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Shannon Farrell

The Effect of Self-Preservation on Humanity

In a world where independence and self-reliance are key, the natural instinct to look out for oneself often interferes with the ability to show compassion toward others. In *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, author Katherine Boo explores the theme of self-preservation posing a threat to humanity as both a warning and a call to action for the reader. Throughout her telling of the changes and injustice taking place in Annawadi, the slums of Mumbai, Boo uses the lives of two extraordinary women and one powerful scene to express her theme of self-preservation posing a threat to one's humanity.

Boo utilizes the character of Fatima to show the reader how complex self-preservation can lead to selfish actions that harm others. Abdul, “[l]ike many of his neighbors... had assessed [Fatima’s] damage, physical and emotional, and casually assigned her to a lesser plane of existence” (Boo 128). In viewing Fatima as less than human, the slumdweller prove to Fatima time and time again that she can only rely on herself. Her neighbors “spoke of her fury as an ignorant, animal thing” (72), when in reality, “much of her outrage derived from a belated recognition that she was as human as anyone else” (72). Fatima learns to take care of herself and does not count on receiving any sympathy from those around her. Because of this, Fatima also never learns to care for others. After her daughter, Medina, drowns in a pail, “Fatima seem[s] oddly liberated” (76). Zehrunisa reveals that “shared walls leak secrets, one of which was that when Medina drowned in a very small hut, Fatima and her mother were there” (76). Fatima felt like Medina was a burden, and she did not feel motherly love toward the girl. While “[o]ther women said the worst of her” (76), Fatima “found that she didn’t much care” (76). Fatima lacks

emotion and regard for others because she is only looking out for herself. When threatened by the Husain family, Fatima yells at Kehkashan, “You may twist my leg, but I’ll do worse to you” (93).

As Fatima drowns in her loneliness and social isolation, she aims to take the Husian family down with her. Fatima says, “I am going to hurt you all” (94) and is intentional in naming Abdul in order to remove the family’s main source of income (102). Fatima longs for sympathy and attention from the people of Annawadi, so she blames the family she envies for her attempt at suicide. “Didn’t she think of her daughters before she did this?” (95), an Annawadian exclaims. Fatima never considers what it would be like for her daughters to grow up without a mother, knowing that their mother was willing to kill herself before their very eyes. While in the hospital, Fatima feels “honored that Asha had come” (100), but “still [her] heart is full of vengeance” (101). Fatima fixates on her own feelings and emotions and never once considers those of the Husain family or her own daughters. The remnants of the caste system force Fatima to become selfish as a means of self-preservation and cause her to only see her own pain. Boo includes Fatima’s story because it shows how one’s situation influences his or her need to be self-serving, but self-preservation can lead to a lack of humanity. Through Fatima, Boo urges the reader to discover the significance of treating others humanely and encourages them to do so.

In contrast to Fatima’s position in society, Boo utilizes Asha to demonstrate how the idea of self-preservation through self-advancement similarly threatens one’s humanity. Asha earns a living and advances her career by taking bribes and tricking the government. While this has made her successful in Annawadi, it has come at a price. When Mr. Kamble comes to her seeking a loan for a new heart valve, Asha is not satisfied with the amount of money Mr. Kamble

offers. She feels “confident that [Mr. Kamble will] come back to her... A dying man should pay a lot to live” (26). Asha sees the opportunity to make money off of Mr. Kamble’s situation, so she overlooks the fact that he is a genuinely sick man in need of help. Instead of showing compassion, Asha brushes him off. Asha believes showing humanity is a sign of weakness, and she suppresses hers in order to better her own situation. Boo shares that Asha believes “a person seeking betterment should try as many schemes as possible, since it [is] hard to predict which one might work” (144). When the airport area begins expanding into Annawadi, she swindles a woman out of her hut (225). With only her own advancement in mind, she stops thinking about what she is doing to others. Asha simply “[anticipates] her own commission when she [arranges] for a middle-aged hotel supplier to buy the hut of an illiterate young mother of three named Geeta” (225). Instead of seeing the situation from Geeta’s perspective, Asha takes advantage of her and leaves Geeta helpless. Asha’s neighbors believe “she’s become like an animal in her greed” (226), and one says, “Always she was sly, but now we know there is no one she won’t hurt for money” (226).

Unfortunately, this is true even when it comes to her daughter, Manju. Manju begs her mother not to leave Asha’s fortieth birthday party, but Asha leaves to sleep with a police officer (150). Asha “suspected, rightly, that at home, Manju’s tears were falling on a slice of chocolate cake,” (150), but “[t]his was about money and power” (150). As Asha becomes more successful, she is willing to do whatever it takes to continue this pattern. This form of self-preservation leads Asha to forget others’ feelings and negatively impacts her sense of humanity. In a world where success seems like the only goal, Boo reminds the reader that humanity is more important than self-advancement.

In addition to Fatima and Asha, Boo takes advantage of the scavenger hit by a car to provide examples of self-preservation leading to a lack of humanity in the lives of many Annawadians. “Sunil was too scared to go to the police station” (152) because he was worried about being accused of hurting the injured man himself. Sunil needed to think about his own survival in Annawadi, and his fear stopped him from showing compassion and stopping to help the scavenger. However, Zehrunisa was also wrapped up in her own life as “[s]he thought his leg looked like hell, but she was bringing food and medicine to her husband who also looked like hell far across the city in the Arthur Road Jail” (153). Zehrunisa prioritized her husband and passed a screaming, dying man on the side of the road because her family was more important to her. Many Annawadians ignored the man as he suffered his slow and painful death, and Mr. Kamble thought only of his own dwindling life as he “saw nothing but his own bottomless grief” (153). Once the man died, others found the corpse disturbing and feared catching diseases (153). No one considered the life of the man, but only his or her own life. No humanity was expressed through a single act of kindness, sympathy, or even acknowledgement of the fatally injured scavenger. In this scene, Boo emphasizes the harsh reality of self-involvement and highlights the dangers of forgetting to show humanity to others.

In a story of poverty and political power, Boo chooses to include this theme to warn the reader that in face of his or her own struggles, he or she needs to be careful to not let self-preservation take away from his or her humanity. She wants to illustrate that in a place like Annawadi, the need for survival often trumps caring for others. However, Boo’s theme is also a call to action. Expressing humanity in areas such as Annawadi inspire the people of the slums to

do the same. Showing compassion to others not only saves one's own humanity but also brings out humanity in others.

In *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Boo strategically writes her story about the Annawadi slums to demonstrate how easy it is to lose sight of empathy for others in living one's own life. Boo thoroughly recounts the lives of Fatima and Asha and carefully describes the death of the scavenger to draw attention to the theme of self-preservation posing a threat to humanity. Crafting this theme throughout the entirety of her book, Boo encourages the reader to hold on to his or her own humanity and spark humanity in others. Whether in the slums of Mumbai or in one's own neighborhood, one must show kindness to others and encourage them to do the same to fight the negative effects of self-preservation.

Work Cited

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