

ENGLISH – BEHIND THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVERS RESPONSE

How does Boo capture the abject misery within this environment?

DRAWING from four years of investigative journalism in the slum of Annawadi, Katherine Boo's non-fiction narrative Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death & Hope in a Mumbai Undercity explores the lives of Mumbai's 'undercitizens' in a rapidly modernising Indian metropolis. She highlights the extreme levels of juxtaposed inequality which engulfs the lives of Annawadians whose lives present a devastating portrayal of complete poverty. Scrutinising the socio-economic system of modern India, Boo reveals a structure of complete social dysfunction with little access to justice; suggesting that Annawadians reside in a state of relative hopelessness. Consequently, the undercitizens are shown to be trapped in their constant misery.

Stress the use of contrast/juxtaposition and irony (both situational and dramatic) in the first two paragraphs. Include references to novelistic and journalistic conventions.

Boo seeks to illustrate the extreme disparities in living standards between the upper and lower classes, juxtaposing the wealth of the overcity with the brutal reality of poverty-stricken Annawadians. The unique setting of the Annawadi slum 'airdropped into gaps between elegant modernities' presents a vivid imagery of the contrasting realities situated together in close geographical proximity. The 'prosperity-driven obstacle course up there in the overcity' exists close enough to ignite the hopes and aspirations of Annawadians but will forever remain an elusive fantasy. The only 'wads of possibility' which 'tumbled down into the slum' include subtle reminders of an alternative, materialistic lifestyle Annawadians will never experience. The chocolate wrapper, 'take a break, have a Kit-Kat' presents a symbolic irony as Annawadians cannot afford to take break in their lives, let alone indulge in luxuries such as chocolate - building towards a key idea of Boo's text to outline the utter hopelessness pervading the lanes of the slum. Rather than settle for 'poignant snapshots of Indian squalor', Boo details an intention to explore and understand how the most vulnerable in Indian society – impoverished women and children – 'negotiated the world of global markets'. She includes the tale of an unnamed boy who, upon having his hand cut clean off just 'stood there with his blood-spurting stump...and started apologising to the owner of the plant'. Such harrowing accounts seek to highlight the sheer devastation which India's most impoverished endure. Despite losing his hand 'the boy's eyes had filled with tears but he hadn't screamed', for even his ability to express pain extreme pain is a luxury he cannot afford in his state of marginalisation. Boo utilises unsanitised realism to expose the true horror of the Annawadian environment – where goats were 'font of liquid shit' – because she deems such detailed description of daily hardship as necessary for her western readership to gain an accurate understanding of the Mumbai undercity. Thus, the use of juxtaposed inequality and an unsanitised account of poverty combine to illustrate the colour and suffering of Annawadians.

Building on the poverty-stricken lives of Annawadians, Boo exposes a level of systematic corruption which fosters a state of social dysfunction. Subject to the perils of a corrupt political, economic and judicial apparatus, the citizens of Annawadi exist in a continuous cycle of oppression with no real ability to seek justice. Adopting a mocking, sardonic tone, Boo ridicules the Mumbai police for their hypocritical adjudication of justice, degrading Abdul's garbage-sorting business as an 'usurpation of public space! A crime against Annawadians quality of life!'. The Mumbai police's insistence on maintaining 'quality of life' presents a bleak irony. Boo's dark undertone is apt, as Annawadians have no quality of life, and yet the police squander Abdul's only livelihood which had 'lifted his large family above subsistence'. During interrogation in the 'unofficial cell', the officers at Sahar Police Station

'[go] after [Abdul's] hands...the body part on which his livelihood depended', encapsulating the systematic oppression faced by the poor in a system where the powerful are not only apathetic, but actively prevent the disadvantaged from exercising their basic human rights. When 'the forces of justice' finally come to Annawadi, it is in the form of animal activist groups rescuing Robert Pires' horses, the 'luckiest and most lovingly tended creatures in the slum'. Boo's mocking undertone in detailing the rescue and the prosecution of the former slumlord alludes to the absurdity of priorities in Annawadi. While incomprehensible to the Western reader, the whole drama becomes a 'source of bemusement' for the residents who do not find the travesty of justice at all surprising. Despite the fanfare of a 'modernising, increasingly prosperous city', Annawadians come to the realisation that 'their lives were embarrassments' and their 'deaths would matter not at all'. Thus, Boo reveals a state of utter misery and hopelessness rooted within the systematic oppression of Mumbai's most vulnerable.

Throughout the entire text, Boo maintains her omniscient narration of Annawadian life and portrays the undercitizens as being suspended in a state of hopelessness and misery. Despite being a silent third person narrator of the non-fiction text, Boo's scepticism of faith as a barrier to hardship is clear. She derides Abdul's belief that 'Allah, in his impenetrable wisdom, had cut him small and jumpy', for a God who had made him as such would also have been responsible for his miserable fate. While Abdul's loyalty to his deity is admirable, it is also presented as being naïve and foolish as it lends Abdul to believe that his suffering is somewhat destined. In contrast, Sunil's mind 'hadn't been infected [with] contempt' for he still thought that 'memorising "A Is for Apple" might make some difference in his life'. Sunil still dreamt of being able to escape his reality, and that his state of misery was not in perpetuity. By presenting characters who are yet to fully comprehend the true hopelessness of their plight, Boo evokes the unique misery of an environment where Abdul and Sunil's faith amounts to nothing. However, Boo depicts fate in an unpredictably cruel manner, portraying the Annawadians fate as existing in a state forever oppressed and marginalised by factors which they cannot control. [Odd to follow off this statement to an event that is controlled by Fatima, although I get the point you are trying to make. Rephrase to put the emphasis on unpredictability of their lives, even at times when they feel secure of hopeful, like when there is "a break in the rains." Follow this with stronger examples of pathetic fallacy/foreshadowing such as the "sky...purple as a bruise" after Fatima's self-immolation.] Fatima's self-immolation and the Husains' legal troubles are foreshadowed by Fatima's vow to 'put them in a trap', a promise which ultimately leads to Fatima being fatally trapped in her own sinister intentions while the Husains are trapped in a corrupt justice system. Boo foreshadows the impending fate of the Husains observing that in June, 'the beginning of the four-month monsoon season, made every Annawadian pensive'. It is within this monsoon season that Fatima dies, the Husains are arrested and the relative stability of the earlier months is destroyed. Therefore, the naïve faith of young Annawadians in the face of hopelessness and the uncanny foreshadowing of events in line with the weather seek to demonstrate that Annawadians are never in control of their own lives and will likely forever be trapped in a state of abject misery.

Katherine Boo's non-fiction text *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* illustrates the misery and helplessness of Annawadians, who are subject to marginalisation in a system of drastic inequality and systematic corruption. The text illustrates the extreme poverty of Annawadi, exacerbated by endemic corruption and the hypocrisy of the Indian elite – thus sentencing the slum dwellers to a desperate fate from which there is no means of escape. From a humanitarian perspective, nothing presents a more poignant illustration of the abject misery which saturates Annawadi than the residents concluding that their lives are inherently meaningless to the world around them and only truly matters if they value themselves.