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Maddie Farnsworth

Right in Their Backyard

Clint Migrant Detention Center on the Texas border with Mexico does not attract as much public scrutiny as it deserves. The way asylum seekers are treated in this facility contradicts perceived American morals, such as the importance of equality and freedom. In a *Time* article, Madeleine Joung describes the conditions where illegal immigrants are held. She illustrates a place where people are deprived of soap, toothpaste, water to shower, and proper medical care. Mothers are not given clean diapers for their babies and have been reportedly groped by policemen. Facilities are overcrowded, and those being held often suffer through extreme temperatures and lack a place to lie down and sleep.

Thousands of miles away in a slum village in Mumbai, India, there are also obstacles on the path to achieving a high quality of life. In the slums, people lack access to clean water; garbage overwhelms the streets; and a murky sewage lake leaks a rancid smell into the polluted air. The Annawadi slum is a place where children cannot be children, suicides are common, and few lives are valued. Through comparing the conditions of Annawadians living in abject poverty, as presented by Katherine Boo in her book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, and those of asylum seekers at the United States border, it becomes apparent that the treatment and living situations of both peoples are more similar than one might expect. The similarities are specifically found within the usage of walls and cages as well as water dilemmas both groups face.

One of the tangible similarities between Annawadi and the Clint Migrant Detention Center is the way both are blocked off from society with physical barriers. People who live in this slum village, like the Husain family, are already expelled from the community based on

socioeconomic standing. The obstructive cement wall only further separates families like theirs from the more advanced, prosperous city of Mumbai. The separation of those living in poverty emphasizes the way Annawadians are purposefully pushed from the conscious thoughts of rich airport clientele commuting past the slums. The government strategically and deliberately conceals them, allowing the public to subconsciously ignore them. Instead of seeing shelters held together by duct tape and rope, passersby do not think twice about what lies behind the bright yellow concrete wall with an Italian tiles advertisement displayed on it (Boo 37). Outsiders are blind to the poverty-stricken living conditions of Annawadians, and Boo cleverly depicts this when she describes how Sunil could only see the smoke from cooking fires when he looked at his home from Airport Road (36). Not only does the wall keep wealthy outsiders from acknowledging Annawadi, but it also conveniently prevents those living in the slums from integrating into a more contemporary civilization.

A parallel world can be found in Clint, Texas. As a security guard walks into the Clint Detention Facility, the first things his eyes meet are prominent metal cages stuffed with nearly four hundred people. They are crammed so tightly that not everyone is able to lie down (Dawsey). Asylum seekers and illegal immigrants there are overlooked just like people in Annawadi. Instead of embracing those who come looking for a better life and sympathizing with these people's situations, border police cage them until they can be deported back to their homelands. Based on the Customs and Border Protection Laws (CBP), those in the migrant detention centers are not to be held for more than seventy-two hours, but when Vice President Mike Pence visited the detention center, he heard otherwise (Dawsey). According to Pence in *The Washington Post* report, a man screamed out to him that he had been held for over forty days

(Dawsey). Asylum seekers and illegal immigrants are being held in inhumane conditions for excessive periods of time. The cages literally prevent them from becoming members of United States society, which strengthens the understated actuality that American culture drives out those who do not fit in. Thus, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants who make the long journey to the United States do not qualify for acceptance. On top of forbidding them from becoming members of American society, the cages and the cement building in which the cages are kept in allow passersby to ignore the fact that people are being brutalized and treated like animals within those walls. All they see is a large warehouse; therefore no questions arise in regards to their nation's ethics. They can continue to believe America is a sanctuary for freedom. The cages in which asylum seekers and illegal immigrants are kept in are arguably interchangeable with the wall in the Annawadi slum due to the ways in which the barriers allow others to disregard them as well as how both peoples are inhibited from becoming members of a more contemporary society.

However, the isolation is not the only similarity between the Mumbai slum and the detention center in Clint, Texas. One of the main differences between a more advanced and modern city like Mumbai, in contrast to the slum of Annawadi, is access to clean water. When Abdul was in jail, he made the comment that there was more water there than back home (Boo 53). In Abdul's village, there was a minimal number of clean water faucets, and they were owned by the Shiv Sena gang who appropriated the taps (Boo 53). Not only does it cost Annawadians money for clean water, but the water also only runs for ninety minutes in the morning and ninety minutes at night (Boo 53). This overall restriction of clean water access is a key indicator of Annawadi's extreme poverty. Compared to the faucet, other sources of water were less sanitary. Boo describes the lake in the slums when she states, "Late at night, the

contractors modernizing the airport dumped things in the lake. Annawadians also dumped things there: most recently, the decomposing carcasses of twelve goats. Whatever was in that soup, the pigs and dogs that slept in its shallows emerged with bellies stained blue” (7). Boo’s illustration of what the lake contains shows this water is unusable and unsanitary. When reading Boo’s depiction of Annawadi’s clean water shortage, it is easy for Americans to distance themselves and think they are lucky to live in a place where water is unlimited. Despite those beliefs, water is not available to everyone within United States borders.

In the Clint Migrant Detention Center, water is just as limited, if not more, than it is in Annawadi, defying the notion that clean water is always available in the United States. *The New York Times* published a report on the detention facility in Clint, Texas. A group of lawyers did an inspection on the conditions of the people being held there, and a lawyer by the name of Hope Frye described the state of a mother and her child. Frye said, ““When we encountered the baby and her mom, the baby was filthy. They would not give her any water to wash her. And I took a Kleenex and I washed around her neck black dirt”” (qtd. in Dickerson). This situation is even worse than Abdul’s. Abdul chooses not to wash off everyday because he knows he will get just as dirty the next. In contrast, the mother in Clint, Texas was not provided with the means to wash the dirt off of her baby regardless of whether or not she wanted to prioritize cleanliness. Another report published by *The New York Times* gave an additional example about the inadequacy of water availability for those being held in the Clint Migrant Detention Center. A different group of lawyers reported, ““Children had gone unfed and unwashed. Lawmakers said they had met migrants who were not given fresh water and were forced to drink from toilets””

(Kanno-Youngs). The fact that they were forced to drink from toilets disproves any claims that argue societal problems like the ones in Annawadi are not present within American borders.

The current events surrounding migrant detention facilities mirror Katherine Boo's depiction of poor living circumstances in a Mumbai slum. From physical barriers to a shortage of clean water, readers can draw parallels between Annawadians and those who are being held at the border of Mexico and Texas. The asylum seekers and illegal immigrants in the detention facility live in a comparable environment to the Annawadians; however, these are too often disregarded. Those who view the United States as a nearly flawless country full of equality, yet look down upon and distance themselves from a village like Annawadi, need to look closer. The conditions in which Annawadians live and the manner in which they are treated are not as foreign as one might think. In reality, a minority group is being mistreated right in their backyard.

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