

# **Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity Study Guide**

**Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death, and Hope  
in a Mumbai Undercity by Katherine Boo**

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## Plot Summary

Katherine Boo's book "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity" is a nonfiction, journalistic account of the lives of several people who live in the Annawadi slum.

Among the lives that Boo chronicles are those of the Muslim Husain family, particularly the teenage Abdul, and the life of Asha, a local school teacher who desires a career as a politician. Abdul is a scavenger, who steals and combs through trash to find materials that can be sold for recycling. His mother handles prices and haggling. They slowly begin saving money, with the intent to purchase land outside the slum and move away. But a disagreement with a one-legged neighbor in pursuit of respect and affection spells disaster for Abdul and his family. Accusing them of beating her, the one-legged neighbor sets herself on fire, seeking attention, and ends up dying in the hospital of an infection. The Husains are blamed, and several members of the family are arrested. Ultimately, they are found not guilty, but at the book's end, Abdul's case is still pending.

Asha has dreams of wealth and power, and she has a beautiful daughter whom she hopes she can arrange in a beneficial marriage. Asha's daughter, Manju, is in college, teaches classes for her mother in the afternoons, and takes care of her family in the evening. She dreams of freedom, and of graduating from college. Asha, who sleeps around, funnels money where needed, and engages in corrupt practices, seeks to become the Corporator of the state Ward in which they live. Eventually, she gives up the pursuit of politics in favor of fraud in a Department of Education scheme.



# Prologue - Part II, Chapter 5, Ghost House

## Prologue - Part II, Chapter 5, Ghost House Summary

Prologue - It is July 17, 2008, in Mumbai, India. It is near midnight, and the police are searching for Abdul, a teenage garbage collector, and his father, in Annawadi, a slum by the international airport. Annawadi consists of 335 miserable huts, and three thousand people, some transient, others inhabitants. It is an unwelcome melting pot of different cultures and religions, all of them squatters on the Airport Authority of India's land. Abdul himself is Muslim. Abdul has, for years, been buying and selling things rich people threw away. Abdul decides the best place to hide is at home among his garbage. The great common area, the maidan, is full of water, trash, and other junk, is quiet tonight after the burning of the woman with the one leg, known as "The One Leg". All around the slum are fancy hotels and businesses. Every morning, the people of Annawadi sort through the trash. Abdul works hard because his father has tuberculosis, Karam Husain, and his mother, Zehrunisa, haggle over the found trash when selling it.

Abdul enjoys a good relationship with his mother, who has given birth to ten children - nine of whom have survived. Abdul's father is too sick to work, but not sick enough to enjoy his wife, meaning more siblings for Abdul. Abdul's neighbor is Sita, the One Leg. In recent years, prosperity in India has led many to question the old caste system, and many seek to reinvent themselves. Dreams vary. Fifteen year-old Meena wants a life of freedom, not submission as a wife. Sunil, a twelve year-old, dreams of enough food to eat. Abdul wants a kind and respectable wife, who doesn't use profanity, and doesn't mind that he smells - and a home outside of Annawadi. The One Leg wants to be attractive and desired, but this is difficult to do for a cripple. When she is beaten and burned, and survives, she blames Abdul and his older sister. When the police cannot find Abdul, they arrest his father. In the morning, Abdul - at his mother's insistence - turns himself in.

Part I, Chapter 1, Undercitizens - It is January, 2008. Because the hut is so small, Abdul sleeps outside on the maidan. Annawadi sits two hundred yards off the Sahar Airport Road, and had been settled in 1991 by laborers repairing the runway. "Annawadi" means the land of annas, older brothers. By 2008, only six of the slum's permanent residents have regular jobs, but there is much hope among the people due to the economic liberalization of India. The trash and junk-filled lake is fished, and used for disposing garbage and animal carcasses. Abdul's brother, Mirchi, waits for his best friend, Rahul, who has managed to break the barrier between the rich and poor worlds, for his mother, a kindergarten teacher with good connections, manages to secure the ninth-grader a job at the Intercontinental hotel. Rahul recounts seeing Bollywood parties, and using indoor toilets. Regular workers at the airport are light-skinned and all have cell phones. Rahul explains that many white people from many countries come to the hotels, and that there are many healthy, fat Indians who stay at them as well.



Rahul's mother is a member of the nationalist Shiv Sena party, which blames poverty on non-natives taking jobs away from natives. The head of the Shiv Senas, Bal Thackeray, admires Hitler's programs of ethnic cleansing. But the friendship of Rahul and Mirchi transcends politics and religion, and Abdul envies this friendship. Abdul dutifully continues collecting trash, for his family is saving money to buy land.

Part I, Chapter 2, Asha - The slumlord of Annawadi, Robert Pires, has had something of a reformation, erecting a Christian and Hindu shrine behind his house, atoning for his past sins by feeding hungry children. This inspires Asha, Rahul's mother, to be the go-to-woman when people from the undercity dealt with people from the overcity, the rich areas. Asha aspires to be a rare female slumlord. She has risen through the political ranks of Shiv Sena, and her work and efforts have been noted. She sees in India not hope, but opportunity. Everyone blames their unhappiness on others. Asha has a beautiful daughter named Manju, nineteen, and wide-eyed. Manju is in college, and stands to become the first female college graduate of the slum. But she is very sentimental, a trait her mother despises. Mr. Kamble comes to see Asha about a business loan, and Asha instructs him to pray everyday, rejecting his request. This upsets Manju. Asha is annoyed by Manju, and dreams of becoming the Corporator -the administrator- of all of Ward 76.

Part I, Chapter 3, Sunil - It is now February, 2008. Because of the diverse and unsettled nature of Annawadi, gangs of young thugs have been beating up people from the north, and Abdul's father is from the north. Poor-on-poor riots are commonplace. Sunil, a twelve year-old Hindu bhaiya, knows Abdul is worried. Sunil and his younger sister live with their father in a hut that is ten feet long by six feet wide. Sunil's father is a drunk, and Sunil is ashamed of him. Because of his small size, Sunil must rely on being clever and sophisticated in sorting garbage and scavenging. Scavenging at the road where cargo is loaded and unloaded is the most profitable, and this is where Sunil works. He often has his finds stolen by others, however. Sunil makes an average of thirty-three U.S. cents a day.

By March, the riots are over. Abdul's family rents the back room of their hut to the extended family of an autorickshaw driver from the north. But they have run out of money due to the riots. Abdul's mother kicks them out. While many Western businesses look east for cheap, trainable labor, Annawadi is perceived as a blight, and the residents know this. Many of them sleep out in the open, on top of their garbage to prevent others from stealing it. A common drug problem among the youth is Eraz-Ex, the Indian equivalent of White-Out, which is sniffed through rags. Sunil sees a working friendship develop between Abdul, and a fifteen year-old scavenger named Kalu, who has seen many Bollywood movies. Kalu often acts them out for others.

Sunil and Kalu head out to steal metal from a construction site, on the advice of police officers, who take a share of profits. Sunil gets a third of the cut, 380 rupees.

Part I, Chapter 4, Manju - Manju is often included in her mother's political machinations. They oversee a turnout for the Corporator, Subhash Sawant, to come and speak to. The Corporator has been fighting to block bulldozers from the airport with the intent to



destroy all of Annawadi. But by eleven that night, the Corporator still hasn't arrived - but a dancing eunuch has. Eunuchs are laughed at, thought to be bad luck by some, and they are consulted with questions needing prophetic answers, given in trance-like tongue.

Manju is a marvel. She attends college in the mornings, teaches in the afternoons, and cares for her family in the evenings. Manju is falling behind in her own work. Manju welcomes learning English, and the Western ideas of meritocracy and globalization. Manju is more interested in virtue than in money. She is thereby at direct odds with her mother. Her mother, though nominally a teacher, has Manju do the work for her, while she works to better her name in Shiv Sena. A little boy named Devo, hit by a taxi, comes to see Manju, who does her best to help stop his bleeding. But Devo's mother arrives, and beats him with a metal stick, and Manju protests, stopping her by coming between mother and son. In secret, Manju teaches her fifteen year-old best friend, Meena, English.

Part II, Chapter 5, Ghost House - The One Leg, renamed Fatima by her husband, love sex, and has numerous affairs, which are a joke among the people of Annawadi, because she is a cripple. June arrives, which is the beginning of the four-month monsoon season. In such season, mold and fungus grow wildly, including on people. And Mirchi has failed ninth grade, on top of it. Kehkashan, the eldest sister of the family, returns home, and Abdul and the others are happy to see her, for she has been a second mother to them. She has run away from her arranged marriage to her cousin, wondering why her cousin will not have sex with her, and why he keeps photos of another naked girl on his cell phone. As far as sex, Zehrunisa attempts to get along with Fatima's desire for respect and affection, but Zehrunisa cannot stand the way Fatima beats her children mercilessly. Fatima is also suspected of murdering her two year-old after her two year-old catches tuberculosis, though Fatima denies it.

Abdul is next in line to be married, and a deal is being worked out with the parents of a pretty sixteen year-old girl in the industrial district, Saki Naka, where Abdul sells his scavenged goods. Abdul isn't so sure about marriage, for he is cautious. Abdul's family is inching closer to buying land in Vasai, a community which has many Muslim construction suppliers and industrial recyclers. The plot of land they are seeking doesn't even have a home, and so Zehrunisa refers to it as a "ghost house". She would rather their current home be fixed up, and Karam agrees to renovation.

## **Prologue - Part II, Chapter 5, Ghost House Analysis**

Katherine Boo begins her book, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity", with the seminal event that changes the fortunes of all those involved in Annawadi - the burning of Fatima, the One Leg. Though Boo does not go into detail about the circumstances around Fatima's burning, she does reveal that Abdul, his father, and his sister are being blamed for it, and the police are after them. Abdul eventually turns himself in, and Boo transports the reader back seven months, to January 2008.



She begins painting a vivid portrait of the Annawadi, the slum beside the airport, surrounded by expensive hotels and businesses, and the abject filth and utter poverty in which Annawadi's inhabitants live. Their condition is disgusting, the place they live wretched and diseased. But despite their sad state and condition, the people who live in Annawadi are as resourceful and clever as they are crime-ridden and suspicious of one another. Just like the trash that covers the land in the slum is of a multitudinous nature, so too are the people who live in Annawadi, each with different cultural, political, and religious backgrounds. Because of this, tension that would otherwise be barely manageable, is only made worse by the abject poverty of the area, with each person blaming his or her misfortune on somebody else.

While most fight over scraps of garbage and salvage metals, like Abdul, others, like Asha or Manju, seek other avenues to success. Asha is determined to rise through the political ranks, becoming first a slumlord, and ultimately aspiring to govern their ward as Corporator. Asha knows she must build from the ground up, and she is shrewd and heartless, letting nothing stand in her way, seeking even to take advantage of the misfortune of others. Asha is preparing and raising her daughter, beautiful and nineteen, to be married off to benefit her career and her family. Manju, herself, is very sentimental, sweet, and intelligent, and while her mother despises her daughter's sentimentality, she also manages to take advantage of it where she can.

It is from this cultural, religious, and economic quagmire that the lives Boo will follow in her book will spring. The reader is introduced firsthand to the sorts of difficulties that the citizens of Annawadi will endure, from 33-cent daily wages to drugs, to drug lords, slumlords, disease, crime, and corruption. It seems as if the people - even the ones like Asha - are inexorably linked to the ground upon which they live.

At the same time this occurs, the reader is also drawn to the understanding that the past and the present are at odds with one another. Kehkashan, in an arranged marriage to her cousin, runs away from her husband because he will not have sex with her, and because he keeps nude photos of another girl on this cell phone. While Kehkashan cannot understand this, the reader does: her husband is aware of the dangers and immorality of incest, and will not become a party to it.



## **Part II, Chapter 6, The Hole She Called a Window - Part III, Chapter 11, Proper Sleep**

### **Part II, Chapter 6, The Hole She Called a Window - Part III, Chapter 11, Proper Sleep Summary**

Part II, Chapter 6, The Hole She Called a Window - The Husain family begins renovations on their home. The children are kept home from school to help. As they work, the people of Annawadi come and see what the Husains are up to. Many of them are jealous. While Zehrunisa doesn't care about this, Abdul does. He knows that a well-earning Muslim family among angry Hindus will be a target. Among the new renovations are a window in the wall that will allow fresh air into the kitchen. But as they work - their house, connected to Fatima's - they stir up Fatima, who complains. She then argues with Zehrunisa, and goes to the police station to accuse Zehrunisa of assault. The police dismiss it, and Asha knows that to keep her power, she has to handle petty squabbles. She then solicits money from Zehrunisa - a thousand rupees - to keep Fatima quiet.

Back in Annawadi, Kehkashan has begun arguing with Fatima over what has happened, and Fatima threatens Kehkashan. She calls her a prostitute, and this brings Karam outside, who tells Fatima to stop. But Fatima goes on and on. Fatima tells Karam she will hurt all of them. Noori, Fatima's eight year-old daughter, later goes home, but cannot get inside, so she goes to her mother's friend, Cynthia, for help to get in through their window. But Noori sees her mother pour kerosene on her head, and Cynthia screams for her not to do it, but then Fatima lights herself on fire. When the locals break into her house, she is writing on the floor, having poured water on the fire. She blames everything on her neighbors.

Part II, Chapter 7 - Fatima is now in Burn Ward Number 10 of Cooper Hospital. She is hideously disfigured by the fire. Many people come to see Fatima, including Asha herself, who lets Fatima know that everyone knows what really happened. Asha looks to keep the peace to preserve her own position and avoid the police becoming involved -but Fatima has already involved them. A government official helps her compose a statement, in which she again blames the Husains for her distress. A few days pass, and Fatima's pain increases from her burn, having not realized what would happen to her.

At the police station, Abdul turns himself in. The police appear to want Abdul to confess to setting Fatima on fire, and they beat him. Abdul's father has also been beaten, and they are deposited in a prison cell. The daily beatings are taking a severe toll on Karam. Abdul knows that money makes the Indian world work, and he wants his family to pay the police to declare them innocent. The days go by, the beatings continue, and a





saddened Zehrunisa comes to visit her husband and son. Even Asha's first attempts to help settle the matter with the police fail. But later on, Asha makes inroads, managing to have the beatings of Abdul stopped. Karam knows that someone has probably been paid off, but lets Abdul believe it is because of Asha's power.

Though an infection kills Fatima, the doctors blame it on the burns, which suddenly grow from 35% of her body, to 95% of her body. Her death spells grave danger for the Husains.

Part II, Chapter 8, The Master - The rains return. Sunil hopes that Abdul will be brought home from jail, because Mirchi is useless as Abdul's replacement. Indeed, the Husain family business is hurting. Kehkashan, imprisoned as well, lies to her mother when she comes to visit, telling her mother she is fine. Karam, however, complains about being in prison. Having fought with other inmates, he has been transferred to the very tough Arthur Road Prison. Officer Thokale, an Asha-bribed ally, is furious that Zehrunisa has been in a state of shock, babbling to everyone about what was going on with payoffs and her family's prison situation.

Because Abdul looks like an adult and has no proof of birth, he will be charged as an adult. Zehrunisa goes to see the local brothel keeper, who had been imprisoned twice, hoping he would know about good bribery. Bribing the Marol Municipal School, she receives a record for her son, which states that he is sixteen. Abdul is then transferred to a juvenile facility. Abdul thinks about God, knowing that God must exist, otherwise people wouldn't spend fortunes building mosques and donating to charities. Abdul is forced to bathe, and to eat horrible food. There are all sorts of boys in prison, including one who killed his father after his father killed his mother. Even though Abdul misses home, he realizes that prison is the first real rest he has ever had. When he is inspected by the doctors, Abdul is declared to be seventeen.

Because of human rights activism, the boys at Dongri Prison are given classes, taught by The Master, a pudgy teacher. The Master explains that reformed boys would make something worthwhile of themselves. Whenever the Master talks of sad things, he cries -and it causes the others to cry, including Abdul. But when he talks of happy things, the boys are inspired. Abdul learns about the concept of virtue, and he wonders about how he has lived his life. Abdul could still turn his life around, and reject corruption.

Part III, Chapter 9, Marquee Effect - In July, Asha and her family go to visit relatives in the northern Vidarbha region of Maharashtra. Asha is there to market her daughter, and to escape the trouble of Annawadi, as well as for a small wedding for a relative. Thousands of farmers, ashamed and in poverty, commit suicide every year by drinking pesticide. Only the rich and elite held any real opportunity or power, and shared it mainly among themselves. Such growing disenchantment with government promises of self-success and wealth, Maoism is gaining popularity among the people, but many are still waiting to see if new technology and agricultural advances will make things better for them. Manju's seventeen year-old cousin, Anil, works the fields of a rich politician who pays him \$21 a month for his efforts.



Manju knows that her own future will soon be decided by arranged marriage. Back in Annawadi, Asha continues planning how to advance herself in politics. Whereas most families consider daughters damaging due to dowries, Asha has raised Manju to be a lady, and believes Manju's beauty will be a benefit through marriage, raising up the entire family. Manju, meanwhile, joins the Indian Civil Defense Corps, to safeguard the city from terrorist attacks and to help in the event of floods. Asha, meanwhile, sleeps around in order to get in good with those with money and power. Manju worries her mother will contract AIDS.

Part III, Chapter 10, Parrots, Caught and Sold - In late July, Sunil comes upon an old man whose legs have been mangled by a passing car. Thousands of people pass by, and none help the man. He ultimately dies of his injuries. The body is picked up for anatomy class at the B.M. Patil Medical College. Two more bodies turn up, and the Annawadians believe that One Leg has cursed the place before her death. Sunil is worried by these rumors. He follows around a boy who lives a few huts down, named Sonu, who has no friends, but maintains profitable friendships beyond it. In exchange for sweeping the airport, Sonu is given two bags of garbage, which he is free to pick through inside the airport. Sunil and Sonu begin working together, splitting their profits. They are often beat up, but they don't care. They are making about a dollar a day, each. Sunil also sees how Kalu works: in exchange for information about local drug lords, the police allow Kalu to steal and pilfer from trash at will.

Eventually, Zehrunisa is able to afford a lawyer for their case, and Abdul is released. Back in Annawadi, Abdul lives by the Master's teachings, and does not buy or sell stolen goods. He and Kalu and Sunil are on the airport road when they decide to go home after running into a disabled junkie named Mahmoud. Kalu is killed when he goes to the airport one night, for he has no home to go to.

Part III, Chapter 11, Proper Sleep - When Abdul learns Kalu is dead, and Mahmoud has been talking to the police, Abdul thinks he will be in trouble. Several boys are rounded up and beaten, the police telling them that if they do not keep away from the airport, they will be charged with Kalu's murder. Two of the boys leave Annawadi for good, so intimidated they have become. One boy, Sanjay, sells to Zehrunisa to finance his escape. Sanjay instead drinks rat poison and kills himself. Saddened by the deaths of Sanjay and Kalu, Sunil and Abdul begin something of a sort-of-friendship. Sunil believes Air India guards have murdered Kalu, while Abdul believes it was drug dealers who discovered Kalu to be a rat.

## **Part II, Chapter 6, The Hole She Called a Window - Part III, Chapter 11, Proper Sleep Analysis**

Working day by day, the Husain family saves enough money with the intent of investing in land elsewhere, and to renovate their house. Yet it is a dangerous thing to do for the Husains, because they live in the midst of poverty, surrounding by jealous and scheming neighbors. Their marginal, quasi-success, coupled with the insecurities of their neighbor, Fatima, compels her to act out, setting herself on fire, and blaming the



Husains for her troubles. She ultimately ends up in a corrupt hospital, and though she dies of infections, the hospital writes her death off as caused by burns which have magically increased from 35% of her body to 95% of her body.

Fatima, though having lied, has set into motion a chain of events that cannot be undone. Abdul, Karam, and Kehkashan are all arrested, and charged with Fatima's death. The reader, beyond the dirty nature of the slums, is introduced firsthand to the corrupt practices and policies of the Indian government, even at the very most local levels, right down to the local slumlords and the police.

The police themselves are heinous, using physical intimidation and beatings to elicit false confessions, in order to make their own jobs easier, and in order to provide a false appearance of sound efficiency. Following the death of Fatima, a rash of deaths occur, and bodies turn up all over the place. The people grow even more suspicious of one another. Following further intimidation from the police, several of the scavenger boys run away, and one even goes so far as to commit suicide in order to escape, not having enough money, perhaps, to run away.

Tradition and Westernization are also at war with one another. Manju, who loves English and much of the West, worries that her mother is seeking to arrange her marriage. While Manju favors the liberalizing effects of modernization and globalization, she seems unable - or unwilling - to directly defy her mother in terms of marriage, or her corrupt practices in politics.



# Chapter 12 - Chapter 17

## Chapter 12 - Chapter 17 Summary

Part IV, Chapter 12, Nine Nights of Dance - In late September, 2008, Asha is in full control of Annawadi. Despite all of her success, she has alienated her husband through her affairs, has no real friends, and her daughter is distant. Fatima's suicide has also become a symbol of rebellion and power among women. Manju has contemplated suicide herself. The festival of Navratri approaches, which celebrates feminine divinity, and is a "flirtfest". The people need a celebration, for the Western recession has hit India, and recyclable goods are now worth less than before. Though Meena and Manju are not happy with Annawadi, they feel that if they marry a farmer in a village, they will travel backwards.

Navratri means that the people furiously clean the maidan, clearing away garbage, and putting up decorations. Meanwhile, seeking freedom, Meena drinks rat poison, but then thinks twice about it, and she is given vomit-inducing substances, which clean her system. When Meena's brother comes home to discover she has consumed rat poison, he beats her, and she ends up in the hospital, where she dies six days later.

Part IV, Chapter 13, Something Shining - By November, the scavenger market crashes. Even the rich Indians and Americans had taken serious losses. Abdul, hopeful, tells Sunil that things will soon get better. Word spreads of Muslim terrorists from Pakistan running wild around the city. Attacks were taking place seventeen miles from Annawadi. Shortly thereafter, a taxi is blown up on Airport Road. Scavenging then becomes impossible with an increased police and military presence. As 2009 dawns, many in the slums are eating frogs and rats. Sunil has transitioned from scavenger to metal thief. Sunil also learns that many females in Annawadi want to die, and it worries him.

By February, a boy named Taufeeq has taken control of a multi-thief operation to steal from Taj Catering Services, in particular, German silver.

Part IV, Chapter 14, The Trial - Karam's trial in Sewri begins. The judge, Chauhan, is mean and impatient. The case is argued before her, and continues on through April. Fatima's widowed husband speaks as well. He reiterates his wife's story, that the Husains beat her. Cynthia, Fatima's friend, is also questioned and caught lying. The closing arguments will come in two weeks.

Part IV, Chapter 15, Ice - Abdul has been working nonstop to pay for lawyers fees, and they have sold their storeroom as well. Closing arguments for the court case come. But just as the case looks as though it will be decided in the favor of the Husains, a new judge is appointed. Fatima's husband prepares to withdraw the case if he receives \$4,000, but Karam refuses because Fatima's husband doesn't have the power to call off the case.



Part IV, Chapter 16, Black and White - Despite all of her politicking, Asha remains where she is. The new Corporator seeks her assistance in his position. But Asha is reluctant to pledge allegiance to a new Corporator. Slowly, Asha's power is slipping away. Rather than oppose plans to raze Annawadai, she decides to get involved in land speculation. She also becomes involved in a Department of Education plan, to make elementary education universal. Asha, through her school teaching, becomes involved in a payoff scheme in which she pretends to be running several schools that don't actually exist. The family profits immensely from the scheme.

Parliamentary elections follow shortly thereafter. Many, such as the Husains, have tried in vain for years to register to vote. Asha, meanwhile, is finished with politics, and becomes fully ingratiated in the philanthropic organization to help educate children.

Part IV, Chapter 17, A School, A Hospital, a Cricket Field - In the middle of May, the election results are in. Incumbents have mostly won, and reformers have lost big. Shortly thereafter, the lake is bulldozed, and the edges of Annawadi are hedged in. The youngest Husain daughter finds a pot worth fifteen rupees in the upturned earth. A horse race on the Western Express Highway leads to the death of several horses, bringing outrage and investigation. The boys of Annawadi find it amusing that the authorities worry so much about the animals, but not about the children living and dying in the slums.

The Husains' case continues through the summer with the new judge. The Husains are found not guilty. Abdul's own court case still pends. When the book closes, the residents of Annawadi are still awaiting their slum to be torn down, and junk prices are inching back up.

## **Chapter 12 - Chapter 17 Analysis**

The final third of Boo's book, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity", deals with the resolution of major issues and situations. The major situation, dealing with the fortunes of the Husain family, comes to pass through a long, drawn out court case which is rife with scandal, enticements to kickbacks and payoffs, and various other corruptions, including the inopportune transfer of judges for undisclosed reasons. At the same time the court case drags on, the global recession dramatically impacts India, especially Annawadi. Abdul and his mother work tirelessly to scavenge and sell. Abdul's conversion to virtue and honesty means that he will not steal, and so he works even harder to make up for the loss in profits.

Eventually, the court case involved Karam Husain comes to pass, and Karam is found not guilty. The family is jubilant, having refused to lie and descend to corruption in order to prove their innocence, which, if it had been done, would have been a great matter of irony. The book ends with the Husains getting their lives back on track, anxiously awaiting Abdul's own trial.

In an interesting aspect of the final third of the book, and in illustration of the misguided attention paid to slums in India, activists become worked up over the deaths of horses in an illegal race -even though people are living and dying under illegal conditions and circumstances in the very same area. The irony in this instance is not lost on the children and teenagers who dwell and scratch a living from trash in Annawadi.



# Characters

## Abdul Husain

Abdul Husain is a teenage boy living in the slum of Annawadi, in the city of Mumbai, India. He is a quick, clever teenager, who scavenges and steals in order to help provide a living for his family. Abdul's mother is Zehrunisa Husain, who handles the prices of Abdul's goods, and Abdul's father, Karam, who is slowly wasting away of tuberculosis. Abdul has eight other siblings, including his brother, Mirchi, and his sister, Kehkashan.

Abdul doesn't form friendships easily, and is suspicious of arranged marriages. He is interested in Western culture and technology, including iPods. Like most people in the slums, he hopes trade with the West, as well as economic liberalization, will bring up all the impoverished people of the slums, himself included.

Accused of being complicit in the death of Fatina, Abdul is imprisoned and beaten, but refuses to give a false confession. When he is transferred to a juvenile detention center, Abdul has a spiritual awakening through his teacher, The Master, and Abdul decides to devote his life living honestly and by virtue. As such, when he is released from prison pending trial, he returns to work, no longer stealing or cheating. When the book ends, Abdul's own trial is still pending, though his father has been found not guilty.

## Manju

Manju is the beautiful, nineteen year old daughter of Asha. Manju is a wonderful person, attending college classes in the morning, teaching school for her mother in the afternoons, and taking care of her home and family in the evenings. Manju cherishes English and Western culture, finding solace in the concept of freedom against her mother's corrupt political machinations, and her desire to arrange Manju in a marriage that will elevate her family. Manju is wary of this, and harbors great sentimentality, something her mother considers weak and unbecoming. Manju hopes for a better life, and hopes to graduate from college, despite everything going on. At one point, she even contemplates suicide, but the idea soon passes over her.

## Mirchi Husain

Mirchi Husain is the younger, teenage brother of Abdul, and the son of Karam and Zehrunisa Husain. He is also the brother of Kehkashan, Mirchi is unable to cover the family business when Abdul is arrested.





## Zehrunisa Husain

Zehrunisa Husain is the wife of Karam Husain, and mother of eight children, including Abdul, Mirchi, and Kehkashan. Zehrunisa Husain is a shrewd businesswoman, who frequently uses profanity, but loves her children and her family tenderly. She is unsure about her husband's desire to move them out of Annawadi, and instead wants to renovate her home for the time being. This causes consternation with her neighbor, the insecure Fatima, resulting in a shouting match after which Fatima sets herself on fire, and blames it on Zehrunisa's husband, son, and daughter. Zehrunisa scrapes by, caring for her family while her husband and Abdul are in prison. She is elated when her husband is found not guilty, though she worries for the coming court case for Abdul.

## Karam Husain

Karam Husain is the husband of Zehrunisa, and father of eight children, including Abdul, Mirchi, and Kehkashan. He is slowly dying from tuberculosis, but continues fathering children. Abdul is implicated in Fatima's burning and death, and is arrested, where his tuberculosis worsens. Found not guilty in court, Karam is free to live his life once more.

## Fatima One Leg

Fatima "One Leg" is the one-legged neighbor of the Husains. She is tremendously insecure, and desires respect and attention, as well as affection, and engages in multiple affairs to achieve this. She picks a fight with the Husains when they renovate their home, and sets herself on fire to gain more attention. She ultimately dies in the hospital of an infection.

## Asha

Asha is a local school teacher who has ingrained herself in politics in the Annawadi slum, in the Shiv Sena Party. She is unkind and cunning, sleeping her way up to power, passing along money, handling kickbacks and payoffs, and engaging in other corrupt practices to secure power. She despises her daughter, Manju's, sentimentality. Asha seeks to arrange Manju in a marriage that will benefit Asha more than Manju. Asha ultimately gives up politics in favor of becoming involved in fraud through the Department of Education. For the moment, she must remain in the slums, though her family begins to profit immensely from the scheme as the book closes.

## Sunil

Sunil is a gangly twelve year-old kid who lives in the slum of Annamadi, and admires and looks up to Abdul, Kalu, and others. He is very clever, using his small size to his advantage, and doing everything he can to scrape by.





## **Kehkashan Husain**

Kehkasha Husain is the oldest daughter of Karam and Zehrunisa Husain, and the older sister of Abdul and Mirchi. Running away from an arranged marriage to her cousin, who does not want to sleep with her, and who keeps photos of another naked girl on his cell phone, she is implicated in the burning and death of Fatima, but later released from prison.

## **Kalu**

Kalu is a fifteen year-old scavenger who is something of a friend to Abdul and Sunil. Kalu is found dead after going to the airport one night. Later, the other boys shake their head that activists concern themselves with the deaths of horses during an illegal race, while Kalu's murder goes unsolved and uncared for.



# Objects/Places

## Annawadi

Annawadi is a slum beside the international airport in the city of Mumbai, India. Annawadi consists of a few hundred houses, and a few thousand transient and permanent residents. It is a disgusting, wretched place to live and work, and a place from which the people in the book seek to escape, by any means possible. It is located on land owned by the Indian Airport Authority.

## Mumbai

Mumbai is a major city in India, with an international airport. It is the location of the slum of Annawadi.

## India

India is the country in which the city of Mumbai, and its slum Annawadi, are located. India has, within the last few decades, opened its doors to economic liberalization and increased Western trade, making it ground zero for a clash between modernity and ancient traditions.

## The Maidan

The Maidan is a trash-strewn, dirty field in Annawadi. Many people sleep there, and it is also the location of celebrations and festivals.

## The Airport

The airport is located in the city of Mumbai, and is located beside the slum of Annawadi. The airport is surrounded by rich hotels and businesses, and is the source of much of the slum's trash.

## Airport Road

Airport Road leads to the airport in Mumbai, India, and runs parallel to the slum of Annawadi. It is along Airport Road that many Annawadians sell their wares to rich Indians and visiting Westerners.



## **Scrap Metal**

Scrap metal is a valuable resource stolen and scavenged for by the people of Annawadi. It is sold to recyclers for the daily wage of thirty-three American cents.

## **Kerosene**

Kerosene is what Fatima uses to douse her head and shoulders, and set herself on fire following her argument with Zehrunisa Husain.

## **Rat Poison**

Rat poison is the suicide poison of choice among women and men in the slum of Annawadi. It is cheap and easy to obtain.

## **Eraz-Ex**

Eraz-Ex is the Indian equivalent of White-Out, and is used as an inhalant drug by youth of Annawadi. It is very addictive, and very damaging to the user's health. Many of the youths are indeed addicted.



# Themes

## Poverty

Poverty is one of the three major, dominant, overarching themes in Katherine Boo's book, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity". Poverty - a lack of basic needs and wealth - stalks the people documented in the book like a nightmare, and influences every single part of their lives and their stories. In Annawadi, poverty is nearly inescapable and unavoidable. People are born into such poverty all over the world, and in Annawadi, it is no different. There is no running water, no indoor plumbing, no relief services, no cleaning services, and the people do not take care of what they have, because they can barely afford to take care of themselves.

As a driving force, poverty causes contention between those who live in it, blaming each other for their own misfortunes. Poverty sharpens religious, cultural, and ethnic divisions in Annawadi. Poverty also serves as a source of shame and humiliation, and inspires the people to get out of, or rise above poverty, no matter the cost. For Abdul, scavenging thievery seem the likeliest way, until after his spiritual awakening. From there on, he aspires to rise above his circumstances honestly. For Asha, corrupt politics, sex, and later a Department of Education scheme, are the surest way to ascend from poverty. Indeed, Asha goes so far as to desire to raise her own social status through seeking an arranged marriage for her daughter, using her as a bargaining chip.

## Hope

Hope is one of the three major, dominant, overarching themes in Katherine Boo's book, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity". Hope, which entails the desire and seeking of a promise of a better future, exists in the hearts and minds of all Indians, including those in the slum Annawadi. Economic liberalization and globalization with the West have led many Indians to believe that the entire Indian culture will rise in prosperity thanks to such policies and ideas. Indeed, some, like Manju, are so heavily invested in the idea of freedom that they embrace Western culture, including mastering the language of English.

Poverty is, ironically, the wellspring of hope for Indians and those portrayed in Katherine Boo's book. Abdul, for example, dreams of and hopes for a life far away from Annawadi, with a beautiful woman much like his mother. Manju dreams of graduating from college, while her mother dreams of political and financial power, transcending her poverty to join the caste of the elites. Abdul's father, Karam, hopes to live outside the slum on land that he has purchased for his family. Abdul's mother, Zehrunisa, dreams of things much closer to home, including renovating the shack they live in. Hope therefore serves as inspiration -and a trap- for many people, causing them to betray their own morality and constitutions in order to make it. Asha, for example, gives up her body and her kindness in search of power.



## Clash of Cultures

The concept of clash of cultures is one of the three major, dominant, overarching themes in Katherine Boo's book, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity". The idea of clash of cultures has to do with the meeting of different peoples, philosophies, religions, ideas, experiences, and understandings. In Boo's book, the clash of cultures occurs at three levels: locally, nationally, and ideologically.

Locally, the clash of cultures has to do with the uncovered melting pot that is Annawadi. The slum is ground zero for contention between peoples of different faiths, ethnic, and political backgrounds. Muslims are much resented by Hindus, and Hindus by Muslims, having no stronger identity -such as being Indian- to override their differences. Their politics also clash, as Hindus blame Muslims from out of the region for taking up all of the jobs that might otherwise be had by native Hindus.

Nationally, the clash of cultures has to do with globalization and the liberalization of India's economy, as well as its international trade. Such policies pursued means that India has opened its doors to unprecedented wealth and prosperity that pour in from Western markets and economies. India, however, is unprepared for such changes, because its citizens are largely uneducated and unready to handle the demands of a 21st century economy.

Ideologically, the clash of cultures has to do with a battle between modern Western ideas, and the ancient traditions of India. Whereas in America, and in the West at large, social transcendence and self-success are commonplace, India struggles with a caste system through which few people move, and even then, the movement is usually down. Arranged marriages, an ancient tradition in India, is an idea at war with the concept of marriage through love, and without the utilitarian idea of dowries. Greater freedom for women, and all Indians for that matter, is something unheard of in traditional India, but is the norm in Western society.



# Style

## Point of View

Katherine Boo writes her book, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity", in the third-person omniscient narrative, with Boo herself serving as the narrator. Because the book is a piece of journalism, it is only fitting that Boo should narrate the book herself in the third-person, describing for the reader the lives and misfortunes of those she chronicles. This allows her to talk about the conditions of Annawadi, and allows her to serve as the transitioning agent between the various and different people, places, and events she writes about. A single narrator also makes the transition between people, places, and events, much easier to follow and understand.

## Setting

The setting of Katherine Boo's book, "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity", is that of a Mumbai undercity, the slum of Annawadi. Boo explains in the book that there are few nonfiction books set in the slums of India, which helped compel her to decide to write about a slum in India. The setting is important because it draws attention to the forgotten people in worlds dominated by power and wealth, such as India. It also draws attention to the living conditions, and the abject poverty that these people live in.

## Language and Meaning

Katherine Boo tells her book "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity", in language that is at once both objective, sentimental, and intelligent. Boo's own work as a journalist maintains that she should be objective and honest in her writing, both aspects readily visible in the book, along with her intelligence. Yet, Boo is not without emotionally evocative language, taking care to explain situations and circumstances tenderly where needed, and allowing the poetic prose of the individuals chronicled themselves to speak openly and honestly about their lives.

## Structure

Apart from the prologue of "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity", which occurs in July, 2008, Katherine Boo chronologically reveals the lives of those she writes about in linear chapters. Each chapter therein receives a title, focusing on some aspect or the main subject of that chapter. (Chapter 5, Ghost House, for example, refers to the nonexistent house on land that Kamar wants to buy outside of Annawadi. Zehrunisa calls the nonexistent house a "ghost house".) This is done in order to tell the story of the lives of the people written about, so the reader may

progress through a year and more in Annawadi without losing focus on the stories themselves.



## Quotes

"Everything around us is roses," Abdul's younger brother, Mirchi, put it. "And we're the shit in between."

-Prologue, p. xii

Time was precious to Annawadians, even those not tense about their children's exams. They had work at dawn, homes to clean, children to bathe, and above all water to get from the slum's trick-taps before they went dry, which involved standing in line for hours.

-Chapter 4, Manju, p. 53

She was less and less sure she wanted to go to Vasai, less and less sure her husband would live to get there. She wanted a more hygienic home here, in the name of her children's vitality.

-Chapter 5, Ghost House, p. 83

Abdul wasn't sure how much money his family had left after fixing the house and paying his father's hospital bill. But he thought that whatever remained should be paid, in order to be innocent. He wanted to go home to the place that he hated.

-Chapter 7, The Come-Apart, p. 107

But the fog of shock and grief didn't fully obscure his understanding of the social hierarchy in which he lived. To Annawadi boys, Kalu had been a star. To the authorities of the overcity, he was a nuisance to be dispensed with.

-Chapter 11, p. 168

"My flowers live because I don't keep anything dark in my heart. I let the bad things come out into the air."

-Chapter 12, p. 179

"She was fed up with what the world had to offer," the Tamil women concluded. Meena's family, upon consideration, decided that Manju's modern influence was to blame.

-Chapter 12, p. 189

"Do you ever think when you look at someone, when you listen to someone, does that person really have a life?"

-Chapter 13, p. 198

"There's this guy who counts cars in a parking lot, and he said he saw the talent in me," Mirchi reported one evening at home, breathless in his hope that this new contact might lead to steady work. But there were millions of other bright, likeable, unskilled young men in this city.

-Chapter 15, p. 215





Abdul could control his many desires, but not this one. He wanted to be recognized as better than the dirty water in which he lived. He wanted a verdict of ice.  
-Chapter 15, p. 220



## Topics for Discussion

The people of the Annawadi slum do whatever they can to get by financially. What sorts of jobs do the people in Annawadi hold? What do these jobs entail, and what are the profits like from these jobs?

Discuss the theme of poverty in "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity" by Katherine Boo. What is poverty? How do the people of Annawadi live in poverty? How does poverty affect their lives positively and negatively? Provide examples.

Discuss the theme of hope in "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity" by Katherine Boo. What is hope? How does it appear in the book, and in what ways? What are the hopes of the people that Katherine Boo chronicles? Are their hopes similar to, or vastly different to the hopes of Americans and other Westerners? How?

Abdul, Asha, and Manju each aspire to escape the poverty they find themselves enmeshed in. In what ways do they attempt to escape poverty? Which of these ways is most honest, and which is most dishonest? Which of these ways is most likely to succeed, and why? Will how each of these people achieve success matter to them in the end? Why or why not?

Discuss the theme of clash of cultures in the book "Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity" by Katherine Boo. What is the clash of cultures? In what ways do cultures clash in Katherine Boo's book? How do the characters of Abdul and Manju handle this clash of cultures?