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## The Wall: An Unexpected Connection

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Rebekah Davidson

### The Wall: An Unexpected Connection

The wall that stands to separate the elite society of Mumbai from the impoverished slums is highlighted throughout *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. It serves as a physical barrier between the undesirable and ideal societies that exist in India; however, it also happens to be the single connection between the two. What separates the area where privilege begins and ends is also what brings them together.

It is easy to think of the wall as a barrier. It stands between two areas to block one from the other. On one side of this wall, there is the ideal and picturesque version of the city of Mumbai. There are constantly new hotels being built, and more recently an airport has been added (5). This version of India is for the blissfully ignorant, which supports the notion that if a problem cannot be seen, then the problem does not exist. This is where the businessmen and women make a living. There are doctors and politicians who live there day to day without a care in the world; however, just over the other side of the wall, there are large groups of individuals who live their day to day in suffering. For the individuals living in the slums, the wall is a constant reminder that they are never going to have the opportunity to cross it and live in a higher class society.

The wall is a physical blockade, but also a metaphorical divide to represent social immobility. Individuals who live in the slums will never have the opportunity to live the lifestyle of those who live in the prosperous city of Mumbai. In most cases, these individuals have to buy and sell trash to make a living, if one could call picking through garbage a living. What little money they do receive is hardly enough to provide food for a family or provide a stable income.

No amount of trash and recyclables will provide enough in a physical sense to affect an individual's societal or social status. The financial struggle of Annawadians and of the countless other individuals living in the slums is physically depicted in the barrier wall. The financial burden is a hurdle that is too large to jump over, as is the wall that connects the slums to the privileged city of Mumbai.

The idea of the barrier wall poses a mental and metaphorical separation that may not be so apparent at first, but it represents a blockade in every sense of the word. The idea of the caste system in India is not a new concept, and it is referenced throughout *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. Once an individual has been labeled an “untouchable” or a member of the Dalit class, day to day living is made exponentially more difficult. Members of this class are treated in a similar manner to the trash that many of them collect. They are thrown out into the slums because no one wants to be seen with a member of such low class standing in a major city like Mumbai. From the Annawadi slum, what can be seen is the skyline of Mumbai. The tops of hotels and the airport are visible to the individuals on the other side of the wall. The buildings taunt them with what they can never have.

The advertisement that states “Beautiful Forever” is only visible to those who are living in the slums (37). It serves as a way for individuals to make a mental note that there is hope for leaving the Mumbai slums one day, but ironically the ad is plastered on an even larger reminder that these individuals will never move higher in social standing or in economic class (37). A burden this large is impossible to overcome.

The wall physically divides the slums from the city, and it blocks the idea of any chance of changing social standing. It is simple to say that this wall only further disconnects the wealthy

and privileged from the undesirable and impoverished; however, this wall is also a point of connection for the two societies, both physically and in an abstract manner. This wall is shared. Katherine Boo makes this idea difficult to grasp, but that seems to be her intention. It is made clear that this wall is a dividing line, but in reality both societies are living with the wall; it is serving a separate purpose. For the privileged individuals living in the city, the wall is used to hide the reality of what the individuals in underprivileged India must live with. For the impoverished individuals living in the slums, the wall blocks off any inkling of hope. One cannot physically get up and over the wall, and an individual cannot better their chances of living a better life by moving up the ladder of the caste system.

There is a theory that states that one thing cannot exist without the other. Those two things are connected in that aspect. This theory applies here. These groups of individuals are separate because they have been bombarded from the beginning with the idea that the caste system exists and the individuals at the bottom of the system are worthless and will never be equal to the individuals at the top. These people are living in one community but they are separated by the idea that one individual is better than the next simply based on a title they have been labeled with. In societal standards, the poor would not exist without the rich. The privileged would not exist without the impoverished. One idea constitutes the other. That is what Katherine Boo wants to portray to the reader. It is easier to look at the wall as an impossible obstacle to overcome, but if it is viewed in a slightly different light, it becomes apparent that these societies are connected. There is common ground, but the idea of even the slightest bit of commonality was blocked as soon as the barrier wall was constructed.

Works Cited

Boo, Katherine. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. New York: Random House Trade, 2012. Print.