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Fall 2019

FYS 101 Women Writing the World

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Fall 2019

## A Feature on Fatima

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### Recommended Citation

Letcher, Angelica, "A Feature on Fatima" (2019). *Fall 2019*. 5.  
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Angelica Letcher

### A Feature on Fatima

Up until the twentieth century, most of society viewed people with disabilities as unhealthy and unable to ever be “normal”. Those people were intentionally disregarded and seen as their disability, more of what they lacked (Burtner). Society’s overall attitude towards individuals that lack some sort of ability is a common aspect in America, but Katherine Boo brings awareness to this as a common theme in a nonfictional story that takes place in Annawadi. This village’s caste system is quite corrupt in the sense of Kshatryia (the government) treating those below them differently like the untouchables who are sex workers and garbage pickers. While the main characters are untouchables there is a common theme of corruption between them as well. In the book, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Boo brings attention to society marginalizing people with disabilities through the character of Fatima. She lashes out by intentionally harming herself and those around her because of how she was treated in the past.

Fatima consistently doubts her self worth and questions her place in society because of her treatment in the past. Growing up, Fatima was surrounded by confident women like her mother and sister, but was unable to relate to their common lifestyles because of her physical disability. Her own mother compared her two daughters because of Fatima’s one leg, with she referred to her sister the “two legged marvel being ‘a good girl’” (Boo, 72), which not only shifts Fatima’s perception of herself, but also shifts how she believes society perceives her as well. Beyond society just noticing Fatima as one to stand out of the crowd, most disregard and even disrespect her. From the very beginning of the story, the community chooses to view Fatima solely on what she lacks in her physical appearance. This reaches the extent of only

referring to her as her disability, rather than her real name. The author depicts this non-fictional character by her name, Fatima, but the Annawadi people refer to her as “One Leg”. This introduction to the character begins on the very first page and continues all throughout the book, even after she has died. It is clear that this nickname has affected her so much that she lashes out on those around her. Boo refers to these attacks on others as Fatima’s “verbal arsenal” (71), inferring that her actions are not acceptable, but they are understandable, given the negative feedback she has received all of her life.

Fatima feels so uneasy about her self worth that she physically harms herself and her future. Fatima doesn’t treat her husband as a respectful life partner, but goes beyond disrespecting and disregarding her marital commitment by then prostituting herself throughout Annawadi. While her family is not home, she allows “the part of her body she has to offer feel more important than the part of it she lacks” (73) with various Annawadi men. It is quite upsetting that Fatima can only have self-respect by receiving validation from men. This all seems to be stemming from her disability that has followed her all of her life and the negative attention it seems to bring her.

She goes beyond intentionally harming herself with intimacy from strangers to physically setting herself on fire. Whether it be for the sake of attention, vengeance, or attempted suicide, she knew she was intentionally harming her body and putting her life at risk by pouring kerosene on her head and then lighting the match (173). It was a selfish choice which ended up affecting her family, as well as herself and even other families in Annawadi. Fatima is well aware of her internal actions by being reminded by others that she physically and emotionally affects

everyone around her. In the end, Fatima stops at nothing to ensure her community is aware of her vengeance because of how she has been treated in the past.

Boo chooses to dive into Fatima's treatment towards those around her, specifically her harm of her neighbors. The community continuously recognizes her arranged marriage to be forced upon her as "she treats that old man like a shoe" (77), while most of them feel sorry for her husband, but no remorse for Fatima whatsoever. She intentionally disrespects her husband more than anyone else by not only disregarding him as her husband, but going beyond that and cheating on him with other men. Beyond hurting someone she is relatively close with, she also puts distant authoritative positions like the police in terrible situations because most often times events in her life do not go the way she expects. She chooses to be deceitful and convince the police that a young boy, Abdul, intentionally harmed her, which is an extensive accusation that could harm the Husains' future. She also harms Abdul's mother, Zehrunisa, as "Fatima put her in a trap" (91), and even threatens her. It is unfortunate that Fatima tears down Zehrunisa so much because they share so many similarities. They are both oppressed women in Annawadi and constantly take care of their families' well being. However, Fatima's becomes more harmful and intentional with her actions on those that are younger than her.

Fatima reaches the extent of intentionally harming children even if they are her own. While she already affected Abdul and his mother, she continues to spread her vengeance on the Husain children, going as far as to refer to the whole family as "bastards," (88) even the children. Growing up at that age and in such a cruel environment is already difficult enough, but she blames the whole Husain family for intentionally trying to kill her when in fact she harmed them on multiple occasions. Beyond that, her own children have not been taken into consideration yet.

Boo takes into account a pivotal moment for Fatima's daughter, where she must watch her mother lighting herself on fire (174), having conflict with the community, and tragically dying. Prior to that event, Fatima's two-year old daughter, Medina, drowned under poor watch from her mother. Fatima is never concerned with this issue, claiming she was using the bathroom while she drowned. She didn't even spare her own child, who was so affected by her carelessness that she died and Fatima had no repercussions, which is not acceptable under any circumstances.

In the end, Fatima's actions may be understandable occasionally, but are not acceptable by any means. Fatima's vengeance intentionally harms herself and those around her constantly throughout the book. While emotion can run high, in general society needs to move forward by keeping in mind the importance of treating others with kindness, no matter what traumatic event has happened in the past. Society often times marginalizes and disregards people with disabilities, but does that give them the right to treat others wrongly?

Works Cited

Boo, Katherine. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014.

“Society's Attitude Toward People with Disabilities.” Paul Burtner, May 2019, 14.