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### Book Review: Behind the Beautiful Forevers

Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* explores many complex ideas throughout the novel by detailing the events that unfold in a slum in Mumbai, Annawadi, but the focus is really on the corruption that touches everyone's lives. We see how a Muslim family survives in the tough world, despite the erasure of anyone poor. We see the complexities of individual people - women, children, and men - and the opportunities that are presented to them. We see these people scramble to be recognized by anyone of importance in the incredibly corrupt and unequal world they must survive in. The themes of erasure, social division, and opportunity appear numerous times in the text, emphasizing the experience of many people that are pushed to the side in India.

The novel begins with Abdul, a boy in his late teens (we aren't sure of his age) hiding from the police in a pile of trash he sells to make a living. He has been accused of setting his disabled neighbor on fire, a capital crime in India. As the story moves along we find ourselves transported back to before the incident, where we see the daily lives of those living in Annawadi. In various chapters we are introduced to different characters: Asha, a mother who uses the corruption of the city to her advantage and rises in the political ranks; Sunil, a young boy whose growth is stunted due to malnourishment; Meena, a teenager who has an incredibly restricted life because her parents believe her worth is directly tied to her marriageability; and Kalu, whose

murder is swept under the rug and classified as a death by illness (there is plenty of it in Annawadi). These characters, in addition to many others, all play a role in describing the events that occur in the story to highlight the corruption.

The easiest thing to see as an emphasis on corruption is the beautiful forever: the tiles that Sunil finds on the wall along the river separating Annawadi and the airport. This wall is representative of the problems that India is trying to hide - Annawadi behind the wall. The government is trying to claim that their problems of poverty are behind them, when in reality they are covered up with a mediocre effort. Officially, a caste system no longer exists in India (something that the government also pushed to prove that “progress” was being made for the sake of their global image), but the social stigmas that existed are still very much present in daily life. When Fatima, Abdul’s neighbor needs to be taken to the hospital, none of her neighbors step up. Although she is their peer, they see her as a burden, as a crazy, promiscuous woman that doesn’t deserve their help. Her implied social status, as a disabled woman, is lower than most of those that reside in Annawadi. Despite the image they project, Indian society still is not very progressive when tradition and traditional values hold incredible importance to many generations of people. Meena’s life is very restricted because her worth is directly tied to her marriageability, something that her parents strongly believe in. When we meet her, she tells us that she wants to be more, but she can’t because of the societal norms in her life. She would love to go to school like her best friend, Manju, and learn english, go to college and become someone of worth, but she is destined for a life of living inside and obeying her husband (through an arranged marriage, too).

Abdul's hopes for his life were small (simply to earn enough money to live comfortably) but later in the novel, from a jail cell (where he was detained for the accusation of murdering Fatima) and between interrogations and beatings from the police, he sees that even his very small dreams may not be reachable. Asha calls the police station and stops his beatings - not out of compassion but out of the need to show how much power she has. This is an example of how corruption has caused even more social division and selfishness, and it rises above even human compassion. Asha knows Abdul's family and yet she still needs to benefit from the small act that she does to protect him. While in jail, Abdul learns that everyone's lives are hard. The doctor who attempts to threaten him into paying 2,000 rupees has a hard life, and is just trying to make it. Asha, who will undermine and manipulate people to no end, is just trying to make it. Everyone who lives in Annawadi and who is considered of low status has a hard life. India does not treat people fairly and they ignore the needs of their people, which is why there is such a struggle for so many of these people.

When the trial begins, we get a glimpse into India's court system, which is (surprise!) set up so that the judges care about what is fastest - not right. Abdul's family's case is one of 35 simultaneous cases, and one of 9 on that day. Here we see that there is a female judge, which is progressive, but it is truly masking the fact that the justice system is broken because it is overrun with cases.

Towards the end of the novel, there is a discourse concerning the upcoming election and the possibility that residents of Annawadi can be rewarded with a small apartment with running water. Asha, a newly appointed slumlord of Annawadi, helps middle-class people commit fraud so they can get an apartment, while residents of Annawadi are left with nothing but their huts in

the slum. The residents of Annawadi see Asha's actions as the horrible crime that it is and begin to shun Asha. Because residents of Annawadi are not typically allowed to vote due to status and registration complications, they really don't have a say in who their representative is. Now that they see Asha has turned against them - in another example of corruption - they become more concerned in trying to gain their voting rights. As it turns out, the woman who is part of a Bollywood family and whose father held the seat before her is going to get the position. Annawadi is gifted with sewage covers to gain the votes of the people, but then taken away when the politicians need the support of another slum - yet another example of the massive amounts of corruption that touch everyone's lives.

In the end, there are plans in the works for Annawadi to be demolished. Although they may try hard to be the ice that rises from the dirty water around them, as Abdul mentioned several times, the residents are still stuck in the same position they were in before, struggling to be above the poverty line without giving in to the corruption they face in every aspect of their life. Despite how hard they tried to leave, the residents find comfort in returning back to their original positions in society, India, and the slum they live in, resolving to be happy with being a part of the dirty water instead of the ice cubes that become something new.