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Paige Lang

Women in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Throughout the book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, the author, Katherine Boo, does an excellent job portraying the women in a society rampant with poverty and corruption. The readers gather a sense of confinement from these women, often taking on the role of the caregiver and a worker. This is similar to the series of vignettes *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros in which women make up a community that cannot communicate with each other due to the societal confinement. Between these two books there is a common theme of women looking through windows, portraying their longing for liberation from the constraints that society places upon them. In both texts there is a similarity in what the other side of the window means, which is a sense of hope and a change of circumstances. However, in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, the change in circumstance is related to more material prosperity, whereas in *The House on Mango Street* staring out the window is more passive and represents a freedom from patriarchy.

In *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, windows are an active symbol that represents a chance to escape from the pressures of poverty and patriarchy. A main woman that is depicted actively seeking a window is Zehrunisa, the mother of nine children. Boo writes: “She wanted a small window to vent the cooking smoke that caused the little ones to cough like their father. On the floor she wanted ceramic tiles like the ones advertised on the Beautiful forever wall— tiles that could be scrubbed clean, instead of broken concrete that harbored filth in each striation” (Boo 83). Within this quote, the readers gather a sense of the hut being smokey, dirty, and harmful, illustrating the pressures of society: the burdening poverty and corruption. The building of the

window for Zehrunisa represents an escape from those aspects of Annawadi. She specifically mentions to her children that she does not want them to “cough like their father”(Boo 83). Symbolically she does not want them to end up in the situation that their father did, back in Annawadi continuing this cycle of poverty.

Similarly, the readers see Zehrunisa’s daughter, Kehkashan, looking out a window before her trial: “Kehkashan turned her head to a small window, where over an expanse of wet tile roofs she could make out the Arabian sea” (Boo 237). In this case, the sea is linked to freedom. Immediately, she longs for the freedom from the trial that she has just given up hope on. However, this vast sea can represent freedom from the everyday life and chores of Annawadi that has been placed on her due to her father and brother landing in jail. Overall, through this book, the readers see the women interacting with the windows in an active manner and striving for material freedoms of their everyday life.

In contrast to the women in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, the women in *The House on Mango Street* are more passive. Windows in *The House on Mango Street* serve to characterize the women as observant objects, instead of active agents of change. Cisneros makes the point of men being the barrier in these women’s lives, as the girls are constantly put under the male gaze and domination in this patriarchal society. Thus these women take their “place by the window” (Cisneros 11) and long for a life other than that set up for them by the men in the society, leaving these women passive. The readers are first introduced to this with Esperanza’s great-grandmother. Esperanza explains:

Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That’s the way he did it. And the story goes she never

forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. (Cisneros 11)

At a young age Esperanza is able to see how the women in this society do not get a choice in their future. It leaves her wondering if these women make the best of their situation or if they sorrow over the life they are missing out on. Regardless, they all still sit in sadness longing for a life where they were not snatched by a man who decided their bleak fate. Not only does Esperanza's great grandmother stare out the window her whole life, but she is objectified by the term "fancy chandelier" as if she is nothing more than something pretty to look at. This is an interesting thought as another character, Sally, is married young as well and stuck in the house being complacent with the objects that her husband buys her: "She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake" (Cisneros 102). Similar to the great-grandmother, Sally plays a passive role in her life; they both sit in the house longing for what could be.

Another character that the readers see take this observant role is Mamacita. Cisneros describes: "Whatever her reasons ... she won't come down. She sits all day by the window and plays the Spanish radio show and sings all the homesick songs about her country in a voice that sounds like a seagull" (Cisneros 77). Mamacita is portrayed looking out the window, dreaming of the opportunities she may have had if she was still in her Spanish home, a culture that may have presented her with opportunities. However, in this community Mamacita is closed in with perceptions that have been dominated by the man she has now married. Through this book, the

women are constantly objectified under the male gaze and defined by the objects around them.

These women stare out the window passively dreaming with hope of what their lives could have been, but instead of talking about these prevalent issues, they are stuck inside without communication, creating this silent community.

The women in both of these books are constantly put under the constraints of the men in their society, and have to bear a substantial role in home and work life all while maintaining their public view. These women are depicted staring out a window, longing for escape from their current situation. The other side of the window to them is hope and a different way of life. Whether or not these women are able to act on these is completely dependent on the society to which they belong. In *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, the women must function outside the house so they are able to actively work on the freedom that the other side of the window represents. However, in *The House on Mango Street* the women are viewed as prizes, objects that the men whisk away without questions, so they passively sit by the window dreaming of a future where they would have been able to choose their fate. The freedom that the women in these books are dreaming of is one where they have the individuality and independence to actively pursue their futures.

Works Cited

Boo, Katherine. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: [life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity]*.

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