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Lauren Estes

The Struggles of Being a Female in a Mumbai Undercity

Most people, especially those labelled as “untouchables”, in the slums of Mumbai are challenged with adversity every day of their lives. However, the women portrayed in the book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo are at an extreme disadvantage based on their sex. Inequality of the sexes force women to comply with an endless cycle of corruption that one is not able to escape from. Fatima, Asha, and Manju are all prime examples of this injustice and highlight the struggles of being a woman living in a Mumbai undercity.

One of the first women introduced in the novel *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* is Fatima. Many may view Fatima, or “One Leg” (Boo, xvii) as a selfish woman who is extremely attention-seeking. However, one could also argue that the constant oppression she faces stems from her past. In Mumbai, many women are arranged in marriages based on their ranking in society and their looks. Fatima struggled in both of those aspects. Fatima and Zehrunisa were the only Muslim women in Annawadi, making them isolated from society. Fatima was also disabled, making her dreams of being “respected and reckoned attractive... inappropriate for a cripple” (Boo xvii). Even at her funeral, “onlookers kept their distance” (Boo 115) highlighting the fact that Fatima never truly gained that respect from other citizens in her community and they were simply there to be present for the latest. Boo’s decision to introduce Fatima in the prologue from the perspective of Annawadians as a whole is very purposeful. Fatima is initially described as simply “One Leg”, showing that most Annawadians don’t even bother learning her name and base her social status solely off of her appearance in comparison to others (Boo xiii).

While women such as Fatima are perceived as failures by society, Manju, “the only college-going girl in Annawadi” (Boo 23), gives the reader hope for empowerment of women. Manju’s willingness to help teach children in the slums, despite her own busy schedule with school and helping to support her family, is a prime example proving how passionate she is for causes she truly cares about. Manju can definitely be perceived as a leader who could potentially encourage other women living in slums to pursue an education and help others within her community. However, Manju faces many issues with other citizens, mostly men, diminishing her image. For example, Manju was told by many others in college that “high class women wear jeans” (Boo 141) and she was even told by a soldier that she shouldn’t stand in the sun too long or she’ll “get too black” (Boo 141). Examples such as these prove that young women such as Manju are molded by societal pressure to succumb to these stereotypes to obtain an image that is more respected by men (Boo 143).

Manju also had a great desire to get married; however, she was somewhat timid due to the fact that negotiations with potential suitors can be difficult based on the appearance of the woman. This instance that sparked this fear the most was when Asha tried to negotiate a marriage between a neighbor girl and a boy from another slum and the boy’s family objected proclaiming that the girl was “not beautiful” (Boo 141)!

Confidence in a woman does not decrease her chances of being discriminated against. An example of this is seen when looking deeper into Asha’s story while living in Annawadi. Asha’s dream throughout nearly the entirety of the book is to be slumlord. To do so, she knew she needed to be willing to compete or bargain with men on the daily, hence the need for confidence. This proved effective in many cases; however, she was constantly criticized by men and

reminded of her inferiority. An example of this is when a Shiv Sena man made an unsolicited “rigorous critique of her image” (Boo 143), similar to Manju’s experience with being told what to wear to look better as a female in college. The Shiv Sena man based all of her credibility off of her physical appearance and even suggested that she should not “walk with people who look worse than you”, referring to himself being more professional than Asha (Boo 143). Although these constant remarks seen throughout the novel taught Asha to have a thick skin, she later realizes that she could not handle the stress of being a woman in politics and eventually decided to “quit being slum boss” (Boo 231).

Not only do all of these women mentioned face injustices in their daily lives, but they also are not getting the support that they need from each other. Instead of uniting together to overcome adversity, these women pit themselves against each other and are in a constant state of competition to be the most successful in Annawadi. Even Asha, when describing Fatima and Zehrunisa, said she “didn’t care for either woman” (Boo 27). Mental health in women is an extremely prevalent issue that anyone reading this novel can point out, however, it is rarely discussed by the people living in Mumbai or Annawadi. Even Sunil, a young boy, is able to point out that “too many females wanted to die” (Boo 198), clearly a cause of the injustices they all face. It is very unfortunate to see that throughout the entire novel these women are at constant battle with each other and aren’t willing to comprehend the fact that they all are experiencing similar hardships.

Women such as Fatima, Manju, and Asha all are challenged with the extreme oppression put on them for being women. Main results of this oppression are isolation, differentiating societal pressure, and higher expectations needed to be met to achieve the same goals as men. All

of these multiplying factors set up women in Annawadi and in other slums in Mumbai to be consumed by the never-ending corruption in the government and in Indian society as a whole. As heartbreaking as it is, one is really forced to think if women in Annawadi could every escape this cycle.

Works Cited

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