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Keira McKinley

Powerlessness in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

“Everything around us is roses and we’re the shit in between” (Boo XII) is how Mirchi, the younger brother of Abdul Hussain, described himself and the other Untouchables in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, written by Katherine Boo. The story illustrates the dynamic between those with power (the “roses”) and those without power (the “shit in between”). Most of the individuals in this book are those without power and are at the mercy of those with power. In order to combat the feeling of helplessness, the characters attempt to take charge of themselves in almost every decision made. The characters take control of their life in the smallest and most personal of ways. They grasp for power over their lives through who they blame, what they value, and even how they die.

Throughout the book, the characters are constantly pointing fingers and blaming one another for their problems, despite all of them facing the same oppression. This blame game is the result of these characters being exploited by those with more power and wealth and, having no ability to fight back, instead blame the only people who they are on equal grounding with: each other. One of the greatest examples of this is the first major scene of conflict within the story when Fatima set herself on fire (Boo 95), and then blamed the Husain family (Boo102). Fatima had been belittled her entire life; looking to blame, she turned to the only people she could seek retribution against. Similarly, Cynthia blamed the Husains when her testimony was proven false. Boo describes that: “She shook with anger. But at whom? The judge? The lawyers? The justice system? She decided to blame the Husains, hunched on the accused bench in the back” (Boo 212). Cynthia realizes she has no power to actively fight against the judge, the

lawyers, or the entirety of the justice system, and so she holds the equally powerless Husain family responsible. As Boo writes, “Powerless individuals blamed other powerless individuals for what they lacked” (237). These people, who have nothing, can only condemn those who also have nothing because just as the blamers cannot fight against the powerful, the vulnerable accused cannot fight back against the accusations.

In addition to choosing who to blame, some people hold a semblance of power from choosing what they value in life. The character who most demonstrates taking control of his values is Abdul, who maintains a steady grasp on his morals throughout the novel. Abdul’s strong moral compass is prominent during his time in prison, where, even as he is treated brutally, he finds empathy for others: “Abdul couldn’t help but feel sorry for the friendly doctor . . . A few days later, Abdul would even find himself concerned for a Mumbai policeman” (Boo 130). Even as the doctor attempts to squeeze money out of Abdul and the policemen beat him, Abdul still holds tight to the ideals he values in his life, while other individuals give up such morals. This moral approach is further developed when Boo writes: “He wanted to be better than what he was made of. In Mumbai’s dirty water, he wanted to be ice. He wanted to have ideals. For self-interested reasons, one of the ideals he most wanted to have was a belief in the possibility of justice” (218). Abdul realizes that although he may not have power in the justice system, he still has the power to choose to believe in the idea of justice. Just as Abdul chooses to value morals, Sunil chooses to value something he has been told does not matter: his life. In chapter 13, Sunil reflects, “But something he’d come to realize . . . was that a boy’s life could still matter to himself” (Boo 199). In this instance, Sunil is taking control of his ability to choose that his life still matters despite what those with more power and wealth dictate.

Finally, one particular character obtains power and control not from changing her life, but by deciding to end it. Meena has grown up with other people constantly lording their power over her. First, society told Meena that she was worth nothing because of her class, and then her own family tormented her. She had every decision taken away from her, which she contemplates, thinking: “Things were inflicted upon her — regular beatings, the new engagement to marry. But what did she ever get to decide?” (Boo 182). Weary from having no control of her life, Meena chooses to take her life back in the only way she knew how. “I did it for myself,” (Boo 189) is what Meena says to the police officer as she lays in hospital bed after attempting suicide. Impuissant to stop the abuse inflicted upon her, Meena knew only one way to finally exert control over her life, and that was to have no life at all.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers depicts the hardships that people living in absolute poverty suffer and the little influence they have on how to live their lives. Instead of becoming despondent, however, Annawadian’s display tenacity and fortitude to survive, taking victories where they can. These victories may seem small to others but making a choice to stay moral or deciding that one’s life matters is a resolution that reaps its rewards, a resolve that no one can take away.

Works Cited

Boo, Katherine. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks.

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