

**RISKS AND UNCERTAINTY OF SLUM IN METRO CITIES: A CRITICAL STUDY
OF SELECTED NON-FICTIONAL WORK OF KATHERINE BOO'S BEHIND
THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVERS**

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Risks and Uncertainty of slum in metro cities: A Critical Study of selected non-fictional work of Katherine Boo's Behind the Beautiful Forever's.

Abstract

The present paper gives a foretaste on satire in Katharine Boo's Behind the Beautiful Forever's: Life, Death & Hope in a Mumbai Undercity. (2012) The Behind the Beautiful Forever's non-fiction is Boo's first and well-known no-fiction. This research paper depicts the reality of the aristocratic and local government. As a postmodern writer, Katharine Boo uses different tools for uncovering the reality of municipality as well as drugs mafia. Behind the Beautiful Forever's: Life, Death and Hope in Mumbai Undercity by Katherine Boo is a non-fiction book about what captivating illustration of poverty, stratification, corruption, inequality, gullible rituals, communal wars, caste system, existing politics and rural lives of people in India. Katherine Boo through this book openly projects her bias through the imaginative demonstration of the lives of people in India. Boo as a satirist is reckoned as a moralist who examines the right and wrong as they are revealed in each character's responses to a given situation in life. In the first part of my research paper I have explained Boo's life and his literary experience and background. Through her writings she tries to pose more questions than give answers, what is usually done by a satirist. In the final part of my paper I have analyzed satire in Katharine Boo's Behind the Beautiful Forever's.

Key Words: Aristocratic, stratification, corruption, inequality, gullible rituals and drugs mafia,

Katharine Boo is one of the prominent writers in the field of English literature. She is also called as a postmodern author who is known for her journalistic writing both in fiction and non-fiction works. Basically she is a star journalist in American print media, Boo is known as a politics reporting nationally and internationally. She is the winner of the National Book Award. She is widely known for his exemplary work in journalistic and also for his literary career. Most significantly, her writings are about many countries, but of universal significance. Boo's first nonfiction, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012), she has adopted different narrative like satire, irony humour. Among these techniques, satire is the dominant modes. She has become a celebrity in Indian Writing in English by adopting satire in the twentieth century.. Indian English Writers had not given much serious attention to satire, like in World English literature. Only a few writers try to employ satire in their writings. R.K.Narayan uses gentle of irony and paradox in his writing. His comic vision is full of irony. Narayan's irony includes the social and political context in his character with different experiences. The modernity in R.K. Narayan's novels disturbs the peaceful life of tradition. R.K. Narayan is the prominent writer of Indian Writing in English. Boo made use of satire as a dominant mode in his unique way of narration. Through her writings she tries to pose more questions than give answers, what is usually done by a satirist.

There is a a countless number of slum Colonies in India, where poor people spend their lives trying to make both ends meet. India's metropolis cities are famous for slum colonies like Mumbai, Calcutta, Delhi and Madras where poor people come to work from small towns because of their economic exigencies. They cannot afford their home in the beautiful colony that's why they live in slums struggling to manage the bread of only two beats. Annawadi is a slum area in Mumbai. There is a lack of basic facilities such as water supply, electricity and proper sanitation. As an outcome of these things, the people of that area are infected by serious diseases like Malaria, tuberculosis and hepatitis B and many more. In the slums, people live in miserable conditions. It has been presented by many Indian and foreign authors in their works. Katherine Boo is among one of them. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012) is a brilliantly written, National Book award-winning nonfiction by Katherine Boo, a journalist who writes for the New York Times. She has chosen the area of Annawadi of Mumbai. She depicts the life of Abdul, his family and other residents of Annawadi. It is a wonderful work of journalism, written in a narrative using a combination of fictional as well as journalistic style. Boo turns facts into a literary experience as the finest in fiction"(India Today). The title of the book has been drawn from sunshine yellow ads for ceramic tile that are painted on the concrete wall hiding Annawadi: the ad series repeat the words "Beautiful" and "Forever." Behind those "beautiful forevers," Zehrunisa wants some of that tile for her own house.

Annawadi is a filthy slum by the Mumbai International Airport, a slum surrounded on all sides by luxury hotels, which make it "magnificently positioned for a trafficker in rich

people's garbage"(xiv). Now India is going to become the world's fastest-growing economic country. On one side there is newly built hotels, talismans airport, while on the other sides, it is a place where people do not have proper shelter and basic facilities. Annawadi is an illegally built slum area and is under constant threat of slum clearance. Many Annawadians make their small livings as trash scavengers. But Boo believes that though only six of its three thousand residents have permanent jobs, even then "almost no one in this slum was considered poor by official Indian benchmarks"(4)

Abdul Hakim Husain, the main protagonist, has been steadily enriching his family (his parents, Kehkashan, Atahur, Safdar, Abdul, and other four siblings) for several years with his trade. They work as a rag picker and sort out the problem of trash in the city for their earning. But they live in the small huts which have no solid walls and they save money for buying a plot of land outside the city for the fulfilment of their dream of own house. Boo takes us inside the home of Husain, who is a little above in status from other Annawadians:

Now they had a roughly carpeted wooden cupboard for their clothing- a cupboard twice as large as Asha's. A small television, bought on an instalment plan. Two thick cotton quilts, one blue-and-white checked, one chocolate-brown. Eleven stainless steel plates, five cooking pots. Fresh cardamom and cinnamon, superior to the spices most Annawadians used. A Cracked mirror, a tube of Brylcreem, a big bag of medicines. The rusty bed. Most people in the slum, Asha included, slept on the floor. (85)

We have been given a spellbinding insight into the life of a nineteen-year-old scavenger, Abdul Husain and other garbage gatherers like Sunil, Kalu, etc. They look for a place where they will possibly find enough trash. But their life was becoming tough due to governments' attempts to keep the city clean. They looked for garbage places just like: "Annawadi crows did, circling and observing before trying to seize" (38). It is basically about the poverty-ridden life of scavengers who live a life of neglect. Sometimes they have to remain in a state of constant hunger or they would have to feed on the rotten leftover food from some hotel or catch a frog or otherwise stand silently outside the hut of their neighbours at dinner time. They sometimes sleep in a place where "rats emerged from the woodpile to bite"(34). In one instance, we find that Zehrunisahas to clean the burnt body of Fatima. Boo writes:

Zehrunisa returned to her hut and sobbed, still clutching the rag with which she'd cleaned her neighbour. She didn't cry for the fate of her husband son, and daughter.... She cried for the manageable thing- the loss of that beautiful quilt, a parting gift to a woman who had used her own body as a weapon against her neighbours. (115)

In another scene, depicting how weather brought a difference in the life of rich and poor of the Annawadian. Boo wrote:

“Now it poured, a sting ingrain. On the high grounds of the liquid city, rich people spoke of the romance of monsoon: the languorous sex, retail therapy, and hot jalebis that eased July into August. At Annawadi, the sewage lake crept forward like a living thing. Sick water buffaloes nosed for food through mounds of wet, devalued garbage, shitting out the consequences of bad choices with a velocity Annawadi water taps had never equalled. (117)

The sequence of events follows a description of characters one by one in Part one of the nonfiction. In the beginning, Boo gives an insight into the lives of the characters. Then she gives the detail of their family, social circle and life. She begins with the main protagonist Abdul, hiding from the police and his mother, Zehrunisa after being accused of attempted murder. This is followed by a flashback into their smooth life a year back depicting the time when, after an attempt of self-immolation, their one-legged neighbour, Fatima, accuses them of abusing and threatening.. She was alone at her home because her parents left due to her deformity. She got married to the old age person he was very poor, but he left away, during that for earning money she takes men into her hut sometimes for money, sometimes merely to satisfy her sexual desire, later she died. In “Undercitizens,”(3) writer introduces the reader to other Annawadi residents besides Abdul’s family, including Asha, an aspiring Annawadi politician; Sunil, an essentially orphaned trash scavenger; and Manju, Asha’s virtuous daughter, who is believed to become Annawadi’s first female college graduate In the chapter “The Business of Burning”(69) she depicts how economic hope and official corruption intensify conflicts among Annawadians. The chapter “A Little Wildness”(133) is about the shocking deaths of some young Annawadians, which get covered up public. In the chapter “Up and Out” (175). Boo provides closure to the immediate conflicts presented in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. These closures are largely psychological in nature.

While some Annawadians have finally moved up in social status, they are certainly not out- free from the undercity’s grip. Others retain the same undercity position, but at the same time, gather the inner strength to go” on trying. In this book Boo present, a boy Abdul Husain, who buys rich people’s waste, garbage and leftovers from the market, and sell it to waste dealers to run his family of eleven members. He is a Muslim by religion who has to face the tragedy of wrongful imprisonment by the Police of Bombay. His life is an example of the harsh realities of slum life which the reader experiences with intimacy. Abdul’s mother is Zehrunisa Husain, who handles the rate of Abdul’s wastes, and Abdul’s father, Karam, who is slowly wasting away of tuberculosis. Abdul has eight siblings, including his sister Kehkashan and his brother, Mirchi. Asha, she is a very talented woman and became a first graduate lady in slum’s people. She has identified an alternate route for the middle class. Despite being in slums like Kalu, Asha raises the voice against political corruption with the help of her beautiful daughter Manju.Kalu who is a fifteen-year-old scrap-metal thief, is an

unforgettable character picked up from Annawadi. Boo depicts her skills of fine reporting through impressive and engaging character development. Her characters are normal human beings and have both shortcomings as well as qualities. Boo uses excellent narratives to portray Abdul in his own words “Allah, in his Impenetrable wisdom, had cut him small and jumpy. A coward: Abdul said it of himself. He knew nothing about eluding policemen. What he knew about, mainly, was trash” (xi). She describes his physical form “He had deep-set eyes and sunken cheeks, a body work-hunched and wiry.... Almost everything about him was recessed save the pop-out ears and the hair that curled upward, girlish, whenever he wiped his forehead of sweat”(xiii).

Further, Boo describes Abdul's father, Karam Husain uses the tool of keen observation:

Someone was shuffling on the other side of the wall. His father, most likely. He'd be out of his nightclothes now, wearing a polyester shirt that hung loose on his shoulders, probably studying a palmful of tobacco. The man had been playing his tobacco all evening, fingering it into circles, triangles, circles again. It was what he did when he didn't know what he was doing. (xvi)

Moreover, he was

Too sick to sort much garbage, not sick enough to stay off his wife. He'd been raised according to what he called Wahhabi beliefs, among them opposition to birth control of Zehrunisa's ten births, nine children had survived (xvii).

Although young, these scavengers are philosophical at times: Everything around us is roses' is how Abdul's younger brother, Mirchi, put it. 'And we're the shit in between (xiv). Boo tells that Mirchi envisioned himself “wearing a starched uniform and reporting to work at a luxury hotel. He'd heard of waiters who spent all day putting toothpicks into pieces of cheese, or aligning knives and forks on the tables. He wanted a clean job like that. Watch me!” he'd snapped at their mother. 'I'll have a bathroom as big as this hut!” (xix). On the other hand, Abdul wanted “a wife, innocent of words like a pimp and sister fucker, who didn't much mind how he smiled; and eventually a home somewhere, anywhere, that was not Annawadi” (xx).

Each character has a different hope and expectation for the future. The *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, is a depiction of the problems like corruption, bribery, politics and unemployment. The whole book revolves around these themes through the life of Abdul, his relatives and neighbours. Hundreds of witnesses disapprove of the accusation on Abdul of Fatima's claim but nobody cared. Everyone involved wanted to absorb some of the money Abdul's family had, be it the police officers who had arrested them, or government officials, or the Annawadi village problem solver, Asha. On refusal of any bribe, the three accused Husain's are beaten. Abdul is sent to juvenile correctional jail, and Zehrunisa spends frantic months attempting to save her family. One of her key considerations is whom to pay off, among the many demanding money for promised help, with the family's remaining scarce funds. It is through Husain's case that we are able to have an insight into the judicial system. It is a spectacle of

corruption where at every step bribes are required. Being in juvenile detention, Abdul's business of garbage-sorting is ruined and never picks up again. His brother has to drop out of school to earn a livelihood for their family. They lose all deposits of money they had. Boo experiences that the hospital's store has abundant of medical supplies, but they sell them for their own profit, leaving the patients to supply their own medications. Fatima is left to suffer, while her neighbours and family go on about the business of survival. Meena is a demoralized 15-year-old girl, who is the first girl to be born in Annawadi, swallows rat poison and only her friend takes her seriously. She likes the youngsters who commit suicide. Other children (Sanjay and Kalu) are beaten or thrown in jail and beaten repeatedly to death, even when known to be innocent of the charges made against them. "Indian criminal justice is a market like garbage"(107) writes Boo. The Corruption permeates every possibility and reshapes every hope "Corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained" (28) Boo has also drawn attention to a sensitive issue of female feticide in this book. She tells that Fatima has drowned her own two-year-old daughter, Medina, in a bucket. Boo writes "Young girls in the slums died all the time under suspicious circumstances, since most slum families couldn't afford the sonograms that allowed wealthier families to dispose of their female liabilities before birth" (76).

Boo portrays the inside realities of the orphanages. Through Sunil, we are able to know "that he and other local kids received ice cream only when newspaper photographers came to visit." Sometimes "food and clothing donated for the children got furtively resold outside the orphanage gate"(33). We see that Sister Paulette is a nun. She runs Blessed Trinity children's home. She turned out the boys who were more than 11 years sold out onto the street if she decided they were "too much to handle." (33)Later in the book, Sister Paulette also is accused of selling food donated by airport catering companies to "poor women and children, who in turn tried to resell them" (157).

Towards the end, there is a brief description of a very important event from recent history, the 2008 terror attacks that took place in Mumbai. Boo presents some after-effects of these attacks, which are relatively different for rich and poor. She writes: Mumbai's wealthy were also hopeful in the months after the terrorist attacks. Many had begun to engage in politics for the first time, intent on bringing about government reform. Most wealthy Indians tried to work around a dysfunctional government. "Private security was hired, city water was filtered, private school tuitions were paid" (216). But for Annawadians the effects are totally different:

A city in which terrorists skilled foreign tourists in hotels was not a place other foreign tourists would want to spend their winter holidays. There would not be peak season in Annawadi this winter. The airport would be quiet, the hotels empty. When midnight came on January 1st there would be few partiers at the intercontinental shouting 'Happy New Year.'

Instead, 2009 arrived in the slum under a blanket of poverty; the global recession overlaid a crisis of the fear. More Canadians had to relearn how to digest rats". (193)

Boo has been, no doubt, courageous enough to have visited the place, met people, made video recordings and spent time with the residents of Annawadi. She used notes, audiotapes and photographs about their lifestyle. These things help her to portray the real life of the poor people in her writings. Boo accounts her more than three years experience from Nov 2007 to March 2011, in the form of an enriching narrative. She has carried out her research regarding slums very minutely, and has taken great care to record it cautiously in order to portray global change. Moreover, this is a book in which we do not find a single glimpse of the presence of the author making it a good example of an omniscient narrator in nonfiction. Boo maintains silence, and usually sticks closely to her subjects' points of view. It is Abdul, who supplies a lot of the book's trenchant analysis of slum life. She limits her own interpretations to a short author's note at the end of the book, to explain how she managed to fit into Annawadi so wholeheartedly.

She observed "Instead, powerless individuals blamed the other powerless individuals for what they lacked. Sometimes they try to destroy one another. Sometimes, like Fatima, they destroyed themselves in the process"(236). Also works in the direction of exploring the hopes, deep emotions, friendships, family relationships, and personal philosophies of Annawadians. It reveals the courage with which they are trying to fight this livelihood in a hope to improve and gain a better status in the fast-changing technological and commercial world. The true contours of the age are revealed every now and then. But while being in the Dongri detention facility Abdul comes under the influence of The Master, which brings a transition in his life positively. He feels that this period "was the first long rest he'd ever had" and "something has happened to his heart" (129). He feels sorry for other people. He wants to be kind and generous to people. He takes a resolution of not to trade in stolen recyclable, when he is back from jail.

Most poor people live in the slum area because they have no other viable housing option. By government has been providing housing scheme for living with them, but they do not like these facilities. After the documentation, they sell the allotted housing flat to the builder and look for housing in slums again so that they may earn some money. Most of people migrate to urban areas in the search of employment. Once in the city, they find only unskilled jobs in the urban area. Thus, with such employment these persons are not able to afford suitable housing in urban areas where the cost of living is very high. Hence, they are trying to find accommodation in a settlement or slums. Apart from this, there are so many small factories and workshops, where they can make their living by doing wages and they can save themselves from the rule of local people and, guidelines cannot be enforced.

To conclude, it can be said that Boo has picked up many related themes like poverty, corruption, politics and social problems like dowry and female feticide. It is a powerful meaning of understanding the reality of a section of the globalized society in a metropolitan city. She deals with the problems which are prevailing in all institutions from public hospitals to even charities, as well as the present educational system. With strong character development, minute and accurate descriptions, effective and enriching prose, this is a wonderful presentation of Mumbai.

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