. Still, it necessitates unwavering commitment from all stakeholders to dismantle the societal structures that enable exploitation and to foster environments where every individual's dignity and bodily autonomy are universally respected and protected.

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