

ENGLISH – BEHIND THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVERS TOPIC 4

“Law... justice, concepts in which his limited history had given him no cause to believe.” ‘Law and justice do not exist in Annawadi.’ Discuss.

In a tumultuous transition from old, religious ideologies to a capitalist society, Katherine Boo’s non-fiction narrative Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity explores the conflict between human desire and equality. In Annawadi, corruption and social division is a prevalent factor of life which prevents the opportunity for law and justice to prevail. Through this, authority figures manipulate Annawadi’s unjust system for their own, personal benefit. Furthermore, the bifurcation of India’s social classes is reflected in the division of rich and poor, which perpetuates the lowly status of those is “slumbai.” Due to the inequity that exists in India, the residents of Annawadi are forced to neglect their morality and instead indulge in corruptive actions for mere survival.

Typically, authority figures are symbols of justice and reason, but in Annawadi they are swept up in the corruption that taints their environment. The police officers of Annawadi are willing to “blow their nose in your last piece of bread” in order to further their position in society. Moreover, Constable Pawar’s “brutalis[ation] of a homeless girl who sold flowers by the Hyatt” furthers the horrific imagery of the oppression that exists in Annawadi. The sheer fact that an enforcer of justice will assault a homeless child explicitly reveals the brutal nature of Annawadi, where for mere survival, people are unequivocally prepared to undermine the country’s most vulnerable for personal gain. This suggests that there is no reliable form of law in Annawadi, as those who indulge in **these disgusting acts** are never held accountable. Similarly, Sister Paulette, who is presumed to be a symbol of compassion and virtue, exploits Annawadi’s most vulnerable for her own gratification. Boo condemns this ‘charitable service,’ as orphans only received ice cream when “newspaper photographers arrived,” where food and clothing donated to the children were “furtively resold outside the orphanage gate.” The vindictive actions of this charitable service ultimately question the integrity of figures in high authority, as although Sister Paulette is driven in her “chauffeured white van,” she has the inexcusable audacity to purloin foreign investment for her own fulfillment. Furthermore, in a **western society**, occupations that are of high importance are usually rewarded with a dignified standard of living. However, doctors in Annawadi merely mark the financial injustice that exists, as they are “forced to take bribes” because the government “does not pay [them] enough to raise their children.” As a result, Abdul is forced to pay “two thousand rupees” to successfully change his age. This suggests that the self-serving actions of those attempting to grasp power disrupt the life chances of those who cannot. Ultimately, all are forced to internalise Annawadi’s oppression for mere survival. Thus, those people that are of high authority utilise the inexistence of justice in Annawadi for their own satisfaction, giving society “no cause to believe.”

The clear economic and social division that is present in India exacerbates the apathetic view the wealthy take towards to the poor. India’s attempt at hiding the slum dwellers reveals the superficial nature of the overcity. The overcity actively chooses to ignore the suffering of the Annawadians, where Boo highlights the irony of the adjacent landscapes of the slums and the overcity. Mirchi explicitly states that “everything around us is roses ... and we’re the shit in between,” lamenting the clear economic division within India, where the slums are referred to as ‘shit,’ while the overcity assumes the beauty and splendour of ‘roses.’ Moreover, the beautiful forever’s ‘wall’ allows India to perpetuate a lie, which involves hiding the living conditions of India’s poor from the tourists who come in to the Mumbai airport. Not only does this wall hide India’s poverty from the rest of the world, but it keeps residents of Annawadi from being able to

join 'modern' society, indicating that India's 'progression' means that the slum dwellers are not given access to India's new economic momentum and social mobility. Such symbols showcase the overcity's embarrassment by the slums. In fact, the overcity treats domestic animals with the same level of care - or even more care - than humans. **When Robert Pires is charged with animal abuse, the overcity comes to the defence of an animal, as the PAW activist group disregards the intensity of the poverty that is occurring in Annawadi and instead focus on horses, who are the "luckiest and most lovingly tended creatures in the slum."** This division within society is further exemplified when Boo contrasts the grand living conditions of the overcity with the dire and disastrous standard of living in Annawadi. The richest man in India touted a "twenty-seven-story house" where the lower stories would be "reserved for cars" and "six hundred servants." On the other hand, the residents of Annawadi are forced to trap "rats and frogs and fry them for dinner." Through this, Boo highlights the striking inequity between the overcity and the slums in Annawadi, where India, which is currently experiencing new economic heights, subjects its slums to disastrous and inhumane conditions.

Although morally unjust, the residents of Annawadi are forced to partake in corruptive ideologies for mere survival. It is clear that in order for people to enhance their social position, they must partake in fraudulent work as it is "one of the genuine opportunities that remains." Asha takes part in dishonest deals which distorts her "moral universe." Through this, Boo exposes the naivety of western media, as "foreign journalists came to Mumbai" in an attempt to develop a sense of 'awareness' of the impoverished. Asha manipulates the story of female independence to ensure that "foreign women [get] emotional." In this case, Asha exploits the emotions of foreign investors to attract money, showcasing how corruption in Annawadi obfuscates the reality of Annawadi's lack of social mobility. Similarly, Asha misuses government funds intended to help the poor for her own financial gain. In utilising her daughter Manju to "start nonprofits to secure the government money," Asha effectively keeps the entire community of Annawadi from thriving and instead powers her own rise as the 'first female slumlord' in Annawadi. Through this, Boo highlights that in order for people to enhance their position in society, they must reject their own ability to distinguish right and wrong. Asha's corruption leads her to disregard her morals and "create problems in order to fix them for a small commission." By the end, Asha has fulfilled her ambition to "ride the overcity's inexorable corruption into the middle class," highlighting how her corruptive mindset has not only led to the demise of other residents, but also enhances her own, and her family's financial position in society. Ultimately, Boo's reportage indicates that the only way for Annawadians to further their position in society is to "beggar the life chances of other poor people."

Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity highlights the way corruption and social and economic division are pervasive factors of life that prevents the achievement of law and justice in Annawadi. In the absence of morality, in order for people to survive in Annawadi, residents – and authority figures – are forced to indulge in unjust ideologies for mere survival but are not held accountable in any way. The inequities of the environment are further exacerbated by the clear division that is present in India, which distributes wealth disproportionately and engenders prejudice. Ultimately, the unjust world of the characters forces each man, woman and child to cannibalise their own sense of morality and indulge in corruptive ideologies, leading the reader to understand that indeed, "law and justice do not exist in Annawadi."