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Rags to Metaphorical Riches

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Erin Giesler

Rags to Metaphorical Riches

Behind the Beautiful Forevers, a work of literary non-fiction written by Katherine Boo, follows an overpopulated and underfunded slum in the city of Mumbai. The concept of growth is evident throughout this book in many different forms. The overcity of Mumbai is growing in wealth and luxury, while the Annawadian slum continues to amplify the amount of poverty and mistreatment of people. However, this essay will focus on the growth that is seen interpersonally in a specific character. Each character is exposed to similar harsh circumstances, yet somehow each character develops in different ways due to, or despite of, these challenges. Abdul Husain has survived in and overcame challenges that no teenager, or human being in general, should have to face. His character starts out as a weak boy and, through his experiences, he grows into a determined and confident individual.

At the beginning of the book, Abdul is seen as a scared and skittish character. In just the opening scene, he is frantic as he is attempting to hide from the police (Boo xx). Boo compared Abdul's actions to what his brother, Mirchi, would have done had he been in Abdul's situation. Mirchi "was braver by a stretch, and wouldn't have hidden in the storeroom. Mirchi liked the Bollywood movies in which bare-chested outlaws jumper out of high windows and ran across roofs of moving trains, while policemen in pursuit fired and failed to hit their marks. Abdul took all dangers, in all films, over seriously" (Boo xx). Abdul was fearful, anxious, and bore no confidence in his situation, whereas his brother would have been a classically bold hero. If the threats in movies alone could cause Abdul to become uncomfortable, then a real life situation of danger would cause a greater reaction of fear and anxiety from him.

After Abdul had been captured by the police and sent to jail, his character was able to develop beyond being controlled by fear. His weaknesses began to shift from being fearful to blaming himself for things that were out of his control. After Abdul felt as if he were going insane due to a stuffy jail cell, he thought to himself, *“If I stay here any longer, I will cut up a small child and eat him.”* Afterward, he was astonished that he’d thought this. When the doors finally opened and rotis were passed out, he felt too sick to eat” (Boo 124). Abdul seems to be unaware of the fact that not only is he facing drastic hardships, but also that he is doing so as a child. Anyone, especially a young boy, would feel frustrated in his situation of being unfairly convicted in a society dominated by corruption. Abdul is so used to being the breadwinner for his family that he feels overwhelmed with a sense of responsibility and a need to be mature. He seems to feel ashamed of himself for thinking such a thought because he has no realization of the cruelty of what he is actually going through at his young age. Many other children his age are unaware of the struggles to pay rent and provide for a family of eleven people. This drive to be his family's primary provider consumes Abdul at all times, so he is not aware that having such “impure” thoughts would be normal for a young boy in his situation.

After the initial shock of acclimating to the prison life, Abdul noticed that he may have actually benefited from his stay in prison. Boo writes that “in captivity, there was nothing to preserve - nothing to buy, sell, or sort. Later he realized it was the first long rest he’d ever had, and that during it, something had happened in his heart” (129). While Abdul’s experience in prison was uncomfortable, he was able to take a break from his regular, mundane task of garbage sorting which hardly stimulated his brain. In this new prison environment, he had time to reflect.

One of the main forces that allowed Abdul to grow in jail was the presence and wisdom of The Master. After weeping for the boys' future, The Master explained that "a few boys in the room, select boys, would reform themselves and live admirably... Rewards would come to them. But life would be dire for the other boys, who would continue in their criminal ways" (Boo 131). Abdul was thankful for what the master had given him: the ability to be a student. After this, Abdul was able to reevaluate his own decisions in life. He began to understand that he "had been virtuous"(Boo 132) due to his resistance of drugs, alcohol, prostitutes, and other distractions. Abdul was finally able to understand that he was a "good" person and had actual measures of standards to prove himself. He decided that although his family saw him as nothing other than a workhouse, "an awkward, uneducated boy might still be capable of righteousness" (Boo 132), a discovery made possible only by the influence of The Master.

After being released from jail, Abdul still had some reservation and was occasionally fearful. When he discovered that his friend, Kalu, had been murdered, his first thought was that he would be blamed for Kalu's death and would be subject to police brutality once again (Boo 167). This thought was not selfish; rather, it was a response to his prospect of survival being threatened. To an inattentive reader, this example would signify the retrograde of Abdul's growth as he is returning to fearful behaviors and thoughts. However, this instance proves that Abdul has actually developed as a character. He did not seem to have an immediate negative reaction to having this thought about his dead friend as he did when he fantasized about eating a child; proof that he has grown. He is more aware now, whether consciously or unconsciously, that he is allowed to have negative thoughts and that these thoughts do not otherwise devalue his character.

Abdul was of course maintaining his “virtue” in other ways. He refused to buy garbage that he knew had been stolen and certainly never stole himself. Abdul became very aware that he was capable of being more than the filth that surrounded him. He began to compare his situation to the difference between water and ice which are “made of the same thing. He thought most people were made of the same thing too” (Boo 218). Abdul knew which of the two he aimed to be; “he wanted to be recognized as better than the dirty water in which he lived. He wanted a verdict of ice” (Boo 220). Abdul is clearly very intelligent and has grown a confidence within himself. The Abdul that readers see at the beginning of the book could have never imagined being more than a brainless garbage sorter, but his character has now been able to gain a better and more complex sense of self. Abdul has the insight that although all people are essentially created by the same physical things, the shape that people fashion for themselves from those things is what truly sets everyone apart. He was able to strive to be the better of the two forms.

Abdul grew with every situation, good or bad, that he encountered throughout the book. He started out as seeing himself as nothing but a source of income for his family. He then developed a self loathing as he is ashamed of his thoughts. Due to the effects of The Master, Abdul is then able to see himself as worthy and virtuous. Finally, Abdul recognises the inequality within his society and decides what life he wants for himself and who Abdul Husain really is on the inside. This discovery is vital to Abdul’s continuation in life. Children must grow up to be confident and capable individuals in order to properly live a fulfilling life and ensure that their legacy has an impact on the world.

Works Cited

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