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Kara Connelly

Behind the Rose-Colored Glasses

Women, throughout history, have been conditioned to believe that their emotions should be hidden from the public eye; their presence shouldn't bring attention to them, their voices should not be heard. To the women of the Annawadi slums, extreme feminine discretion is a hurdle nearly impossible to jump over. The women in *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* are at a crossroads at the time of publication, stuck between what was expected of them, and the "flamboyant protest" (Boo 178) of their position in the Mumbai slums. While being surrounded by the beautiful and evolving city of Mumbai, the women of Annawadi are trapped in a gilded cage of hopelessness and despair. Only when one's self-identity is sacrificed can change and growth occur.

Throughout the book, women of the slums conclude that death and pain are the only way to have lives that "matter." For example, when looking at the women that come from Annawadi, each leads a completely different life, with completely different struggles that haunt them. Whether it be a physical disability, a drunkard husband, an abusive family, or a rigid mother, no woman lives a life of ease in Annawadi. However different, all of these women have used personal pain and sacrifice to gain power and a sense of identity in a society where female independence is seen as taboo.

Asha sacrifices her sense of sexual security and home life to secure a better life for herself and her daughter. She acts as Annawadi's unofficial slumlord and messenger between those with no power and those with little power. This duty, however powerful on the exterior, is rooted in sinister, cruel, and heartbreaking methods. The moment that shows Asha as truly

vulnerable is during her fortieth birthday celebration. Asha has reached her balance of power by being a sexual pawn in the men's power games.

To Asha, the sex she had was not based in "feeling loved and beautiful" (Boo 150), like what Fatima chased after, but rather to secure a future for her family. Asha did what she did in pursuit of a better life in a place where basic security is a privilege. Asha states that, "the flourishing of Manju, alone, had justified the trade-offs. Even the nightmare about dying of AIDS." (Boo, 151). Here there is a woman, so headstrong and resolved to move up in society, so intent on success, that she is willing to give away her pride and her body so that her family can have the chance to move up.

Asha is not ignorant of the implications; she knows what she is doing. She is aware of how terrible AIDS is, and how easy it is for her to catch it. Her sole solace is Manju's success: Manju's bright future, and Manju's safety. She is willing to give up everything, even the flimsy protection she had against AIDS, because she can pride herself on being the mother of a college-educated daughter, and "the most influential woman in her slum" (Boo 151). Asha is not a woman who sees life in rose colors; she sees life for what it is, and plays the game to her advantage, to make her life matter, even if it means giving up immensely personal parts of herself.

On the other side of the coin, Fatima saw her own infidelity as the only option to live a life that mattered in the slums of Annawadi. Fatima, "One Leg", was a woman of the slums who always felt the need to feel desired, to feel like she mattered. She went after men outside her marriage to seek the feeling she so desperately lacked: love. She wore her "sexual need as blatant

as her lipstick” (Boo, 71), as mundanely as she would wear an article of clothing. Fatima, the One Leg, was never shy about her pain and her damage, she “acknowledged it freely” (Boo 72).

Whereas Asha’s ultimate goals of sexual acts were rooted in furthering her political agenda, Fatima’s was based in personal esteem. She admits that, “only in the hours when the men came...did the part of her body she had to offer feel more important than the part of it she lacked.” (Boo 73.) Fatima did not desire the men she lusted after. Rather, she desired the effect they had on her, the attention they gave her, the false sense of love she convinced herself was true. The only way a disabled woman in the slum could have a sense of identity that mattered, Fatima reasoned, was to offer up her body. So Fatima let boys and men, young and old, poor and poorer, come to her bed and give her personal power that she lacked by herself.

Pain and struggle in the slums are only multiplied when a woman desires change of her situation. Asha and Fatima, though entirely different in terms of background and family life, are connected by a deep desire to have their lives mean something and will go to the extremes to make it happen. While Asha’s pain was used as a sexual pawn in the game of slum power, Fatima’s was rooted in personal achievement of affection and love she so desperately longed after her whole life.

While pain and struggle can lead to power and class increase, it can also lead one nowhere, except at a place of deep despair, depression, and longing. For women of Annawadi, these emotions are normal. Women of Annawadi are often faced with the decision to succumb to death or succumb to the corruption that keeps the slum alive.

The struggle to lead a life happily in the Annawadi slums is beyond difficult, and to do it morally is virtually impossible. Women like Asha cheat the system and play the game by the

same rules that those with power do: by corrupting the game and making it their own. Toward the end of the book, Asha enlists her daughter, sentimental Manju, to become her assistant in these corrupt dealings. Manju, who has dreams of teaching, realizes “that the payment for a good life, badly acquired, had come due” (Boo, 229). A young woman with a college education, bent on providing a life that was lived for others, to teach underprivileged children how the world they lived in didn’t have to be cruel, had morphed into the same woman she grew up not wanting to be: her own mother. She didn’t see a choice in the matter. She had to become the person she most feared to live a life she most wanted.

There are those who, after seeing the two options women have in Annawadi, - corruption or stagnation- decide to kill themselves. Unsurprisingly, suicide rates of women in India is among the highest in the world. According to Dana Smith in “Scientific American, “suicide is the leading cause of death among Indian women ages 15 to 29,” (Source 2). One such example is Meena, who killed herself with rat poison, after much contemplation on the subject (Boo 189). She was engaged to a man she did not love, was beaten by her brothers for not being happy, and misunderstood by even her dearest friend, Manju.

Meena is the embodiment of so many women of the slums, who believed they should “escape the situation if you know you’re going to be miserable.” (Boo, 184). Rather than succumb to a life of immoral deals, sex as business, and corruption at every turn, Meena made a single choice for herself: to die as herself. It was reasoned, “this was one decision about her life she got to make.” (Boo, 188). Rather than choose to live on morally but miserably, or live on successful but corrupt, Meena chose the hardest path: realization. Her life, she realized, would

never get easier. Meena, along with many women felt “fed up with what the world had to offer,” (Boo, 189).

As women living in corrupt, maligned slums of Mumbai, the options they encounter are scarce. Would a woman risk her personal morality to climb the ladder of importance? Or would she rather succumb to the understanding that life will never truly give her the peace she desires, and so resolve to seek out death? The women of Annawadi are faced with challenges of immense mortality and morality alike and can only seek motion in sacrifice of one or the other.

Works Cited

Boo, Katherine. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. New York, Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2014.

Smith, Dana G. "More than a Third of Female Suicides Are Committed by Indian Women." *Scientific American*, 1 Dec. 2018, www.scientificamerican.com/article/more-than-a-third-of-female-suicides-are-committed-by-indian-women/. Accessed 6 Nov. 2019.