Behind the Beautiful Forevers

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE BOO

Boo grew up in Washington D.C. and graduated from Barnard College of Columbia University. She honed her journalism skills working for Washington's City Paper and the Washington Monthly. From 1993 to 2003, she wrote for the Washington Post as an editor and investigative journalist. In 2004, Boo officially joined the staff of The New Yorker after contributing articles for three years. Over the course of her career, Boo has won many awards for her work in areas of social justice and public service, including a Pulitzer, a National Magazine Award for Feature Writing, and the 2002 Sidney Hillman Award. Boo also won a MacArthur Genius Grant in 2002, funding Boo's efforts to live and work in underprivileged and under-reported communities. Boo married Sunil Khilnani, a Professor of Politics at King's College, London and a scholar of Indian history, and soon became consumed with reporting the stories in India that continue to go unnoticed as India's quickly growing economy transforms the face of the country. Boo spent three years living in the Annawadi slum and later turned her observations there into the award-winning book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. Since 2008, Boo has split her time between India and America as she continues to write for The New Yorker about issues of inequality and economic opportunity in a globalizing world.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Boo's reporting on the lives of residents of a Mumbai slum brings to light the conditions facing a large majority of urban citizens in India in the late 2000s. Though India's economy has been growing rapidly since 2001, thanks to increased industrialization and global trade, many Indian citizens still live in poverty and lack adequate educational opportunities, housing situations, and food. In 2012, when *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* was published, India defined the poverty line as $14 per month in rural areas and $17 per month in urban areas. According to the India Planning Commission, 39% of Indians lived below the poverty line in the 2000s, while outside agencies judged the number of Indians living in poverty to be as high as 50%. Furthermore, poverty is exacerbated for communities in India that have been historically discriminated against, such as the lower-castes Dalits like Meena, or Muslims in majority Hindu areas, like the Husain family in Annawadi. Since 2008, India has worked to lift 140 million people out of poverty, but life is still precarious for those who reach a higher social class. In fact, India is still considered one of the most unequal countries in the world with the top 1% of the country holding 60% of the wealth. Though the Indian government is funding several efforts to relieve poverty, both in rural and urban environments, there is still much work to be done for Indians to have stable, permanent jobs that will establish lasting success for the country.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Boo's deep look into the underside of Mumbai shares aspects of Sukethu Mehta's *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* and *The Beautiful and the Damned* by Siddhartha Deb, both of which also examine the changing face of India through the stories of everyday people. Boo focuses on women's issues in her work on this impoverished community, advocating for educating girls in a similar way to *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. Boo also raises the subject of arranged marriages and their consequences, particularly for women, as shown in *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth. Boo's combination of research and personal narrative is similar to William Dalrymble's book about Delhi, *City of Djinns*, and her dedication to following the families of Annawadi for three years mirrors Alex Kotlowitz's long-term project *There Are No Children Here*, which followed children growing up in a crime-ridden and neglected public housing complex in Chicago. Aravind Avinda's novel *The White Tiger*, while fictional, also focuses on the situation of the poor in India and touches on many of the same themes of competition, corruption, and inequality.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity
- **When Written:** 2008-2011
- **Where Written:** Mumbai, Washington D.C.
- **When Published:** 2012
- **Literary Period:** investigative non-fiction
- **Genre:** Non-Fiction
- **Setting:** Annawadi, a slum community in Mumbai, India.
- **Climax:** The Husain family, falsely accused of forcing their next-door neighbor to set herself on fire, are exonerated and allowed to leave prison.
- **Antagonist:** corruption, poverty, the Mumbai police
- **Point of View:** third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

She Fell Into It. While Boo was worried about the potential dangers of living in Annawadi before she started the project, she was convinced to take the risks after she fell and hurt herself badly in her apartment in Washington D.C. Realizing

that safety was not guaranteed anywhere, Boo decided to follow her passion for reporting in underprivileged communities no matter the costs there might be.

Language Barrier. Boo was not fluent in Marathi or Hindi when she started reporting in Annawadi, meaning that she had to depend on the help of many translators as she gained the trust of the Annawadi residents and began to tell their stories. Some of those translators were Indian journalists, university students, educators, and activists.

PLOT SUMMARY

The book opens with a prologue that introduces Abdul, a garbage sorter in the Mumbai slum of Annawadi. Abdul is hiding in his family's garbage shed, afraid of being arrested for setting his neighbor Fatima on fire, despite that he is innocent and has tried as hard as possible to stay out of trouble all his life. The book then skips backward to January of 2008, seven months before the burning. Abdul, the Husain family's oldest son (who is sixteen or seventeen), sorts recyclables to sell to recycling plants, which helps his parents Karam and Zehrunisa provide for their family of thirteen. Because Abdul works so hard, his younger brother Mirchi can continue his education. Mirchi dreams of a clean job working as a waiter in a hotel, though he knows that Muslims like himself still face discrimination, and that could limit his opportunities.

Another slum resident, Asha, also dreams of making it big. She wants to be the first female slumlord of Annawadi, fixing issues for the powerful Shiv Sena party and taking advantage of government anti-poverty programs to make money. Asha does nothing without profit in mind, including sending her daughter, Manju, to college so that Manju will be able to improve their family's situation even more. Manju does not approve of Asha's corrupt dealings, but Asha sees corruption as the only way for the poor in India to get ahead. Another young boy in Annawadi, Sunil, knows just how few options there are for the poor. He scavenges all day for trash to sell to Abdul, mainly looking along a concrete **wall** at the airport that is covered in advertisements for ceramic tiles that will stay "beautiful forever." The purpose of this wall is to hide Annawadi from the airport's rich international passengers. Sunil rarely finds enough trash at the airport to have money to eat properly. His growth has been stunted by lack of nutrition, and he tries to use his appearance to his benefit and gain pity from the security officers at the airport, but it rarely works.

The conglomerate that owns the land on which Annawadi has been built is constantly threatening to demolish the slum to make more room for airport construction. Mumbai city officials approve the plan, hoping to show that impoverished slums are a thing of the past in India. Boys like Abdul and Sunil understand that they, the poor, are hated in the city, though they try to get by with their dignity intact. Other boys, like the charming young Kalu, become addicted to drugs and survive on theft. Everyone in Annawadi loves Kalu because he has a good sense of humor despite his hard life. Meanwhile, Manju is the "most everything" girl in Annawadi—kind, beautiful, smart, and obedient. She genuinely believes that education can make a difference in the lives of the poor girls of Annawadi, though her mother has a more cynical attitude; Asha runs a school in the slum just to appear charitable. Manju dedicates herself to her studies and helps Asha with Shiv Sena business whenever asked, sacrificing sleep and leisure time to do all her chores in her rare free time. Manju comforts herself that she at least has more freedom than Meena, her best friend in Annawadi who lives completely controlled by her father and brothers.

Fatima, disdainfully called "One Leg" due to a birth defect that twisted one of her legs, also rebels against the confines of her life. Forced to marry a Muslim man and move to Mumbai from a rural village, Fatima flaunts her extra-marital affairs to give herself a sense of self-worth. Zehrunisa (Abdul's mother) does not approve of her next-door neighbor Fatima, becoming especially concerned when Fatima's youngest daughter drowns and Fatima seems not to grieve. Despite Zehrunisa's disapproval, the two families are still forced together as the only Muslims in this part of Annawadi.

Karam (Abdul's father) looks forward to one day moving his family out of Annawadi to a Muslim suburb called Vasai, but Zehrunisa would rather use their limited savings to improve their current house in Annawadi. Zehrunisa wins, and Abdul tries to install shelves into the **brick wall** that the Husain house and Fatima's house share. Fatima becomes alarmed at the construction and insults the Husain family for daring to rub their wealth in her face. After Zehrunisa shouts a few insults back at Fatima, Karam and Kehkashan, the oldest Husain daughter, get into a shouting match with Fatima that ends in Karam ordering Abdul to beat Fatima. Abdul does not, and Fatima storms into her house. When Fatima's daughter Noori returns home for dinner, she finds her mother pouring kerosene on herself. Fatima sets herself on fire, and accuses the Husains of pushing her into burning herself—a criminal offense in India.

Fatima is rushed to the public hospital, while Karam is arrested and Abdul goes into hiding. Yet Abdul is too honest to stay a fugitive and he turns himself in. Their time in the police station is a horrific experience of beatings, starvation, and desperation that only gets worse when Fatima dies. Now accused of murder, the Husains face extortion from the police, from Asha, from the hospital, and from the special executive officer assigned to their case. Zehrunisa bribes a police man into trying Abdul as a minor, so Abdul is sent to a juvenile detention center called Dongri. At Dongri, Abdul becomes a student of a man called The Master whose moral teachings affect Abdul profoundly—Abdul now aspires to be one of the few truly

virtuous slum residents.

That July, Asha hopes to arrange a marriage for Manju that will pull their family out of the slum and into the middle class. She forces Manju to give less time to volunteering at the slum school and more time to mingling with the middle-class students in her college classes, but Manju still feels like an outsider. Manju is especially traumatized when she finds out that Asha sleeps with politicians and policemen for money and power, but she can do nothing about the situation. Meanwhile, Sunil decides to become a thief to avoid the sad disease-ridden death that awaits most scavengers, and he becomes Kalu's partner in theft. While Abdul, (who has been released from Dongri until his trial), advises Sunil to stay on the right side of the law, Sunil continues stealing until Kalu is found murdered on airport grounds. Kalu's death sets off the boys of Annawadi with grief and panic. They know that no officials will care about the murder of a slum boy—they recorded Kalu's cause of death as tuberculosis—and one of Kalu's friends, Sanjay, is so shattered by the murder that he commits suicide by eating rat poison. Sunil and Abdul bond in their mourning, becoming friends.

In late September, Asha focuses on planning a legendary party for Navrati, a holiday celebrated by nine nights of dancing—the only time that most girls in Mumbai are allowed to dance and flirt. The women of Annawadi desperately need a release, since many have taken Fatima's suicide as a symbol of all the pressure and pain of being a wife and mother in this constrained environment. Meena and Manju also feel this tension in the air, even secretly discussing the best methods for committing suicide if that becomes necessary in their imminent arranged marriages. The first day of Navrati, Meena finally cracks under the constant abuse of her family and swallows a tube of rat poison herself. Manju tries to save Meena, but she dies six days later.

By November, the global economic crisis has ruined most people's ability to earn an income from scavenging, and terrorist attacks ruin the normal tourism industry in Mumbai. The residents of Annawadi are poorer than ever. By January, Sunil can only make money by stealing from the construction sites at the airport. It's a risky business, but it lets him make a living by selling metal to Abdul. Abdul, going back on his promise not to trade stolen goods, muses that even a terrible life is still a life in these harsh circumstances.

Karam and Kehkashan's murder trial (Abdul, a minor, is being tried separately) finally begins in one of India's fast-track courts, where judges have little time to even hear all the evidence in the hundreds of cases they hear each month. Karam advises his family to trust in justice, despite knowing that justice in India depends on who can pay the most. Luckily, the witnesses called to testify about what happened the day that Fatima burned herself tell the truth that Fatima did this alone. Only Fatima's husband and her best friend Cynthia continue to say that the Husains burned Fatima. Yet just when it seems that the judge will pronounce the Husains not guilty, a new judge is appointed to the case and evidence must be given again.

In the larger news of Mumbai, the Annawadians are in a frenzy over the upcoming parliamentary election and the chance to choose a new prime minister who will enact real change for India's poor. Yet most Annawadians are not able to register to vote because the government still does not count the low-caste or the poor as real citizens when they live in slums. The election passes with the previous prime minister re-elected. The only real change is that plans to destroy Annawadi move forward. Anyone who can prove that they have lived in the slum since 2000 are entitled to an apartment with running water, but Asha fixes contracts with rich politicians to give most of those apartments to middle-class residents of Mumbai who don't live in Annawadi. She becomes hated in Annawadi, but she no longer cares what the poor think of her since she now considers herself to be a member of the middle class.

In June of 2009, the judge finally pronounces Karam and Kehkashan not guilty, but Abdul's case in the minor court drags on through 2009 and 2010. Abdul learns to live with not knowing the verdict yet, working hard to provide for his family again though he laments that he has had to become corrupt to survive in this unfair world. Still, boys like Sunil have hope for a better future for those in Annawadi.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Abdul Husain – Though the book has no true protagonist, a large portion of Boo's narrative follows the life of Abdul Husain, a teenage Muslim boy who works as a trash and recyclables trader in the Mumbai slum of Annawadi. Abdul is quiet, thoughtful and a bit of an outcast in Annawadi. Unlike most of the boys of his generation, Abdul feels attached to the old traditions of life in India rather than hoping for a different future for himself. Abdul gives himself practical dreams for his future, seeing that those who are ambitious in the slum usually do not achieve what they want. He is somewhat jealous of the privileges his younger brother Mirchi receives, as Abdul works long days so that Mirchi can continue to go to school. However, he truly loves his family and has no resentment towards them for how hard he works. Though Abdul is hard-working and generally virtuous, his life is utterly changed when he is falsely accused of pushing his neighbor, a woman named Fatima, into burning herself. Abdul struggles to retain a sense of morality in the corrupt world where he tries to eke out survival for himself and his family.

Fatima – Called "One-Leg" by the residents of Annawadi due to a birth defect that left her leg twisted and unusable, Fatima

struggles all her life to find a sense of self-worth after being treated as useless and sub-human for her disability. Born Hindu with the birth name Sita, Fatima is renamed and forced to convert to Islam when she marries a Muslim man and moves to Mumbai. Fatima is ridiculed by the other slum residents for her flamboyant extra-marital affairs, but she clings to these moments of physical attraction to prove that her life matters at all. Fatima's anger at the world comes to a head when she burns herself in response to insults from the Husain family, especially Zehrunisa and Kehkashan. Fatima dies from her injuries and the burning sparks a case that ruins the prospects of both families.

Zehrunisa Husain – Abdul's mother and the true head of the Husain family. Zehrunisa wishes that she could fulfill the role of wife and mother that is expected of Muslim women, but she has been forced to work and take part in the family business due to the ill health of her husband, Karam. Yet despite Zehrunisa's misgivings, she clearly enjoys some of the freedoms she receives living in the modern-leaning slum of Annawadi. Zehrunisa feels some kinship with the other residents of Annawadi, especially Fatima (who is the only other Muslim woman near her), but she also wants to do better than the poor families who live in the slum. Zehrunisa is shattered by the destruction of her family's future after Karam, Kehkashan, and Abdul are accused of pushing Fatima to burn herself.

Asha Waghekar – A hard-working, driven, and very clever woman in Annawadi, Asha aspires to be the first woman slumlord for the Shiv Sena party. Asha dedicates all her time to making money through bribes from the other residents of Annawadi and taking advantage of government anti-poverty programs. Asha does not have moral scruples, believing that she would be foolish not to take part in the corrupt systems that might allow her to get ahead in the New India. Asha's husband, Mahadeo, allows Asha to run all household affairs, and Asha's two children, Rahul and Manju, respect Asha's spirit but do not approve of her crooked dealings with policemen and politicians. Boo uses Asha's success to suggest that a certain amount of ethical flexibility is necessary to make it in the current conditions of India's government and economy.

Manju Waghekar – Asha's daughter, the seemingly perfect, "most-everything" girl in Annawadi. Manju is going to college to become a teacher and she cares deeply for the other children in Annawadi. In defiance of her mother's corrupt dreams of becoming slumlord, Manju hopes to be virtuous and good. She spends most of her time studying, cooking and cleaning for her family, and tutoring the young girls of Annawadi who would otherwise receive no education. Abdul seems to have a crush on her, but the two never speak because they are from such different worlds. Manju has big dreams for herself, despite seeing the oppression and desperation that often follows women in the slum.

Sunil – A young trash picker who often sells garbage to Abdul. Sunil wishes he could earn enough to afford proper food, and is very upset that his growth has been stunted by his hard childhood. Sunil can depend on his alcoholic father for nothing and does not receive the same pity and charity that his younger sister Sunita gets. Though Sunil understands that life is stacked against him, Boo shows that Sunil still has hope that he can improve his life by working hard. Sunil's optimism showcases the entrepreneurial spirit that has overwhelmed India in recent years as everyone believes they can achieve their dreams in the new capitalist system.

Sonu Gupta – Known as the "blinky boy" in Annawadi due to his copious health problems, Sonu is a scavenger who tries to convince Sunil to be more hygienic, hard-working and honest. Sonu acts as Sunil's partner until Sunil becomes a thief with Kalu. Sonu is one of the few examples of true moral compass in Annawadi, but Boo shows that Sonu will not have a very bright future as a scavenger.

Meena – The daughter of one of the Tamil families who built the slum, Meena is a teenager who longs to have a life and education of her own like her best friend Manju. Yet Meena is constantly beaten by her father and her brothers for having her own opinions. The lack of any options for her life other than becoming the property of her eventual husband pushes Meena to drink rat poison. Her death is a shock to the slum, but Boo shows that this awful suicide is a common occurrence among young, bright girls in India who are given no freedom or respect.

Kalu – A thief in Annawadi who makes deals with the police to locate and secure stolen goods. Kalu's good humor makes him popular among the slum residents, especially Abdul and Sunil, yet the officials do not care about Kalu at all. When Kalu is murdered, the police report it as death due to illness. Boo sees Kalu as a representation of the bright young men and woman in India who never achieve their true potential in a society that ignores and neglects them.

Karam – Abdul's father, Karam is a sickly man who suffers too much from tuberculosis to work in the garbage business that would sustain his family. Karam wants to give off the image of being the hard-working father who controls his household, but he often must defer to his son Abdul and his wife Zehrunisa who actually run the family recycling business. Karam has grand dreams of moving his family to a richer suburb called Vasai where he believes that his children will grow up healthy and obedient to the old family values, but these dreams are cut short by the accusation that he and his family caused Fatima's death. The court case eats up all Karam's money and ruins his health, showing that no aspirations are safe for the poor of Mumbai.

Kehkashan – Abdul's older sister. Kehkashan acts as a second mother to all the Husain children. During the course of the book, she returns home from her arranged marriage after her new husband turns out to be cheating on her, and she takes

over many family responsibilities. Kehkashan has few options in Annawadi outside of marriage, prospects that are further limited when she is accused as an instigator of Fatima's burning.

Mirchi – Abdul's younger brother, who dislikes working with garbage and hopes to have a clean job working as a waiter in a hotel. Mirchi is able to continue school past ninth grade, a privilege Abdul envies. Mirchi's good life, relative to Abdul's hardship, is an emblem of the slum residents' hope that, as time goes on, their community will have more opportunities and better lives.

Rahul Waghekar – Asha's son, a cheerful, popular boy who dreams of working in a fancy hotel. Rahul is Mirchi's best friend, even though Rahul is Hindu and belongs to the Shiv Sena party that hates low-caste Northern Indian Muslims like Mirchi's family. Rahul's openness and friendly demeanor is a sign of the changing India, which looks more towards economic opportunity and less towards old concerns of caste and religion.

Subhash Sawant – The Corporator (political representative) of the Shiv Sena party in Annawadi's ward. He pretends to be low-caste so that he can run in elections meant to help low-caste people earn a voice in government. The actual low-caste people of Annawadi know that Subhash lies, but they support him anyway because Subhash spends a small portion of government funds on real improvements in Annawadi. Subhash is an example of the ways that government programs meant to end discrimination against low-caste people rarely actually help those in need.

Robert Pires – The current slumlord of Annawadi, who is supposed to ensure that the political party Shiv Sena maintains control of the votes in this district. Yet Robert has had a religious awakening and no longer wants to deal with corrupt bargains, opening the door for Asha to become the new slumlord.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sanjay – A young thief in Annawadi who is so destroyed by Kalu's death, the lack of opportunities, and the complete disregard for young men in the slum that he commits suicide.

Mr. Kamble – An old man in Annawadi who wants to raise funds to fix his weak heart so that he can go back to work. He begs Asha for help, but he ultimately doesn't have enough money to convince her that he is worthy of her attention.

Sister Paulette – A nun who runs the orphanage near Annawadi.

Cynthia – Fatima's best friend in Annawadi.

Suraj – A eunuch who is intact, but feels that he is ¾ girl and ¼ boy. Suraj dances for pleasure, not for money like the other eunuchs. His passion fascinates Manju despite Asha's distaste for eunuchs.

Prakash – The "smartest boy" in Annawadi, Prakash is studying economics in college but finds it very difficult to study in the mess of slum life.

Officer Thokale – A police officer in the Sahar Police Station who works with Asha. Due to Asha's bribes, Thokale stops the abuse of Abdul and Karam in prison.

Priya – A poor, orphaned girl in Annawadi who sometimes helps Fatima.

The Master – A Hindu man who speaks to the boys at Dongri juvenile detention center, shaming them – especially Abdul – into living more virtuous lives.

Sunita – Sunil's younger sister.

Mahadeo – Asha's husband, a drunkard who lets Asha run the household.

Noori – Fatima's eight-year-old daughter who witnesses Fatima's burning.

Vijay – A middle-class student that Manju has a crush on in her Indian Civil Defense Corps, though Manju knows there is no future for them.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SOCIETY, COMPETITION, AND SOCIAL DIVISION

As India advances into the twenty-first century, its government hopes to show a narrative of constant progress towards a fairer society for all Indian citizens. Yet the old caste system, in which a person was born into a specific group that defined their social status, continues to shape who has power in Indian society and who remains poor and outcast. Given that the poor make up the large majority of India's population, Katherine Boo investigates why such societies can maintain a status quo of drastic inequality. Why, she asks, when India claims to be a fair and democratic capitalist society, are those who live in poverty unable to improve their lives no matter how hard they work? And why, since poverty is so entrenched, do the poor not unite based on common interests to create change? By closely examining the internal dynamics of the slum community of Annawadi, Boo comes to believe that the best way for people to improve their lives would be to work together, but terrible circumstances and a new spirit of competition in India keep them from leveraging their common

interests.

Boo examines the social dynamics between the individuals and families in Annawadi, showing the complex relationships that come from such an extreme living situation. Due to the incredibly close quarters of life in the slum, all the inhabitants of Annawadi are intimately involved in each other's lives. This proximity fosters friendships in a few cases, such as the uneasy peace between Abdul, Sunil, and Kalu or the bond between Manju and Meena. Yet more often, the lack of space and the obligatory closeness create strife. While all the families in Annawadi have a similar goal—to build a better life—their proximity and similarity seems not to inspire them to band together to find solutions to problems and collectively improve their situations, but rather it fosters a spirit of competition between families over who can get ahead socially and financially. The feud between Fatima and the Husains, for example, begins because Fatima feels that the Husains are renovating their home in order to rub in her face their rise into the middle class. The Husains *do* in many ways feel superior to Fatima, though they are not renovating to belittle her. However, the rivalry between the two households—which could easily have been solved by renovating the home in a way that was mutually beneficial—descends into a drama that consumes all of their lives. Competition, then, is shown to be a toxic fact of life in the slums that keeps the poor in poverty by obscuring their common interests.

Another aspect of life in the slums that keeps the people of Annawadi from helping one another is that there is clear danger in becoming involved with unknown people or authority figures. The risks can be physical— slum residents, for example, often refuse to help those who have contagious diseases for fear of becoming infected themselves (the community does not have access to adequate healthcare). The risks can also be political, as when the other residents of Annawadi are afraid to speak out about how Fatima burned herself lest they are blamed and arrested by the corrupt Mumbai police. Boo also shows how religious and cultural differences divide Indian society, even in this "new" India that strives to be one united community. The Husains are hated in Annawadi because they are Muslim in a majority Hindu area, and young women of low caste have difficulty making advantageous marriages that could pull them from poverty because caste stigma is still so prevalent. Despite that residents of Annawadi have limited opportunities because of their caste, this collective oppression is not enough to make the poor band together—the attitude of the slums, fueled by India's new capitalist ethos, is that individuals are responsible for getting ahead. Boo seems to lament the loss of community-fed movements in a world that is now governed by capitalist greed, implicitly critiquing the disadvantages that capitalism has brought to this country, despite the good a free market has done to India's new cosmopolitan image in the eyes of the world.

All the families and individuals in Annawadi work hard to better their lives, but their efforts often include pushing other people down in order to raise themselves up. Despite many characters trying to selflessly help other people, such as Abdul's concern for his baby brother, Manju's attempts to keep the slum school open, or Sonu's desire to teach Sunil how to be more than a thief, Boo points out that these acts are anomalies—signs of extraordinary compassion in an environment that ruthlessly pushes people, through the constant fear of death, to make short-sighted, selfish choices. Living in Annawadi means constantly fighting for resources, space, and basic respect—conditions that require individuals to look out for themselves. The community of Annawadi thus lives in close proximity, but remains unable to form a truly helpful community movement that would empower all the slum residents to change their lives.

OPPORTUNITY, CORRUPTION, AND INEQUALITY

While capitalism and globalization initially gave Indians across all social classes hope that more opportunities would be available to them, these opportunities have not proved as transformative to the lives of the poor as they have to the lives of more privileged segments of society. Old inequalities, in other words, have still dominated 21st century Indian life. From what *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* shows of life in Mumbai, opportunities for social mobility reward a select few—those who are already of higher social status, and poor people who know how to work the broken systems to their own advantage, largely through corruption. Otherwise, the residents of Annawadi who strive earnestly to pull themselves into the middle class—as Manju does through education, or as the Husains do through their trash sorting business—find themselves kept down by the prejudice and corruption of the very institutions, such as the police and the government, who are supposedly there to help.

Even within Annawadi, there is a hierarchy of which residents have access to power and opportunity. Men, for example, fare far better than women. Meena, who lives completely under the thumb of her father and brothers, and Fatima, who is disabled and ridiculed by the entire slum, are both driven to suicide by feeling powerless and ignored. For them, choosing to end their lives seems like the only choice they can make for themselves. Additionally, the Husains, who are Muslim, experience obstacles that Hindus in Annawadi do not—the prison that Abdul goes to after he is falsely accused of murder, for example, is disproportionately full of Muslims, who are more likely to be punished than Hindus. On a related note, Boo shows how the government systems in India that claim to give the poor more opportunities to advance are, in fact, upholding the status quo. Boo gives examples, such as the government aid agencies that divert aid from their intended recipients into the pockets of

wealthy investors, or the court system that depends almost solely on bribes to function (which rewards wealthy defendants while condemning poor ones). Though the Husains, falsely accused of a crime they did not commit, are judged not guilty, this verdict seems like a fluke in an otherwise corrupt system that keeps the poor disenfranchised whenever possible.

Living amid such rampant corruption makes it very difficult for people to hold on to any sense of a moral or ethical code. Anyone who tries to value selflessness or integrity amid this corruption cannot survive; they must eventually give in to this immoral way of life in order to make it. Asha, for example, fully embraces corruption as one of the only ways to make a better life for her daughter, Manju, while Manju herself tries to stay moral but also slips into helping with her mother's corrupt schemes so that she can continue to try to get an education. Abdul also tries to be "good" by refusing to take any trash that he believes is stolen, but he is ultimately unable to keep this up when his family is starving. Corruption will continue, Boo suggests, as long as corrupt opportunities are the only opportunities available, and inequality will define Indian society until the government can be held accountable to the values of equality, fairness, and compassion that it professes.

THE LOCAL VS. THE GLOBAL

Behind the Beautiful Forevers is an attempt to go beyond the popular narrative of India as a rising global power experiencing an economic boom that is uplifting all of its citizens. The source of the book's title is a concrete wall plastered with ads for ceramic tiles that will stay "beautiful forever"—this wall is intended to hide Annawadi from the sight of wealthy international travelers at the Mumbai airport. In other words, the wall tries to hide the local from the global, and Katherine Boo is going behind the wall to report on the local effects of globalization that have largely been unseen by the world. Boosterish narratives of capitalist progress reflect India's increasing prestige in the global economy, but Boo argues that, like misleading tile ads, such narratives can hide realities at the local level: the residents of Annawadi are not thriving under India's new global capitalism. In fact, it seems that globalization has made their lives worse.

Even as global concerns become more important to progress in India as a whole, individual people worry about the problems that globalization creates in their lives. Boo gives many examples of this. Annawadi is directly adjacent to the international airport, and the airport constantly threatens to destroy the entire slum in order to protect India's reputation of progress from being tarnished by travelers witnessing the country's poverty. In addition, India's increased industrialization—which is largely responsible for India's ability to compete in global markets—creates pollution that ruins the health of those who live in Annawadi. Finally, globalization means that the local economy of Annawadi is not insulated from the tribulations of larger markets. The 2008 recession, set off by American banks, has huge repercussions in the slum: Annawadians were already struggling, but after the recession depresses the value of goods (including trash), Annawadians' lives become even more difficult and precarious.

Boo presents the slum of Annawadi in all its particular detail, making clear that she is talking only about Annawadi and does not intend to represent the conditions of all people in poverty or even all people in poverty in India. This deep dive into a small number of people humanizes the otherwise overwhelming statistics about those who live in poverty throughout the world, and asserts the significance of every individual. However, despite the particularities of Annawadi, Boo's book does have something to say about poverty around the globe. Though the specific diseases that Annawadians must deal with are unique to their climate and environment, the lack of proper health care in Annawadi is representative of the larger problem of health and hygiene across the world. Issues of child labor (as shown by the trash scavengers), illiteracy and education (as shown in Manju's school), and drug addiction (seen in the constant use of Eraz-ex by some of the Annawadians), are also global concerns seen in many situations of urban poverty around the world. Learning about the experiences particular to impoverished communities in India, and especially seeing complex individuals navigating these issues, can help readers from other parts of the world become more globally aware of the problems that others face.

PERMANENCE, LEGACY, AND ERASURE

In a slum made of temporary materials, everyone living in Annawadi strives to make themselves important enough not to be erased. In a way, by recording their lives in this book, Katherine Boo helps to make these lives visible and inerasable to those who might ignore them, such as the Indian government and the entire developed world, both of which tend to prefer not to look directly at poverty.

Boo spent three years living in the Annawadi slum, meticulously observing the people who live there and learning how they survive in the face of multiple threats of displacement and erasure. The slum itself is not even supposed to exist, as Annawadi is technically squatting on land that belongs to the airport conglomerate. This conglomerate has the right—and the intention—to bulldoze the neighborhood at any time with no care for the thousands of people who live there, so the residents live in constant fear that the lives they have fought to build might be destroyed in an instant. The legal system also erases entire lives with regularity. For example, slum residents who have been murdered, such as Kalu, are recorded as dying from sickness so that law enforcement does not have an obligation to investigate their deaths.

In the midst of all this erasure, Boo works to preserve the

legacy of the Annawadians. She resists either infantilizing or glorifying the poor, and she refuses to see the Annawadians only as victims. Instead, Boo shows what the Annawadians are doing for themselves to make their lives safe, dignified, and permanent. For example, she shows the Husain family renovating their home to make it more hospitable and structurally stable, a gesture of defiance in the context of the slum. She also shows Manju working hard to educate slum children so that they might have opportunities that would otherwise be denied to them. Both of these acts invest labor and care into a slum that is at constant risk of disappearing, and such acts can be seen as a vote of confidence in the slum and a way to resist its erasure. Even cynical acts, such as Asha's misuse of government funds intended to help the poor, demonstrate that Annawadians are using the resources available to them in order to stabilize and better their lives. Boo also specifically erases herself from the book so that the Annawadians' efforts to solve their problems and improve their lives are the only thing that matters. The issues facing those living in Annawadi are huge, and Boo does nothing to suggest how those problems might be fixed. She simply tells readers about the things that the Annawadians live through and the ways that they themselves are trying to make their lives into something that cannot be taken away from them.

LIFE AND DEATH

While some people outside of India erroneously assume that the Hindu belief in reincarnation means that Indians do not value life as much as other people (since Hindus trust that they will be born into another life after this one), Boo takes pains to counter this belief and show that life is incredibly precious to the residents of the Annawadi slum. This is apparent in the Annawadians' struggles to live, despite that fact that those outside of Annawadi—including the government, police, and hospitals—seem determined to make their lives precarious and unimportant. It's also apparent in the fact that instead of desensitizing the Annawadians to death, the high number of losses in this community make death even harder for the Annawadians to bear. The deaths of their friends affect the children of Annawadi greatly, even if they learn to put up a stoic front so that they are not targeted by others who see displays of emotion as weak. While some residents succumb to the hopelessness of constant death (like Sanjay, who commits suicide after the murder of his friend Kalu), others manage to prevail in impossible circumstances—Manju, for example, must put the suicide of her best friend Meena out of her mind in order to protect her own desire to live. Boo grapples with the many suicides in Annawadi, implying that these suicides testify to the appalling circumstances of the slum, rather than weakness or disregard for life. Boo presents these suicides as lamentable, but understandable, in light of the fact that Annawadians live difficult lives with little chance of improvement, despite their hard work.

Even with all the pain that comes from life in this slum, Boo shows that most of the residents of Annawadi believe that life is valuable and should be lived. Some members of the Annawadian community are optimistic about their futures, thinking that life will get better if they give it a chance to improve. Sunil, one of the garbage scavengers, continues to hope that he will get taller and become more successful if he can just collect more garbage each day. Others are more pragmatic, acknowledging that circumstances in Annawadi are often harsh but that life is still worthwhile on its own merits. Abdul, who faces horrible and unjust legal circumstances in addition to the difficulty of his day-to-day life, thinks that any life would "still be a life," even if that life were filled with nothing but abuse and beatings. In the end, Boo asserts that life is hard in Annawadi, but it is neither worthless nor futile. Whenever possible, the people of Annawadi keep hope alive that their lives can still improve. Under these conditions, life is meaningful simply because it holds the chance of something good happening.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVER WALL

The slum Annawadi is next to the international airport in Mumbai, but the poverty of Annawadi is hidden from the rich airport clientele thanks to a concrete wall pasted with advertisements for ceramic tiles that will stay "beautiful forever." Katherine Boo's mission as a journalist is to get behind that wall and inform the rest of the world about the real situation for much of the Indian population. The ad on the wall is an obvious exaggeration, as no tiles could actually stay beautiful forever. Similarly, the Indian government has projected the false narrative that all of the problems of poverty and slums are in the past. While India's economy has improved, there are still large populations living in temporary housing without permanent jobs, such as those who live in Annawadi behind this wall. The wall allows India to perpetuate a lie, hiding the living conditions of India's poor from the tourists who come in to the Mumbai airport.

In addition to hiding India's poverty from the rest of the world, the wall keeps the residents of Annawadi from being able to join the modern society of the more cosmopolitan India. Slum residents are not allowed to go into the airport and are even discouraged from looking over the wall to see what people at the airport are doing. Thus, the wall symbolizes both the inadequacy of the Indian government's narrative of progress

that it sells to the world, and the barrier that still exists for the poor in India, who are not given access to India's new economic momentum and social mobility. By the end of the novel, the wall has been torn down in order for the airport to expand. With the wall down and the slum, an obstacle to the airport's expansion, in full view of passengers, Boo suggests that city officials, and the rest of the world, will be forced to reckon with the slum residents as India continues to develop in the future.

ABDUL'S BRICK WALL

Abdul's family, the Husains, have enough money from their garbage trading business to build **a brick wall** between their shanty and the house next door. While most huts in Annawadi are made up of sheet metal and trash, the Husains are able to make their house a little more permanent by using stable building materials. This represents the slum residents' desire to establish themselves as legitimate residents of the city of Mumbai, rather than temporary migrants who are just squatting on the land. The brick wall gives the appearance that the Husains have achieved this dream, but it's not so simple—when Abdul chips into the wall to secure a shelf, he finds that the wall is completely crooked and so poorly constructed that the bricks crumble instead of supporting the shelf. Thus, the brick wall is emblematic not only of dreams, but also of the reality that any time the Husains attempt to improve their situation, the precarious conditions of the slum make it difficult to succeed.

Abdul also sees this crooked wall as a symbol for the "crooked" ethical system of Annawadi. Life in the slum does not reward living on the straight and narrow, as survival involves navigating and participating in corrupt institutions within and around the government. Just as Abdul cannot make a straight shelf on an off-kilter wall, Abdul cannot live by strict definitions of right and wrong when the entire basis of life in Annawadi depends on dishonest and exploitative practices.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* published in 2014.

Prologue Quotes

❝ There was too much wanting at Annawadi lately, or so it seemed to Abdul. As India began to prosper, old ideas about accepting the life assigned by one's caste or one's divinities were yielding to a belief in earthly reinvention. Annawadians now spoke of better lives casually, as if fortune were a cousin arriving on Sunday, as if the future would look nothing like the past.

Related Characters: Abdul Husain

Related Themes:

Page Number: xvi-xvii

Explanation and Analysis

Abdul, the teenage garbage sorter who acts as the protagonist of Boo's book, notes the recent difference in the attitude of those who live in the Mumbai slum of Annawadi. The Indian government, newly participating in global markets, embracing capitalism, and focusing on the country's growing GDP, has projected the idea that any Indian citizen who works hard can achieve anything he or she desires. India's poor, no longer tied strictly to a caste system that would keep them as poor as their ancestors by rigidly defining what jobs and marriages people can and cannot have, are perhaps most invested in the dream of success. Whereas Indian society used to run according to birthright, with reincarnation to a higher social level as the only way to move up social classes and comfort.

Yet in India's new free market economy, people like the residents of Annawadi believe that one's social standing depends only on how much money one makes. Abdul, however, sees the cracks in this viewpoint. No matter what the government's official stance on the caste system is, the rules of the past remain important in the day to day lives of the Annawadians. As the son of trash sorters, Abdul expects nothing more than to be a trash sorter – a much more practical dream than the social striving of his neighbors.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Seventeen years later, almost no one in this slum was considered poor by official Indian benchmarks. Rather, the Annawadians were among roughly one hundred million Indians freed from poverty since 1991, when, around the same moment as the small slum's founding, the central government embraced economic liberalization. The Annawadians were thus part of one of the most stirring success narratives in the modern history of global market capitalism, a narrative still unfolding.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The residents of the Annawadi slum are part of India's great

success story, living above the official poverty line and acting as proof that India has fixed the problems that kept its citizens in deplorable conditions by embracing capitalism and joining the ranks of global business powers. Yet the numbers of people "freed" from poverty are not the full story. The Annawadians still live in huts with no running water, have limited or no access to health care, rarely receive a full education, and often do not know if they will have enough to eat that day. Their jobs are often temporary, seasonal, or outright dangerous while they pay a lower wage for more hours than most developed nations would ever consider fair. Even if most Annawadians make more than the amount that the World Bank defines as the poverty line, they are not actually as comfortable as the Indian government would like to make them appear. By revealing the true situation for the majority of Indian citizens – a far grimmer life than the Indian government usually admits – Boo suggests that protecting their international interests and building a good reputation is more important to the Indian government than actually taking care of the people who are supposedly enjoying the benefits of capitalism.

❝ True, only six of the slum's three thousand residents had permanent jobs. (The rest, like 85 percent of Indian workers, were part of the informal, unorganized economy.) True, a few residents trapped rats and frogs and fried them for dinner. A few ate the scrub grass at the sewage lake's edge. And these individuals, miserable souls, thereby made an inestimable contribution to their neighbors. They gave those slumdwellers who didn't fry rats and eat weeds, like Abdul, a felt sense of their upward mobility.

Related Characters: Abdul Husain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Abdul, the slumdweller on whom Boo focuses, is a trash sorter that has been more successful than the majority of Annawadians – a fact which makes him ignore the often awful conditions of his life. Though Abdul must spend long days hunched over trash, often cutting his hands to separate the different materials into pure piles that the recycling center will accept, he sees his job as a step up from the people who must walk around collecting the trash. This "victory" gives Abdul a feeling of superiority over the Annawadians who are even worse off than he is. The sense of competition pervades the neighborhood of Annawadi.

Many residents don't seem to care how well they are doing in objective terms as long as they are doing better than their immediate neighbors. As long as there is someone worse off than they are, the Annawadians can pretend that they are part of the population of India that is rising – even if they do not actually have any of the benefits that would come from truly achieving a higher social or economic class. With everyone competing against each other, all of Annawadi stays in near poverty levels.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Everyone, everywhere, complained about their neighbors. But in the twenty-first-century city, fewer people joined up to take their disputes to the streets. As group identities based on caste, ethnicity, and religion gradually attenuated, anger and hope were being privatized, like so much else in Mumbai. This development increased the demand for canny mediators-human shock absorbers for the colliding, narrowly construed interests of one of the world's largest cities.

Related Characters: Asha Waghekar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Asha, a mother in Annawadi who hopes to become the first female slumlord, muses on the new social divisions in India now that the caste system is over and Indian society as a whole delves into the notions of becoming more tolerant of multiculturalism. As Asha notes, old communities based purely on specific identities are rare in Mumbai where people of every walk of life live in close proximity to one another. Yet the disappearance of community ties does not mean that the old rivalries between these groups disappear. Whereas Asha sees the old India as a place where people could depend on their specific cultural group to help them deal with issues, Indians are now left with no source of support when they run into problems.

As a slumlord, Asha hopes to be the one who solves the disputes and troubles among the Annawadians for profit. No longer motivated by caste, religion, or ethnicity, the majority of Boo's characters are motivated by money. The greed often brings people into contention, as competition for jobs, resources and even space is incredibly high in Mumbai. Asha sees a way to make a lot of money in this new world, taking on the old role of mediator between individuals now that the community mindset is no longer

viable.

In the West, and among some in the Indian elite, this word, corruption, had purely negative connotations; it was seen as blocking India's modern, global ambitions. But for the poor of a country where corruption thieved a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained.

Related Characters: Asha Waghekar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Asha, using whatever means she must to make money and gain influence as a potential slumlord in Annawadi, cares very little for the relative morality of her actions as she extorts her neighbors, bribes the police, and has intimate affairs with powerful people. While the elite in India would like to pretend that corruption is no longer viable in India, the economic and political systems of the country are steeped in lies, bribes, and cover-ups. Given the intense corruption of the Indian government, a world in which money trumps everything, Asha believes that the only way she can get ahead is by buying into that same corruption. A s a woman – traditionally silenced in Indian society – born into poverty, the odds of finding success in India are stacked against Asha. Were she to pursue a better life through purely honest means, chances are that she herself would be taken advantage of by another social striver hoping to capitalize on the weakness of others. For Asha, corruption is just business. Stripped of the dishonorable sense that the more well-off Indians would like to give the word, corruption is the best way for a person like Asha to overcome her disadvantages and give herself and her family a better life.

Chapter 3 Quotes

The airport people had erected tall, gleaming aluminum fences on the side of the slum that most drivers passed before turning into the international terminal. Drivers approaching the terminal from the other direction would see only a concrete wall covered with sunshine-yellow advertisements. The ads were for Italianate floor tiles, and the corporate slogan ran the wall's length: BEAUTIFUL FOREVER BEAUTIFUL FOREVER BEAUTIFUL FOREVER. Sunil regularly walked atop the Beautiful Forever wall, surveying for trash, but Airport Road was unhelpfully clean.

Related Characters: Sunil

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 36-37

Explanation and Analysis

Sunil searches for garbage along the wall that hides the slum of Annawadi from the eyes of the wealthy airport patrons. Boo uses the abrupt contrast between the airport and the squatters who surround it to point out the gap between rich and poor in India. Sunil may try to span this gap, but the lack of trash on the Airport grounds is a sign that the rich on one side of the wall are leaving nothing behind to help the poor reach across this wall.

The ads on the wall also speak to the idea that the poor are hidden away. The floor tiles that promise to be "beautiful forever" exaggerate the wonder of the New India that creates such riches. The tiles cannot actually be beautiful forever, just as Indian's programs to alleviate poverty are not working as well as they would like their international business partners to believe. While the Indian government is working hard to spread the idea that their growing economy is gradually boosting all the Indian citizens, there is still a large portion of the Indian population who lives in unseen poverty behind this wall.

And while some international businessmen descending into the Mumbai airport eyed the vista of slums with disgust, and others regarded it with pity, few took the sight as evidence of a high-functioning, well-managed city. Annawadians understood that their settlement was widely perceived as a blight, and that their homes, like their work, were provisional. Still they clung to this half-acre…

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

Annawadi, sprawling on the ground of the international airport, is a sign of the Old India that the new rich elite of the country would like the rest of the world not to see. Though the Indian economy is growing and conditions in Mumbai are improving, the issue of slum neighborhoods is still a huge problem stopping the healthy urban development of the city. The slum is a reminder that not everyone is benefitting from Indian businesses new involvement with international businessmen. Though the Annawadians know that their own city hates their neighborhood and their presence in the city, they have a fierce desire to prove that they are a legitimate part of life in Mumbai. Though they may have temporary homes and jobs, the Annawadians want to make themselves a permanent legacy of Mumbai. Despite knowing that their slum is not part of the vision for Mumbai's future, the Annawadians want to be a part of the grand plans that the Indian government and the Indian elite have for India.

Chapter 4 Quotes

They understood Subhash Sawant to be corrupt. They assumed he'd faked his caste certificate. "But he alone comes here, shows his face," Annawadians said. Before each election, he'd used city money or tapped the largesse of a prominent American Christian charity, World Vision, to give Annawadi an amenity: a public toilet; a flag- pole; gutters; a concrete platform by the sewage lake, where he usually stood when he came.

Related Characters: Subhash Sawant

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

The citizens of Annawadi are not naively unaware of how their Corporator lies to them to secure his own power, but they have chosen to go along with Subhash's story of a low-caste birth in order to try and gain more amenities for themselves. Instead of being offending that Subhash is taking a political position that is meant for someone who has lived through the legacy of oppression tied to being low-caste in India, the Annawadians see Subhash's corruption as the natural way of the political world. They choose not to fight a system so steeped in lies and bribes, but rather find a way to make that system work for them as well.

By accepting the corruption of Subhash, they gain a Corporator who is willing to give small boons to a slum. Subhash's small crimes are far better than risking the election of a politician who came by his seat honestly, but doesn't have the time or inclination to help slum residents. While the Corporator certainly uses Annawadi as a source of votes, the Annawadians use him in return – tapping into the corruption of Indian politics to make things unfair in their favor.

As every slumdweller knew, there were three main ways out of poverty: finding an entrepreneurial niche, as the Husains had found in garbage; politics and corruption, in which Asha placed her hopes; and education.

Related Characters: Asha Waghekar, Manju Waghekar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

As everyone in Annawadi fights to better their situation, Boo identifies three primary methods of emerging from poverty for the people who live in the slum. Each method comes with its pros and cons, as Boo explores by following the Husains and their business, Asha and her political ambitions, and Manju who has chosen education. The Husains are open to the whims of a constantly changing market, as their business depends on the global price of recyclables and they are open to a catastrophic accident that can destroy all they've worked for. Asha also cannot control her fate completely, as the corrupt politicians she bargains with are just as likely to betray her when it benefits them.

Manju's hopes for education are slightly more stable, but even she cannot overcome the limitations of the education given to poor girls who cannot pay for the best schooling. Though Boo presented these three "ways out of poverty," it seems that business, politics, and even education are not complete without an element of luck to lift them out. No one in Annawadi can escape through sheer force of will alone, with so much stacked against the poor of India.

In calmer moments, Manju could argue that parents were terrified of losing control of their children in a city where dangers seemed to be multiplying-a city they didn't fully understand. And as much as Manju hated violence of any stripe, the odd thrashing, like the odd axe blow, could be effective in keeping a child close to home.

Related Characters: Manju Waghekar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 64

Explanation and Analysis

While running the slum school in Annawadi, Manju often has to deal with parents disciplining their children for straying too far from home. Manju notes the changing situation of many families in Annawadi, as children pull away from the traditional family obedience in favor of the wealth of opportunity in the new India. As India charges into a more "free" future – especially in Mumbai where the global influence of capitalism creates the illusion that children can escape the fates their parents had accepted – the younger generations leave behind the old traditions that kept India's social structure rigid for so long. Children like those in Annawadi are no longer happy to accept the plans that their parents have for them.

While the older generations are happy that their children will be doing better than they, there is also fear of the unknown future that these children face. They deal with their fear by punishing their children into obedience, as when a parent beats one of Manju's students for going into the street, or when Manju's own mother struck her with an axe for taking money and going into the city. Manju seems resigned to recognize that this violence is just a part of life in Annawadi.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Zehrunisa would go, sighing, to separate the miserable couple, just as she sighed on Eid and other Muslim holidays before inviting them to share her mutton korma. The family of the child-abusing Fatima, the family of the skeezy brothel owner: This was the Muslim fellowship she had in Annawadi.

"It's easy to break a single bamboo stick, but when you bundle the sticks, you can't even bend them," she told her children. "It's the same with family and with the people of our faith. Despite the petty differences, Muslims have to join up in big sufferings, and for Eid."

Related Characters: Zehrunisa Husain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

Zehrunisa, despite not approving of her fellow Muslims in Annawadi, seeks out their company for the major Muslim holidays. Though Zehrunisa obviously feels competition with the other Muslim families, comparing her own family to the struggles of the others in order to feel better about her own life. Yet Zehrunisa cannot entirely escape the old community of faith, even if India is now supposed to be built on individual achievement. Zherunisa both wants the other Muslim families to fail, because she knows that will make her own family seem better in comparison. But she also wishes that the community of Muslim believers was a more welcoming place for her family in the face of the Hindu discrimination against Muslims in Mumbai.

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... On the floor she wanted ceramic tiles like the ones advertised on the Beautiful Forever wall - tiles that could be scrubbed clean, instead of broken concrete that harbored filth in each striation. With these small improvements, she thought her children might stay as healthy as children in Annawadi could be.

Related Characters: Zehrunisa Husain, Karam

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Zehrunisa, the mother of the Husain family, begins to argue against her husband Karam, and his plan to move the family to the Muslim suburb of Vasai. Though Zehrunisa previously wished for the "normal" and traditional life of a Muslim wife, in which she would stay inside and care for her children, she now has a taste of the "new" India after living in urban Annawadi for so long. Rather than returning to the old ways, Zehrunisa now wants to start anew for her family in the urban center. She sees ways that her family can have more opportunities here, if she addresses the hygiene problems

that plague the urban environment.

Mumbai, like the Beautiful Forever wall that advertises apparently magical tiles, gives off the image of wealth, prosperity, and happiness for its residents. As Zehrunisa attempts to get the best for her children, she buys in to the myth that Mumbai will allow them to grow up stronger than she grew up in a rural environment. Yet all of Zehrunisa's efforts cannot protect her children from all the dangers of this city. Her dreams are as exaggerated as claiming that tiles will stay beautiful forever, especially in the dirt and grime of Mumbai. As hard as Zehrunisa works to clean up their family situation, there is little she can do to combat the hardships of living poor in India.

Chapter 6 Quotes

"Everyone is jealous of us, fixing our house," Kehkashan explained to an older cousin who'd just arrived from the countryside.
"So let them be jealous," Zehrunisa exclaimed. "Why shouldn't we live in a better room now that we are doing a little better?"

Related Characters: Zehrunisa Husain, Kehkashan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Zehrunisa, the matriarch of the Husain family, decides that her family should use the small savings they have managed to earn to improve their hut in Annawadi, sparking jealousy among the neighbors who feel that the Husains are rubbing their good fortune in their faces. In Annawadi, one person's success is equated with another's failure. Zehrunisa revels in this competition, wanting to enjoy this brief moment of feeling better than her neighbors to assure herself that her family really is doing well. The easiest way to experience the new promise of social mobility in India is to have another baseline of poverty to compare against. The small changes that the Husains can make to their house are not much, in terms of global wealth, but the immediate proximity of neighbors who are doing worse give Zehrunisa a tangible reminder that there really are opportunities to give her children a better life here.

The four-foot gray slab was uneven, as was the floor, so the shelf wobbled perilously on two supports he'd built to hold it up. Nothing in this idiot house was straight. The only way to stabilize the shelf, and make it level, would be to cut into the brick wall, itself uneven, and cement the slab in place…
Abdul was dismayed. The readiness of the bricks to disintegrate, long suspected, was now confirmed. They'd been made with too much sand, and the mortar between them had deteriorated. Crap bricks that weren't even glued to one another-less a wall than a tremulous stack.

Related Characters: Abdul Husain

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 87-88

Explanation and Analysis

When Abdul tries to improve the Husain family kitchen for his mother, he has to confront how poorly their hut has been constructed. Boo shows both the practical and the metaphorical consequences of this original poor craftsmanship. In the literal sense, the crooked foundation of the house means that any future work will also be of bad quality. Despite the pressure to show the rest of the slum that they are doing well, the Husains never have enough money to fully fix all the issues, or even properly do new work. The "crap bricks" are a sign that the Husains are not as successful as they would like the neighbors to think they are.

The crooked wall also symbolizes the corrupt decisions that slum residents have to make in order to survive. AS the slum itself was built when people squatted on land that did not belong to them, current slum dwellers are born guilty simply by living in the homes they have had all their lives. People who live in Annawadi start from a handicapped position, and have very few options to make an honest living. They have to take part in illegal activities simply to get enough to eat or feed their families. Abdul is forced to accept stolen goods to keep his family's garbage business afloat. These crooked acts have given the Husain's enough to make superficial improvements to their house, but it cannot address the cracked foundation of their house or really get the Husains truly above the poverty line.

Chapter 7 Quotes

He didn't know if his mother was right about an earlier, peaceful age in which poor people had accepted the fates that their respective gods had written on their foreheads, and in turn treated one another more kindly. He just knew that she didn't really long for companionable misery. She'd known abjectness, loathed its recollection, and raised her son for a modern age of ruthless competition. In this age, some people rose and some people fell, and ever since he was little, she'd made him understand that he had to rise.

Related Characters: Abdul Husain, Zehrunisa Husain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

With the Husain family garbage business failing and no money to post bail for Karam, Kehkashan, or Abdul, Zehrunisa laments the loss of community support when tragedy strikes. Zehrunisa grew up in a very different India than her children now live in, where there was less chance for social mobility but a greater sense of social cohesion. Though Zehrunisa's childhood was full of suffering, she at least had a group of people who were of the same social class and caste to suffer with her.

The old caste system in India condemned people to live the same lives as their parents, with certain jobs only available to certain groups. Abdul and his generation now have the illusion of being able to reach for any future they want, but they are still missing a fundamental foundation of support. When circumstances get bad, as when Abdul and his father are wrongfully arrested, all their hard work means nothing. Boo shows both that Zehrunisa and Abdul think that competition increases their chances of success, and that the cut throat nature of this environment – in which every person is in charge of their own destiny and cannot help anyone else – actually keeps everyone down.

Chapter 8 Quotes

Only in detention had it occurred to him that drudge labor in an urban armpit like Annawadi might be considered freedom. He was gratified that boys from other urban armpits agreed.

Related Characters: Abdul Husain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128-129

Explanation and Analysis

While Abdul is detained at Dongri awaiting trial for allegedly burning Fatima, he becomes furious that other boys are kept here for breaking child labor laws. Abdul recognizes that working hard throughout one's childhood is a poor alternative to being able to study, but he also knows that work is a rare opportunity for kids to improve their lives. Putting these kids in a juvenile detention center keeps them from the chance to go to school and the chance to work and help their families. Abdul thinks that it is incredibly unfair that the families that are so poor that their children have to work are slammed with the extra charges of breaking child labor laws. Working long days as Abdul has since he was a pre-teen is not the normal definition of "freedom," as Abdul has never gotten a chance to relax or think about what he wants to do in life. But it is at least more free than wasting away in the Dongri detention center.

To his family, Abdul's physical capability had been the mattering thing. He was the workhorse, his moral judgments irrelevant. He wasn't even sure that he had any moral judgments. But when The Master spoke of taufeez and izzat, respectability and honor, Abdul thought the man's stare had blazed across the rows of heads and come to rest on him alone. It was not too late, at seventeen or whatever age he was, to resist the corrupting influences of his world and his nature.

Related Characters: Abdul Husain, The Master

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

While in the juvenile detention center waiting to be proclaimed innocent of burning Fatima, Abdul hears the teaching of a man called The Master who attempts to shame the boys at the center into living more moral lives. Abdul, secure in the knowledge that he is not actually a criminal, discovers a burning need to be considered good even though his world is seen as debased and immoral by the rest of the world. The middle class of Mumbai expect nothing but lawlessness from the slum residents.

Abdul sees how easy it is to fall into corruption while living in Annawadi, where the cost of getting enough to eat and a place to sleep often means going around the law. Though Abdul understands that he has a responsibility to do what

he must to keep his family fed, he also sees that he has a moral soul that he wants to shine through the grime of his life. Boo shows that the slum residents are not naturally predisposed to corruption, but fall into it because that is what surrounds them. Abdul believes it is possible to be better than his corrupting environment, though recognizing that part of his human nature is drawn to evil as well.

Chapter 10 Quotes

Now the man's leg was mashed and bloody, and he was calling out to passersby for help. Sunil figured he'd been hit by a car. Some drivers weren't overly concerned about avoiding the trash-pickers who scoured the roadsides.

Sunil was too scared to go to the police station and ask for an ambulance, especially after what was rumored to have happened to Abdul. Instead he ran toward the battleground of the Cargo Road dumpsters, hoping an adult would brave the police station.

Related Characters: Sunil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

A scavenger gets hit by a car in Annawadi and is too injured to move out of the road. Instead of helping him, everyone who passes thinks of a reason why they can't stop to help. For Sunil, the first person to pass, he is too afraid that the police will frame him for the scavenger's injury so they can extort money from Sunil to prove his innocence. Adults pass including Zehrunisa, but are too busy with their own troubles. As the scavenger gets weaker, more people avoid him for fear that they will catch the diseases that they assume the scavenger has. Eventually, the scavenger dies because no one was willing to help him.

Boo uses this incident as an illustration of how competitive the environment of Annawadi is. The residents of this slum cannot expend energy to help others – even if Sunil wants to – for fear of what might happen to them. Survival in Annawadi is a zero sum game – in which one person has to suffer for another to prosper.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"All murders we detect, 100 percent success," was how Senior Inspector Patil, who ran the Sahar station, liked to put it. But perhaps there was a trick to this success rate: not detecting the murders of inconsequential people.
Succumbed to an "irrecoverable illness" was the swift conclusion of Maruti Jadhav, the inspector in charge of Kalu's case. At the morgue of Cooper Hospital, the nature of the "irrecoverable illness" was decided. Fifteen-year-old Deepak Rai, known as Kalu, had died of his tuberculosis - the same cause of death tagged to the bleeding scavenger who had slowly expired on the road.

Related Characters: Kalu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

Kalu, one of the boys who makes his living as a thief in Annawadi, is clearly murdered but the officials who pick up his body record the death as tuberculosis. This practice happens often in Annawadi, as it is deemed too much trouble to figure out how poor nobodies like Kalu have died. The lives of the Annawadians don't matter to the people in power of Mumbai. It is easier to pretend that they do not exist at all, in order to avoid having a poor reputation.

Furthermore, Mumbai does not want to project an image of crime so that tourists will continue to come and boost the Mumbai economy. To keep up this image, the police in Mumbai simply erase the lives of unimportant people who have no money, connections, or family who will make further trouble. As Kalu is an "undercitizen" who isn't supposed to legally exist any way – as a thief who squats on airport land in Annawadi – the police are comfortable pretending that his death was natural instead of doing their due diligence by investigating the real cause and getting justice for this boy.

Trying to make sense of the deaths of Kalu and Sanjay, Sunil and Abdul grew closer. Not quite friends-rather, an unnameable, not-entirely-willing category of relationship in which two boys felt themselves bound to two boys who were dead. Sunil and Abdul sat together more often than before, but when they spoke, it was with the curious formality of people who shared the understanding that much of what was said did not matter, and that much of what mattered could not be said.

Related Characters: Kalu, Sanjay, Abdul Husain, Sunil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

In the wake of Kalu's murder and Sanjay's suicide, Abdul and Sunil become one of the few instances of friendship in Annawadi. Though they are not necessarily close, these two boys have seen far too much pain together to not be close in some ways. The deaths of Kalu and Sanjay are not often spoken of in Annawadi, too dark for the slum residents who would rather focus on their hope for their own futures. Seeing this, it is easy for Abdul and Sunil to believe that their deaths would not matter either. Given how Kalu and Sanjay were erased, the bond between Abdul and Sunil is a way to ensure that they do in fact matter and that they will not be forgotten. Though they do not speak about their late friends, this partnership is a way to honor their memory in Annawadi.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ ...she kept thinking she saw smoke coming out of Meena's mouth and nose-as if the girl had set herself on fire from the inside. No, that was impossible. Rat poison only. Her mind was looping. If she screamed for help, the whole slum would know that Meena had attempted suicide, which would ruin her reputation.

Related Characters: Manju Waghekar, Meena

Related Themes:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

When Manju finds out that Meena has eaten rat poison, she desperately searches for a way to help her friend that will not broadcast how unhappy her friend is with her life. Meena and Manju, two teenage girls in Annawadi, share everything because they have very few outlets for their emotional pain. Meena especially is tightly controlled and restrained by her family so that her reputation will be perfect for her arranged marriage. With no other way to assert her independence an agency, Meena is forced to literally take her life into her own hands. It is not a disregard for life that pushes Meena into this extreme decision, but a deep desire to live by her own terms.

With few options open given her family situation and the culture of Annawadi, the only decision Meena can really make about her own life is to commit suicide. Manju understands these feelings, but wants her friend to have a chance of rejoining society. The other women of Annawadi are also familiar with these feelings, but look on suicide as a coward's option. Manju's references to fire recalls Fatima's self-immolation and how the women of Annawadi both take Fatima as an example and gossip about her lack of strength. Manju must thus cover up her friend's hopes and betray Meena's ability to choose for herself by making sure that Meena's suicide attempt is quietly corrected.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ "The banks in America went in a loss, then the big people went in a loss, then the scrap market in the slum areas came down, too": This was how he explained the global economic crisis. A kilo of empty water bottles once worth twenty-five rupees was now worth ten, and a kilo of newspaper once worth five rupees was now worth two: This was how the global crisis was understood.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

The global recession of 2008, though started by banks in America, has immense consequences for the people in Annawadi. As India becomes ever more involved in the global markets that have allowed the country's GDP to rise, India is also more vulnerable to the changes in global prices. Boo sees this entanglement as intensely dangerous for India's lowest income population. Most of the Annawadians make their living through collecting trash and recyclables. When the recession causes prices for recyclables to fall, the Annawadians feel the effects harshly. Though the slumdwellers might not have lost as much money as "the big people," they feel their losses worse. In the local context of Annawadi, lower recyclable prices means the difference between eating that day or starving. With so little room for error already in this environment, the whims of the global market only serve to make this community more unstable.

Once my mother was beating me, and that thought came to me. I said, "If what is happening now, you beating me, is to keep happening for the rest of my life, it would be a bad life, but it would be a life, too.' And my mother was so shocked when I said that. She said, 'Don't confuse yourself by thinking about such terrible lives.' "
Sunil thought that he, too, had a life. A bad life, certainly—the kind that could be ended as Kalu's had been and then forgotten, because it made no difference to the people who lived in the overcity. But something he'd come to realize on the roof, leaning out, thinking about what would happen if he leaned too far, was that a boy's life could still matter to himself.

Related Characters: Abdul Husain, Sunil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Abdul and Sunil, teenage boys in Annawadi, live incredibly hard lives looking for trash and transporting recyclables to keep themselves and their families fed. Yet despite their trials, these boys still appreciate the miracle of life. Rather than rejecting life as a source of constant pain, Abdul goes so far as to say that a life of nothing but beatings would still be worth living. Sunil, considering this, decides not to commit suicide because his life matters to himself even if it does not matter to anyone else.

The boys stand in stark contrast to the myth that the poor in India do not care about their lives because circumstances are tough and they would rather be reborn into a better existence. Precisely because the boys have to fight so hard to live, they recognize the value of every human life. Boo supports the meaning in the boys' lives, showing how there is beauty here too even among the immense pain. The Annawadians matter, even if no one else chooses to see that, because they are still alive.

Chapter 14 Quotes

Impatient at the translation delays, the judge began telling the stenographer what to write. And so a slumdweller's nuanced replies to the prosecutor's questions became monosyllabic ones - the better to keep the case moving along.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

During the Husain's case, the judge ignores due process of the courts and the rights of the Annawadians to make their testimonies in favor of keeping the trial short. Though subjective judgement is always present in any legal case, it is clear in the Husain's struggle to be exonerated from a crime they didn't commit that the personal feelings, failings, and interpretation of the judge will be far more important than any evidence the Husains can provide that they did not beat or burn Fatima. This blatant display of corruption is another way that the legal and governmental systems in India keep the poor oppressed. As most of the Annawadians speak Hindi, rather than the more respected Marathi or the prestigious English that the court requires, the legal system shuts the poor out of the legal process by refusing to hold trials in the common language of the people.

By restating the Annawadians' replies in simple language, the judge effectively erases the complex people who have come to give testimony. No matter how well the Annawadians express themselves, their poverty makes the Annawadians invisible in the eyes of those who hold power in India. India's government can thus keep up the fiction that the poor are stupid and therefore deserve their terrible living conditions, rather than reckoning with the unfair systems that keep the poor from receiving true justice.

Chapter 16 Quotes

Asha had always prized her competitiveness, a quality that she'd failed to pass on to her children. Perhaps because they lacked it, she had valued it more in herself. But over time, the compulsion to win could become self-deceiving. Instead of admitting that she was making little progress, she had invented new definitions of success. She had felt herself moving ahead, just a little, every time other people failed.

Related Characters: Asha Waghekar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 223

Explanation and Analysis

Asha, who has striven for all of her adult life to become the slumlord of Annawadi, now sees how that was a false measure of power in her limited environment. While being slumlord addresses Asha's immediate concerns to be doing better than her neighbors, she was not actually doing well by objective standards in India. Asha could feel successful because other people were doing worse than she was, a distraction that allowed her to put the actual disparity of wealth between the rich and the poor out of her mind.

By competing with the other Annawadians, Asha felt very rich – with a tiled house, a television, and a daughter going to college. But as Asha becomes more familiar with the luxuries of the middle class, she sees that her life is still pitiful by the standards of wealth others have reached in India's middle class. Asha wants to win, a compulsion that keeps her from being truly happy or reaching real success. The job as the slumlord disappears, just as Annawadi itself will one day disappear. By constantly fighting to get ahead of her neighbors, Asha has made nothing that will last as her legacy.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ But the slumdwellers rarely got mad together-not even about the airport authority.
Instead, powerless individuals blamed other powerless individuals for what they lacked....
What was unfolding in Mumbai was unfolding elsewhere, too. In the age of global market capitalism, hopes and grievances were narrowly conceived, which blunted a sense of common predicament. Poor people didn't unite; they competed ferociously amongst themselves for gains as slender as they were provisional. And this undercity strife created only the faintest ripple in the fabric of the society at large. The gates of the rich, occasionally rattled, remained unbreached. The politicians held forth on the middle class. The poor took down one another, and the world's great, unequal cities soldiered on in relative peace.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

As Boo comes to the end of her account of Annawadian lives, describing how the slum will soon be destroyed by the airport officials that own the land, she diagnoses what she sees as the worst problem in the slum – the lack of community support against common struggles. Though Boo is the first to point out how unfairly the odds are stacked against the slumdwellers in Annawadi, she also sees how these people contribute to their own oppression by insisting on dealing with their problems as individuals. Boo sees strength when the residents join together, powerful enough to possibly change the corrupt governmental and economic systems that keep those who live in the slum as "undercitizens." Instead of building one another up so that the Annawadians can all fight the politicians and middle class for their fair due of human rights and respect in Mumbai, Boo suggests that the poor embody a spirit of competition that harms all of them.

Boo ties the competitive nature of the slumdwellers to global market capitalism, challenging the idea that a capitalist economy and a place in global markets truly mean progress for a county. While capitalism has enlivened hope for opportunity in India, Boo sees this as a false illusion that is not actually better than the communal grassroots efforts that the poor in India have always made to improve their lives. Focusing on individuals in a global world is not actually better than having a dynamic local community that helps its members when they are in trouble. The slumdwellers think only of their personal, immediate profit – as capitalism demands – and so miss out on long-term benefits. Boo's answer for corruption in India is not to open up the markets, but to go back to a more sharing society.

❝ A man, if sensible, didn't make bright distinctions between good and bad, truth and falsehood, justice and that other thing.
"For some time I tried to keep the ice inside me from melting," was how he put it. "But now I'm just becoming dirty water, like everyone else. I tell Allah I love Him immensely, immensely. But I tell Him I cannot be better, because of how the world is."

Related Characters: Abdul Husain

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

Abdul, the trash sorter falsely accused of pushing his neighbor Fatima to kill herself, desperately wants to prove that he is better than the criminals of Annawadi and the criminal that others think he is. He compares innocence to being ice in dirty water, as he sees ice as "better" than what it is made out of and hopes that he too can be more virtuous than his surroundings. Yet by the end of the book, Abdul has given to breaking the law when he has to in order to survive. He accepts trash that he knows is stolen, and turns a blind eye to the other corruption in the slum.

Boo seems to admire Abdul's impulse towards goodness, but recognizes that it is not practical or safe for Abdul to be "good" because of how his "world is." Just living in Annawadi takes immense strength of character, without the added pressure of worrying if an action is moral or not. Abdul makes the choices he must to keep himself and his family

alive. Though Boo sees that this does not make Abdul "good" according to his own standards, he is nonetheless a hero of the book.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: BETWEEN ROSES

July 17, 2008 – Mumbai. At midnight, the Mumbai police are looking for Abdul, a teenage recyclables sorter who lives in a Mumbai slum. Abdul's father, Karam, has decided that he will offer himself to the police when they come to the house so that Abdul can run. The only place Abdul can think of to hide is in his shed full of garbage waiting to be sold. He tries to get there without any of his neighbors seeing, as old Hindu-Muslim resentments and economic envy for Abdul's relatively lucrative job means that Abdul's mostly Hindu neighbors do not like him.

The book begins with Abdul assumed guilty – a state which will follow him through most of the events. It is already clear that Abdul can depend on very few people in his life, and that the neighborhood of Annawadi is not a very supportive environment. Though the new image of India tries to pretend that cosmopolitan tolerance overcomes all, Abdul faces discrimination based on his religion (an old issue) and his money (a new issue after India's turn to capitalism).

Abdul makes it to his trash shed and hides among the garbage. He has made a life out of sorting recyclables and staying out of trouble, teaching him to go unnoticed at all costs in the slum of Annawadi. As migrants from rural India continue to come to Mumbai, this slum has become a lucrative crossroads for trash, but is also a tricky place where old beliefs come into conflict with new ideas. As a Muslim, Abdul tries to avoid his neighbor's arguments about castes and sub-castes that determined life in India for so long.

Abdul is somewhat of an outsider in Annawadi, though he has lived there his whole life. While Annawadi offers business opportunities in the New India, the old ways have not entirely disappeared. Though caste is not supposed to matter now that India's economy is a free market where anyone can advance, there are still restrictions on what people can and cannot do.

Annawadi squats on land own by the Airport Authority of India and is surrounded by five huge luxury hotels that serve the rich people who fly in and out of Mumbai. India's rapidly growing economy has led to huge construction projects in Mumbai and offered a plethora of trash for the city's scavengers to try and recycle to eke out a living. Abdul is not a scavenger, but a step above. He acts as a trader who buys the best goods from poor scavengers then makes a profit at recycling plants. He excels at sorting various trash into the specific categories that the recycling plants accept. With only a few years of school under his belt, Abdul expects to do this for the rest of his life.

Annawadi is not technically supposed to exist, as the Airport Authority never gave permission for these people to live there. Yet the neighborhood is a microcosm for the state of India as a whole – vast increases in wealth for a small minority while the majority continue to live hard, invisible lives. Abdul's job sorting recyclables points to the way that India's citizens are also sorted into groups. No matter how hard Abdul works, he will likely never be welcome in the luxury hotels he sees next door.

On this night, Abdul has been accused of setting his neighbor, a crippled woman snidely called One Leg, on fire. Abdul can smell "One Leg" burning from inside the shed. He climbs up the trash pile as quietly as he can. Walls are thin in Annawadi and Abdul does not want to wake anyone with rattling trash. Abdul lays on a pile of cardboard and thinks about One Leg, Abdul's neighbor for eight years who he does not like.

Boo emphasizes how small the neighborhood of Annawadi is, as Abdul cannot get away from his neighbors or have any privacy. Tensions are also clearly high on this night, though Boo does not yet reveal whether Abdul is responsible for his neighbor's burns or not. Violence of this nature seems to be a common occurrence, though it seems to be a first for Abdul to be involved in it.

Abdul's mother, Zehrunisa, also disapproves of One Leg because she wears perfume and lipstick. Abdul silently thinks that his mother does not always act properly either – Zehrunisa curses when she haggles for recyclables. Karam and Zehrunisa have nine children, but Karam is too sick to work. Thus, Zehrunisa must take on the unladylike job of providing for her family. Now that Abdul is old enough, he does much of the trading that has made the Husain family successful (by Annawadian standards). They make enough money to have a real **brick wall** between their home and One Leg's shack.

Zehrunisa judges One Leg harshly for going against the traditional rules of behavior for proper women in India, though she herself has stepped out of the passive role usually reserved for wives by taking over the family business. Both of these women show how India is changing to allow more freedom from previous restrictions, but also the backlash of anger that follows. For now, Zehrunisa seems to be rewarded for her new behavior with the brick wall that symbolizes ultimate prosperity in the otherwise temporary housing situations of Annawadi.

One Leg's real name is Sita. She has fair skin that should have made her quite a catch but her twisted leg put off all offers of marriage but one. Her family was happy to get rid of her, even though Sita's husband is Muslim. Her husband renames her Fatima and the two have three daughters together. Fatima does not seem to grieve when her youngest daughter drowns in a bucket, which sets off gossip about her. Fatima does not seem to care about that either.

Boo outlines the incredibly restricted state for most women in India, where they are seen as good for nothing except marriage. Fatima, as she is now called, has very little to herself – even her name is under the jurisdiction of her husband. Her physical appearance trumps any other good qualities she might have in the eyes of her neighbors, leading Fatima to lash out against others in return.

Abdul's mind wanders to the current state of "wanting" in Annawadi now that people believe that they can better their lives immediately without waiting to be reincarnated into a better status. Abdul's brother, Mirchi, is one of these people. Mirchi dreams of working at a luxury hotel as a waiter. Other people in Annawadi dream of medical miracles or escaping their families or getting enough to eat – even going to college. But One Leg is the craziest of these dreamers in Abdul's mind, as she wants to be respected instead of seen as a cripple.

India's acceptance of a capitalist economy has influenced public attitude to think that their futures are under their own control. The supposed wealth of opportunity leads the residents of Annawadi to dream big, a choice which Abdul sees as foolish and impractical. Yet in global terms, the dreams of the Annawadians are fairly normal parts of life – showing the huge handicap that the Annawadians have from birth.

The police arrive in Annawadi, striking fear into the hearts of all the residents. They are strangely polite to Abdul's family, simply relaying that Karam, Abdul, and Abdul's sister Kehkashan have been charged with beating One Leg and setting her on fire. Abdul overhears the charges from his hiding place, knowing that their innocence doesn't matter because the poor are always seen as guilty in Mumbai. The police officers lead Karam away as Zehrunisa sobs.

The police are not seen as protectors, but as aggressors in Annawadi. Their normal behavior is so bad that common courtesy is seen as strange. The poor are hated in Mumbai, with no money or influence to earn them justice in a system that depends on bribes to buy innocence.

Abdul weighs his options, wondering if the police will return to look for him tonight. The other boys in the slum are more daring, raised on Bollywood movies that praise feats of bravery and strength. But Abdul prefers to be cautious, even if the other boys laugh at his fearfulness. Abdul knows how quickly fortunes change in Annawadi and thinks it pays off to be alert. Yet even Abdul had not foreseen that One Leg would burn herself.

Bollywood movies also encourage the residents of Annawadi to dream too big. Abdul prioritizes practical action, seeing that the opportunities that others expect in the new India do not come without a cost. Yet even playing it safe is not enough to truly be successful for people who are born poor, as Abdul's accusation in One Leg's accident attests.

Hours later, a woman named Cynthia, a friend to One Leg and rival to the Husain family in the garbage business, tries to convince people to help her look for Abdul and deliver him to the police. No one takes her up on it, and Abdul gets a few hours of sleep. He wakes again at dawn, cursing himself for not escaping Annawadi under the cover of night, and he decides to find his mother to ask her what to do. Zehrunisa tells Abdul to turn himself in at the Sahar Police Station. He runs there, hoping to save his father from a beating and proclaim his innocence. Abdul trusts that justice will prevail as he enters the station.

There are few friendships in Annawadi, such as that between Cynthia and One Leg, but Boo points out that most people are primarily concerned with looking out for themselves as no one cares enough even to look for Abdul. Abdul, fundamentally honest, decides to turn himself in because he still thinks that justice means something.

CHAPTER 1: ANNAWADI

This section opens with a quote from Karam, explaining how the poor have wild, futile dreams of their children becoming rich. The chapter then starts, moving back in time to January 2008, before Fatima burned herself and Abdul turned himself in. Zehrunisa wakes Abdul, telling him to get to work. Obediently, Abdul gets up and enjoys the rare peaceful moments of dawn in the Annawadi slum. He silently begins to sort trash, preferring to keep as much distance between himself and his neighbors as possible.

Karam again emphasizes the idea that everyone expects better lives now that India's economy has improved. These dreams are lived out day by day in the slum as Abdul scrambles to provide for his family by working long hours. Though Abdul himself entertains no illusions of becoming rich, even just surviving requires Abdul to stay apart from others in the slum so he can focus on his own prosperity.

Annawadi was built in 1991 by migrants from Tamil, a state in Southern India, who came to work on the airport and never left. Now 17 years later, the slum is home to people who have been "freed" from poverty by the new economic liberalization in India. However, many of the residents still have temporary jobs. Yet they are at least proud that they do not need to catch rats and frogs to eat each day. For a garbage trader like Abdul, times are particularly good due to the high price of scrap metal while China prepares for the Beijing Olympics.

Life in India is improving from the earlier times of "rats and frogs," but the statistics and reports given out by the Indian government do not reflect that actual conditions of the country. Annawadi might not be a neighborhood in poverty, but it is still a place where people struggle daily to survive in a precarious environment. Annawadi's status as a slum depends on the airport's lax control of its land and the ever changing whims of the global recyclables market.

Abdul sorts trash, looking out for stray goats who might try to steal his bottles. In the afternoon, Mirchi gets home from school and waits for his friend Rahul to tell him about his day working for the Intercontinental Hotel. Rahul appears wearing fine new cargo shorts and a black hat, crowing the details of his night rubbing elbows with the rich and famous – though Rahul had been threatened harshly never to make eye contact with the people he was serving.

Mirchi and Rahul are social climbers in Annawadi, but Boo subtly shows how restrictive Indian society still is by exploring the boys' limited dreams. Rahul and Mirchi aspire to be near the rich and famous as servers, accepting that they shouldn't be allowed even to look at the wealthy – much less dream of being invited themselves. There is still a deep divide between rich and poor in India even as a capitalist systems offers more social mobility.

Abdul avoids the other boys, but he too listens in to Rahul's tales of the foreign women at the party and their wild antics. Abdul fondly remembers Rahul's story about a New Year's Eve Party during which a rich man had gotten drunk and stolen all the rolls from the buffet. The other boys continue to ask Rahul about this most recent party, but Rahul becomes distracted, looking for recyclables he can sell.

The rich man who steals the rolls is another reminder that India now allows for people to climb their way out of poverty. Yet a lifetime of being poor creates habits – such as food hoarding – that cannot be easily forgotten. Rahul displays his own childhood growing up poor by constantly looking for profit even when he should be relaxing with friends.

Rahul gets his entrepreneur's spirit from his mother, Asha. Asha works for the political party Shiv Sena, a Hindu party that works to purge Mumbai of Muslims and new migrants from India's poorer north. Even though the Husains are both northern and Muslim, Rahul and Mirchi have a fast friendship. Abdul envies this closeness, as Abdul has only one casual friend, a thief named Kalu. Abdul's greatest bond is with his youngest brother, Lallu. Abdul cries every time he sees new rat bites on his two-year-old brother's cheeks.

Rahul and Mirchi represent the changing face of Indian society, a world that aspires to be tolerant and inclusive rather than divided based on old hatreds. While Mirchi and Rahul are successful at overcoming their differences, Abdul still questions whether these bonds are practical in the cut-throat world of Annawadi. Despite wanting friendship, Abdul focuses on doing what little he can to protect his family. The injuries of his baby brother Lallu is a reminder that there is little Abdul can do to actually erase the harshness of their world.

Zehrunisa comes out of the hut and scolds Mirchi for talking instead of studying. Education is important to the Husains, especially because they must pay for Mirchi's schooling now that he is past 8th grade. Abdul tries not to be jealous of his brother, whose schooling and charm might be enough to get him a job away from garbage despite the city-wide discrimination against Muslims.

Education is one of the few ways that the poor in India can truly expect to improve their lives. However, the advanced schooling necessary for high paying jobs is reserved for those who already have money, as the free public school system only goes up through middle school and any further education must be paid for out of pocket. This is another way that India's administration continues to oppress the poor.

As dusk falls, Rahul struggles to get a kite out a tree so that he can resell it for a few rupees. The leaves of the tree are covered in soot and grit from the nearby concrete plant, a leading cause of asthma and tuberculosis in Annawadi. Abdul happily finishes sorting his trash, then loads a small jalopy with the bags and heads out to the recycling plant. Traffic is as jammed as ever, but Abdul finally makes it to the recycling plant in a slum called Saki Naka.

Health concerns also run rampant in Annawadi, as the industrialization that has created so many jobs and opportunities in India also leads to increased urban pollution. While the rich can pay to live far from the sources of pollution, the poor are left to live in the consequences of India's rapid rise to industrial power.

Abdul thinks about the men who work at the recycling plants, remembering a young boy whose hand was cut off by a plastic shredder. The boy didn't scream, just assured the owner of the plant that he would not report anything. Abdul thinks that India still maintains a strict class system, no matter what Mirchi thinks about progress. Abdul is just happy to keep working with garbage, as this job (though stigmatized) is helping him earn enough money for his family to put a deposit on a piece of land in Vasai, a quiet community outside the city.

Though it is workers like the young boy who have made India's prosperity possible, Abdul's story illustrates how the rich still hold all the power in Indian society and further suggests that Abdul sees this progress as dangerous to the poor. Mirchi's friendship with Rahul points to a better future, but Abdul more realistically sees how far Indian culture must go before the city is truly fair. His own smaller dream involves leaving the city and returning to the traditional values that Abdul sees as safer.

CHAPTER 2: ASHA

Asha Waghekar, Rahul's mother, is very happy this winter because the current slumlord of Annawadi (the man who rigs political elections in the slum and is paid by Shiv Sena to push their agenda) seems to have turned away from corruption now that he has found religion. As Robert Pires loses power, Asha thinks she can fill that void. She knows that it is rare for a woman to hold this position, especially as Asha's husband is a nothing-special drunkard, but Asha thinks she is strong enough to do it.

Asha is perhaps the most ambitious woman in the Annawadi slum, and fully embraces the corrupt ways of the Mumbai political system in order to achieve her goals. Asha recognizes that women in India usually receive power when they are attached to powerful husbands, but she is determined to make her own way in the world.

Robert, the current slumlord, is famous mostly for bringing Maharashtrians (those from the Indian state of which Mumbai is the capital) to Annawadi. Yet now, northern immigrants outnumber the Maharashtrians, and the Shiv Sena Corporator, Subhash Sawant, is angry enough with Robert's apathy about this that he is looking for a new slumlord. Asha has been working hard for years attracting women to the Shiv Sena cause and her loyalty is starting to catch Subhash's attention.

With the increasing immigrant populations in Mumbai, looking for new jobs away from rural poverty, Shiv Sena taps into the fear of the Maharashtrians that the immigrant communities will take over their homes and jobs. Asha does not care if the immigrants suffer as long as championing Shiv Sena gives her an edge in the competitive world of Mumbai slums.

Asha is used to fending off unwanted male attention, having honed a sharp tongue in her childhood village, but she now also has the skills of discretion and subtlety. Asha is a keen observer of people. She has seen how Mumbai now buzzes with hope, but also envy. Without the old communities of caste, ethnicity, and religion, people need someone to mediate disputes and help them solve their problems. Asha feels no guilt in charging people for this service and using the corruption of the city to her advantage.

Like Abdul, Asha sees that reticence can be useful in this tricky urban environment, but she also sees the places where speaking out can be advantageous. By tapping into the new struggles of all Indians to be more successful than their neighbors, Asha hopes to replace the old communities of support with a privatized business for dealing with the conflict inherent to the close proximity of so many different people.

By day, Asha teaches kindergarten. When she arrives home on this day in January, she sees the usual line of people waiting to tell her their problems. She makes them wait while she changes into an old housedress, giving a potent message that she doesn't care about impressing these people. Asha's daughter Manju brings tea and the supplicants come in. Women weep about lost jobs or being forced into sex work. Asha herself has little qualms about using whatever one can to get ahead, with few concerns beyond what will make her the most money.

Asha has no problem manipulating people to get what she wants, as seen in the way she curates her image before her supplicants. Asha's moral compass has little room for right and wrong, as Boo uses this character to display how completely the pursuit of money and status has taken over the lives of some Indian citizens who chase "modern" lives. Boo subtly suggests that Asha also sells her body, with none of the worries about impropriety that follow the more traditional Indian women.

The next visitor for Asha is Mr. Raja Kamble, an old friend of Asha's who is now very ill due to his weak heart. His health has gotten so bad that he was laid off from his job with the sanitation department, a harsh blow because Mr. Kamble was one of the few Annawadians with a permanent position. Mr. Kamble now hopes to raise money for the surgery he needs to fix his heart valve. Asha could help him get a loan for a "small business" from the government, falsifying the records necessary to prove that this small business is employing slum residents. Yet Asha is offended by the small cut of the loan that Mr. Kamble offers her and she tells him to go and pray at the temple.

Permanent jobs, with a steady income, are such a rarity in Annawadi that even Kamble's deplorable job cleaning toilets was a source of envy. While Kamble might have been resigned to die of his illness in an earlier India, he now pins his hopes on the marvels of modern Indian medicine to change his fate. Yet with the leaps in technology made possible by India's rapidly developing economy also come the rise of capitalist thought. Asha will only help her so-called "friend" if she can see the profit for herself.

Manju, silently kneading bread in the corner of the hut, angrily sighs. She knows that her mother's advice to go to the temple really means that Asha won't help unless she is given more money. Asha knows her daughter disapproves of her money gouging system, but she doesn't much care what Manju thinks as long as Manju stays hard-working at home and studies well at school. Manju is one of the only Annawadians who is going to college. Asha is proud of her daughter, but she resents the opportunities her daughter has that she herself was never given.

Manju remains true to the old ideas of virtue, though she is of the younger "modern" generation. Boo suggests that Manju's focus on honest living is partly a testament to Manju's moral character, but also a sign that Manju has not had to endure the hardship that Asha lived through. Asha's painful childhood has made her ruthless, something that the more privileged Manju cannot understand.

Asha looks down on others in the slum, such as the Husain family, who work in garbage to get rich. She prefers to use the government programs, pretending to start women-run businesses and a female self-help group to get government stipends without doing any of the work. Asha knows that she is a pawn in the government scheme to convince the world that poverty in India is ending, and Asha doesn't mind as long as she gets her check.

Asha again shows that she would rather engage in a corrupt system than work hard at an honest job such as the Husains (mostly legal) trash business. This type of competition runs rampant in Annawadi, as everyone tries to use others for their own gain. Asha recognizes that she herself is used by those higher in the Indian government, but allows this to happen so that her own image is boosted.

After the supplicants leave, Asha turns on the TV – a huge luxury in Annawadi. The news tells of a child who experienced a medical miracle that fixed her birth defect. Asha disdains the other slum residents like Mr. Kamble for believing in life-changing miracles that happen overnight. Asha's own miracle goals are long term. She wants to become the new Corporator of Annawadi's ward, a goal made possible by the new laws mandating female candidates for certain elections.

Though Asha may not respect Abdul, she is actually more similar to him than she realizes. Both characters see themselves as more realistic about the true opportunities of modern India than those who believe that the advances India has recently made now mean that anything is possible. Asha may be ambitious, but she also sets practical boundaries for her dreams.

Manju finishes cooking and Rahul comes home from chatting in the street. Asha scolds Rahul for wearing his pants low in the American style, then laughs at the tasteless meal Manju has made. Manju seems to be protesting Asha's harsh treatment of Mr. Kamble, but she hopes her daughter will realize the importance of this penny pinching when Asha pays for Manju's college classes.

Rahul, a modern Indian boy, shows the influence of Western ways of thought in developing India. Meanwhile, Manju, the dutiful daughter of a Hindu family, has very little way of expressing herself other than refusing to spice her family's food. Still, the college education Asha is paying for gives Manju more freedom than most Indian girls of her economic status.

CHAPTER 3: SUNIL

By February 2008, Abdul seems more anxious than ever after news of violence against northern migrants (like him and his family) increases. These riots are specifically orchestrated by politicians from parties like Shiv Sena. Karam and Zehrunisa tell their children that this will all pass and India will be stronger than ever, but Abdul is scared enough that he does not work for a week.

Though Shiv Sena would like the riots to look like spontaneous reactions to the presence of migrants who might threaten the security of natural-born Mumbai residents, they have actually forced the riots to happen. Almost every community activity, like a riot, is now privately controlled by one organization or another. Yet Karam and Zehrunisa still trust in the image of a unified India that will embrace diversity.

Sunil, a 12-year-old scavenger, is scared to see Abdul so changed. Sunil learned to read people while living at Sister Paulette's orphanage and he enjoys finding the secret motives behind people's actions. He wasn't even angry when Sister Paulette told him to leave the orphanage because he knew that having boys older than eleven there would give the orphanage a bad image to foreign sponsors. Sunil and his younger sister Sunita now live in a cramped and filthy hut in Annawadi with their alcoholic father.

Sunil, though young, already understands how life in Mumbai operates. His desire to find people's secret motives reflects Boo's sense that everyone in Annawadi is always looking out for their own gain even when they seem to be helping others. With increased global attention, much of Indian life is now catered to give the best impression to wealthy foreigners, no matter how much it might hurt Indian citizens like Sunil.

When Sunil was younger, he could beg for charity meals at dinner time, but he is now too old to take advantage of this food source. Sunil would rather not beg anyway, but he hates to think that the lack of food is stunting his growth. Sunita is now taller than him, a fact which bothers him. But scavenging is hard, dirty work that comes with the constant risk of disease. It is often all Sunil can do to keep himself from being the next scavenger to die, much less get enough trash to feed himself properly. The other garbage workers, like Abdul, have a running bet on who will be the next scavenger dead.

Sunil's desire to grow physically symbolically represents the common desire of all Annawadians to "grow" out of their conditions of poverty. While working hard in a scavenging job may give Sunil some income, it is not enough to offset the potential dangers that come from this job. Likewise, most of the sources of income in the slum come with costs far higher than their benefits, preventing most Annawadians from ever growing strong.

One day in February, Sunil walks down Airport Lane using his signature rich boy walk to avoid inviting contempt from foreigners. He passes a huge **concrete wall** pasted with ads for floor tiles that promise to be "beautiful forever." This wall hides the Annawadi sprawl from the airport clientele. Sunil looks for trash on Airport Lane, trying to avoid women from the Matang caste who still believe that waste picking is their livelihood exclusively. Even worse, the airport itself now has a professional waste company that removes all the valuable recycling from the premises. Municipal garbage workers have also multiplied, now that Mumbai wants to change its reputation as a dirty city.

The appearance of wealth is important both to Indian citizens personally – as Sunil's swagger suggests – and to India as a country. The "beautiful forever" wall projects the idea of impossible wealth while hiding the slum from the eyes of foreigners flying into Mumbai. This way, wealthy people cannot judge the continued poverty when India would like to seem prosperous in the modern age. Sunil is caught between the old ways, which say that trash picking belongs to a certain caste, and the new ways that demand that all industries be privatized for maximum profits.

Sunil decides that he should explore new territory if he wants to make more than his usual 33 cents a day. He watches people who throw away trash, realizing that the airport taxi drivers sometimes throw their trash into the Mithi river on the other side of the airport. The wind and current tends to push the trash onto a narrow ledge where Sunil can balance and collect bags of trash where others are too scared to go. Sunil knows the risks of falling into the fast-moving Mithi, but he likes the idea that people think he is daring for going here.

Sunil, making just 33 cents a day, is still considered to be one of the Indians living above the poverty line. To truly improve his lot in life, Sunil has to risk death on the small ledge above the Mithi river. Boo uses this one example to show that situations like this are common across Mumbai, with young boys desperate to be successful willing to risk everything to achieve their dreams of wealth and happiness. Sunil takes this one step farther by imagining that others may admire his daring –a sign of how much Sunil wants to be noticed in a society that would rather pretend trash pickers like him do not exist.

By March, the riots are over, but their effect scared many north Indians away from Mumbai. Others were not able to work during the riots, like the Husain family's tenants. Zehrunisa has no sympathy for this family, exaggerating her own family's poverty. The migrant family leaves, and Abdul knows that new immigrants will come to take their place after this next monsoon season.

In her own way, Zehrunisa can be as ruthless as Asha. Though she herself was afraid during the riots due to her northern heritage, Zehrunisa has little trouble evicting tenants that cannot pay when doing so is better for the Husain's finances.

The airport has been privatized in recent years, now belonging to a management conglomerate called GVK that wants to raze Annawadi and take back the airport land. GVK highlights that developing the land could be both potentially lucrative and helpful to the sense of national pride; the Indian government is trying to show that Mumbai is a high-functioning, well-managed city that does not have a slum problem.

As more industries in India become privatized, Boo suggests that common citizens have less control over their lives as these companies look only at profit. Though thousands of people make their livelihood in these slums, conglomerates like GVK see only the money that this land represents. Meanwhile the Indian government continues to look at global reputation rather than acting in the interest of those who live in the slums.

Annawadians know that the city hates their slum, but they are fiercely loyal to it. To the residents, Annawadi has three distinct sections: the Tamil Sai Nagar which is richer and has the public toilet, the poorer section built by Dalits (the "untouchable" lowest class of the old caste system), and the poorest section in which the scavengers do not even have huts so they sleep on their trash heaps. In this poorest section, thieves abound. They prey on the rich clientele of the airport and often get high on Eraz-ex, a type of white-out, to distract from their hunger.

Though the slum may seem like one poor mess to the wealthier citizens of Mumbai, the residents understand the complex hierarchy that governs this competitive world. Officially, caste no longer matters, but it still plays a role in who lives in which section of Annawadi and who can enjoy the small health benefits of public toilets instead of finding places to relieve themselves on the street. Meanwhile, even a hut can be a symbol of luxury to the lowliest who have only trash. This hierarchy allows slum residents who have nothing by global standards to feel that they are doing well simply because they have a roof.

Abdul warns Sunil not to get involved with Eraz-ex, feeling somewhat protective of the younger scavenger, but Sunil thinks the guys who get high are more fun than boring Abdul. The thieves even play video games at Annawadi's first entertainment center. One of these thieves is a boy named Kalu, who uses Eraz-ex to give him the strength to scale barbed wire fences and steal aluminum sheets from the airport recycling bins. Sunil loves watching Kalu reenact Bollywood movies or imitate other people from Annawadi.

Abdul shows care by looking out for Sunil, but Sunil does not seem to return this favor. To Sunil, friendships should be reserved for people like Kalu who can earn Sunil more prestige among the other boys of Annawadi. Kalu's terrible life as a thief is hidden with his escape through Eraz-ex and Bollywood. Though Kalu faces injury every day, he is able to smile and laugh due to these escapes that erase his daily pain.

One night, Sunil overhears Kalu tell Abdul about a thieving operation that went wrong. Kalu found some iron bars at an industrial estate by the airport but was chased off by a security guard. Sunil offers to wake Kalu at 3 am so Kalu can go back and get the iron bars. Sunil tracks time by the moon, then wakes Kalu. Kalu explains that his usual partner is now too stoned and asks Sunil to come with him.

Though getting high helps make a harsh life in Annawadi bearable, it can also prevent the users from opportunities to make their way above this slum life. With Eraz-ex stealing their motivation, the thieves have little chance of ever being more than thieves. Yet for Sunil thievery is an envious step up from trash picking. Despite the dangers of getting caught, being involved in this theft is a huge stroke of luck for Sunil.

Kalu tells Sunil to bring his bedsheets and the two boys sprint down Airport Lane. Kalu leads Sunil past the reek of the Mithi river, then the two boys wade across. At the industrial estate, Sunil is spooked by the shadows of security guards, but Kalu assures Sunil that he has hidden the iron bars where no one will see them. Kalu is right, and the boys fill the bed sheets with three irons each. Fifteen minutes and one difficult swim later, they make it back to Annawadi. Abdul buys the irons and Sunil gets a third of the profit from Kalu.

In Annawadi, high risk can mean high reward. Though Sunil sees how reckless Kalu is being, they are not immediately punished for their illegal actions. In the corruption of Indian government, crime does pay at times. Abdul may have little respect for thieves, but even he still buys stolen goods that will make his family a profit.

With the first disposable income of his life, Sunil goes to see a movie. It's an American film about a man who survives a plague in New York City. Sunil is traumatized when the man kills the dog that has been his only friend throughout the movie—he is unable to figure out why the man would do that. A few weeks later, Kalu asks Sunil to help him with another theft. Sunil refuses, unable to explain even to himself why he is turning down this lucrative offer. He knows it has something to do with the dog's death and his fear of the police, but also his lack of respect for thieves.

Sunil sees himself as the dog, a companion easily disposed of when it is no longer useful. Though Sunil appreciates the money, he ultimately wants to have respect for himself. Clinging to morality instead of profit, Sunil decides to remain a poor scavenger rather than sell his sense of right and wrong to be a rich thief. Though Boo admires this action, it is unclear whether it was the right choice for Sunil, as he will certainly have to work harder just to eat by committing to this moral choice.

CHAPTER 4: MANJU

Manju struggles to understand *Mrs. Dalloway*, the latest novel for her college English course. She blames it on the weather, hoping she hasn't caught malaria or dengue fever again. Her mother, Asha, is also looking stressed these days, as Corporator Subhash Sawant has been accused of electoral fraud for impersonating a low-caste person to win the latest election. He is now touring the slums of his ward, hoping that public approval will somehow erase his legal fraud. It's Annawadi's turn next and Asha has been ordered to assemble the residents to pray for the case to be dismissed.

Mrs. Dalloway, a novel focused on the existential crisis of high-society ladies and gentlemen in England, thematically echoes Manju's own questions of why she is alive even if the details are completely foreign to this poor Hindu girl. For Manju, a health crisis such as malaria or dengue fever is an expected annoyance and the fraud of a respected politician is a chance for her family to get ahead. Subhash's low-caste trick is another way that systems set up to relieve historical oppression in India rarely assist the people who are actually suffering.


Asha painstakingly cajoles the Annawadian parents to come to the meeting and leave their children, who are supposed to be studying for school exams, for the night. Subhash himself appears at sundown and approves of the food and decorations that Asha has planned for the victory rally. Subhash leaves, telling Asha that he will return after dinner to speak to the Annawadians at the small temple in Annawadi. At 8 pm, Asha rings the temple bell and a crowd of genuinely low-caste people assemble. Most of the Annawadians know that Subhash has lied about his caste, but they respect him anyway because Subhash takes the time to personally come to Annawadi and fund public improvements for the slum.

Though Subhash's meeting disrupts the Annawadians' already busy and difficult lives – even getting in the way of the education that might offer a way out of poverty for some – the Annawadians do not seem to resent this intrusion. The Annawadians place little importance on whether a politician is honest, knowing that lies and bribes are the way of that system, and prefer to show loyalty to the people who actually improve conditions in Annawadi. Though Subhash takes advantage of their low-caste votes, they do not mind as long as Annawadi gets something out of the deal as well.

The Annawadians wait in the temple for an hour, giving up precious time they could be using to clean or wait in line for water. At 11 pm, Subhash still hasn't arrived. Asha tells Manju to give the people the food they had prepared. Most Annawadians eat and go home. Asha is terrified that Subhash will arrive to find an empty temple and question Asha's influence in Annawadi.

Though Subhash claims to care for the people of Annawadi, he does not respect their time or the effort that Asha has gone to on his behalf. For the rich in India, the concerns of the poor do not matter, though the future of people like Asha is completely dependent on their approval.

While Asha stews about the lack of a crowd, a young eunuch named Suraj arrives outside the temple and starts to dance. Manju is fascinated by the sight of this sexually ambiguous person, though popular superstition says that eunuchs bring horrible luck. Usually eunuchs must be paid to leave, but this eunuch seems to dance for the sheer joy of it. A crowd forms to watch the dancing, then Suraj invites them to ask him questions so the goddess inside him can give them advice. The Annawadians ask about the future of their slum, not even caring that Suraj only answers in gibberish.

Another way that India seems to be opening up is in acceptance of sexual diversity. While eunuchs who blur the line between man and woman were previously abhorred in India, Manju now finds Suraj beautiful and Suraj is allowed to dance freely in Annawadi. The Annawadians accept Suraj because he gives them a space to believe that their fear of Annawadi's erasure might not come true – though Suraj's gibberish answers suggest that this is a false hope.


In the Husain house, Mirchi is annoyed at all the noise the crowd is making in the street as he tries to study for his ninth-grade exams. A 21-year-old named Prakash is also disturbed by this ruckus on the eve of his college graduation exams. But Asha is overjoyed at the noise when Subhash finally calls to say he won't be coming and he thinks that the din is all in praise of him.

The entire slum is seemingly set up to make sure that boys like Mirchi cannot escape the poverty of their birth. Even for an intelligent, hard-working man like Prakash, the ability to get an education can be disrupted by random events. This arbitrariness hurts them, but helps Asha through sheer luck – another reminder that no one in Annawadi can control their fate.

Manju spends most of her time doing things for others, such as running a small public school in the afternoons and cooking and cleaning for her family. She specifically cultivates gentle behavior, hoping to distance herself from her mother. The afternoon after Subhash's failed rally, she complains to Rahul about all the work she has to do, but Rahul is too distracted by his own worries about work. He is trying to cultivate the perfect demeanor for a waiter at a high-class hotel, but he embarrassed himself at the last party he worked by dancing to the music.

In a slum steeped in corruption, even an insistence on virtue can be an act of defiance for Manju. Her "perfect" behavior and desire to help others is an ironic expression of teenage rebellion in the strange moral system of Annawadi. Just as Manju hides behind a veneer of gentility, Rahul as well must erase his true personality in order to be accepted by higher Indian society.

Manju leaves her brother to watch TV and turns to her English literature reading. The book is *The Way of the World*, but Manju is not expected to read the original text—she is only supposed to memorize the approved summary and rewrite that summary on the test. Usually Manju is good at "by-hearting" these books, but *The Way of the World* is proving tricky. She can't make sense of what the phrase "Love is subordinated" is supposed to mean.

Manju's "education" is the envy of every one in Annawadi, but it is not actually set up to help Manju think for herself or make her own choices. Her only option for success is to learn "by heart" the answers that other people want her to give. Though Manju has trouble with the English vocabulary, she would certainly recognize the sentiment that passions and love must be ignored for personal gain expressed in the idea that love is subordinated.

Manju wishes she had an English-Marathi dictionary. She doesn't harbor the same resentment of this colonial language that her mother does. To Manju, learning English is just another sign that India is becoming more global. Her skills in this language are rather poor, but in Annawadi they are second only to the top student Prakash. Manju thinks about asking Prakash what "subordinated" means, but she knows that she cannot be seen talking to a young man unchaperoned.

Manju welcomes the opportunities that learning English gives her, choosing to see the positives of this language rather than dwell on the harm that the colonial years did to India. Still, a past full of restrictions and the "subordinated" place of women in Indian society keep Manju from achieving her full potential at school and in life.

Manju whispers the plot summary of *The Way of the World* while she cleans the family hut. She can't identify with the heroine of this novel, who complains about having to arrange her own marriage. Manju lives in fear of being married to a village boy who will not let her leave the house. Manju thinks about one of the themes of *The Way of the World*: money is more important than love. That is obviously her mother's opinion, but Manju herself believes that virtue is the most important. This desire to be good comes partly from fear—Manju's mother hit her with an axe the one and only time Manju stole—and partly from rebellion against her mother's corruption.

For Manju, simple choices like the ability to choose one's own life partner are seen as huge luxuries. Manju's entire life is controlled by her mother, a fact which Manju submits to in order to be a good daughter, but which Manju also resents when she has a rare free moment to think about it. Ironically, being a good person by conventional western standards is the best way for Manju to get back at her mother and Asha's focus on success in a corrupt world.

Years ago, Asha got a government grant to open a school in Annawadi and she uses this endeavor to prove that she is a good person. But Manju actually runs the school while her mother focuses on Shiv Sena political commitments. Asha wishes Manju would only run school when the supervisors came to check, but Manju wants to give the other slum children a real education and a fighting chance of getting out of poverty. Her school is much better than the public schools, which let the children play all day.

Manju truly cares about the other children in Annawadi, hoping to give them the same educational opportunities that she has had. Education in India is improving with the help of government grants, but this system is still far from perfect. Manju, at 17, runs a better school than the public schools who are nothing more than glorified baby-sitting. To truly learn anything, Boo points out that Indian students must take matters into their own hands.

The students come rushing into Manju's hut in a frenzy because one of the young boys has been hit by a taxi. Manju dumps turmeric on the open wound on the boy's head. The boy's mother comes in and begins to beat the boy for going into the street and putting himself in danger. Manju desperately tries to get the woman to stop, or at least avoid the boy's already injured head. She knows that the violence comes from the parents' fear that their children are slipping away in the new Mumbai.

Manju's quick reaction to this crisis are another sign that injuries and violence are a common occurrence in Annawadi. Manju rationalizes the mother's horrific behavior by recognizing that many parents in India are simply afraid of losing traditional family values in the modern, capitalist India, but Boo maintains the horror of this awful beating throughout the scene. Boo sees this violence as another way that Indians in poverty are sabotaging their own futures.

Manju finally patches up the injured boy and enjoys a few minutes of gossip while she rounds up her students. On the way to the classroom, Manju surveys her group of young girls; most are painfully thin and unlikely to get any other education but Manju's school. One of Manju's secret students is her friend Meena, a teenager whose family believes that education ruins a girl's marriage prospects. On this particular day, Meena has to stay home because she spoke back to her parents.

Despite efforts at gender equality in the higher social classes of India, girls are still oppressed among the poor of Annawadi. Especially among strict Hindu families like that of Meena, a girl's worth is still tied directly and solely to her marriageability. Boo sees Meena's restrictive life as another way that Indian society is not as progressive as some Indians would like to pretend.

Manju gets the students to the classroom and starts a round of "Head-Shoulders-Knees-and-Toe" to get out the children's energy before an English vocabulary lesson. Sunil, the scavenger, no longer comes because he considers Manju's class meaningless when he could be working. Abdul listens from the street, wondering how anyone could pretend to be superior to Manju, the "most-everything" girl in Annawadi. Even Abdul can't guess what future waits for Sunil.

Sunil has given up on education as a way out of poverty, a smart choice in terms of immediate profit, but a difficult prospect in terms of Sunil's ultimate future. Abdul, who clearly yearns to have the luxury of Manju's goodness, both resents Sunil for giving up the education that Abdul wants and hopes for the best for his young friend.

CHAPTER 5: GHOST HOUSE

The section begins with a quote from one of the mothers in Annawadi, wondering why poor people can't make stupid mistakes the way rich people do. The chapter then starts focusing on Fatima, who comforts herself in her boring arranged marriage by having multiple affairs. For any other woman, this would be scandalous, but Fatima's disability makes her ridiculous. She lets out her anger freely and often, finally taking back her self-worth after a lifetime of being told she was worthless. She uses the men who visit her in the afternoon to remind herself that her body is more than the parts she doesn't have.

The quote at the beginning sets the stage for someone in Annawadi to make a mistake that could ruin entire lives – as being poor in India means that any mistakes have exponential effects on one's livelihood. Fatima's affairs may seem like a mistake, but no one respects her enough to even care that she is flouting the traditional roles of women in society. A lifetime of oppression has made Fatima into a woman who takes what she wants no matter the consequences.

June marks the beginning of monsoon season, which can be brutal in the slum. In 2008, the rains start early and pour down for a full week. But then they stop – giving children a welcome respite from staying inside. Zehrunisa watches Mirchi play, trying not to think about how Mirchi has failed 9th grade, Karam is in the hospital for his lungs, and Kehkashan has run away from her husband. While the younger Husains are happy that Kehkashan is home, Kehkashan is heartbroken that her arranged marriage has ended in a husband who cheats on her.

For the Husains, things that looked like opportunities to get out of Annawadi have proved disappointing. Mirchi's education is not going as planned, and Kehkashan's marriage has failed. But where Mirchi has some fault in his failure, Kehkashan has no control over whether her husband cheats. The "mistakes" of both Mirchi and Kehkashan could ruin their lives and keep them in the slum for the rest of their lives.

Zehrunisa angrily thinks that Fatima's extramarital affairs have brought improper men to their neighborhood who now leer at Kehkashan. Zehrunisa is also skeptical of how Fatima treats her children. Fatima's 2-year-old daughter recently drowned in a bucket, and Fatima says she was at the toilets when it happened, but Zehrunisa knows she was at home. The police don't care, as kids—especially girls—die often in the slums where they are a huge financial liability.

Zehrunisa judges Fatima despite knowing just how hard Fatima's life is. Instead of bonding over their shared struggles, Zehrunisa looks down on Fatima for not accepting her hard lot in life with the quiet dignity that Zehrunisa expects. As women in Annawadi, there are few choices open to both of them – a situation made worse by the lack of female support and community.

Fatima becomes even more flamboyant after her daughter dies, wearing makeup and rubbing her lovers in her husband's face. The Husains commiserate with Fatima's husband, but Fatima overhears and gets angry. Still, the Husains must invite Fatima's family over for the important Muslim holidays.

Though the Husains dislike Fatima enough to talk about her behind her back, they are still bound by the old traditions of their faith community. Though they may not help each other in everyday circumstances, the Muslims of Annawadi still bond on important days.

Karam returns from two weeks in the hospital, much improved from breathing the clean air. Zehrunisa is happy, though grumbles about the cost when the Husains have so many marriages to arrange. Next up is Abdul's, and Zehrunisa has talked to the family of a scrap dealer in Saki Naka. Mirchi is eager for marriage, but Abdul is more cautious. Zehrunisa thinks that marriage will finally make her strange, silent son happy.

Getting out of Annawadi seems to be the best way for the Husains to live healthy lives, as evidenced by Karam's improvements. Yet the proposed arranged marriage Zehrunisa has planned for Abdul would keep him stuck in the same type of slum environment, just on the other side of town.

Karam thinks that Abdul will only be happy when they move to Vasai, away from the poisonous atmosphere of the slum. Karam himself fell in love with the mostly Muslim community in Vasai when he saw a group of men drinking tea and talking about the Muslim running for election in America. Karam thinks that Vasai is the perfect mix of village and city where he can raise his kids to be obedient and give them opportunities.

Vasai, as a suburb, seems to hold the best of the two Indias in Karam's mind. From the rural communities, the suburb keeps the old traditions of honoring family. From the city, the suburb has economic opportunity and the chance to live a better life than one's ancestors. For Karam, the suburb is the true vision of the New India.

Now that Kehkashan has returned to care for the younger kids, Zehrunisa can go with Karam to visit Vasai. Zehrunisa had expected to spend her entire life in *purdah*, the Muslim tradition of women staying in the home out of view from men outside their family. Yet Karam's tuberculosis has forced Zehrunisa to work in public. Zehrunisa looks forward to the day when her sons can take over the recycling business, but she no longer knows if she wants to go back to purdah. Living in Mumbai has given her freedoms that she would not have surrounded by other Muslim families in Vasai.

Though Zehrunisa did not originally want to move out of the traditional role of women in the Muslim community, she has now had a taste of the freedoms available to her in a rapidly changing India. Living in Annawadi, Zehrunisa can go where she wants and she can speak in public. These freedoms may not be much, but they would be gone if Zehrunisa were to move her family back to a more traditional community.

Zehrunisa senses that Karam's return from the hospital is a good moment to approach him about improving their house in Annawadi instead of putting all their money into the dream of living in Vasai. Zehrunisa convinces Karam to pay for a real shelf for **their wall** to keep the cooking away from rats, a small window, and real tile flooring that can be swept clean. Zehrunisa hopes these changes will keep her children healthy. She doesn't know that trying to improve the house will change her life forever.

Zehrunisa hopes to blend the benefits of the suburb with her freedom in Annawadi, making her home more hygienic with small improvements that make their hut more like a permanent house. Zehrunisa sees Vasai as unattainable, while digging in their heels in Annawadi is practical. Calling back to the quote at the beginning of the section, Zehrunisa has no way of knowing that simple construction will be the biggest mistake of her life.

CHAPTER 6: THE HOLE SHE CALLED A WINDOW

Renovations on the house begin and all the Husain children are kept home from school to help. They cart all the family's possessions to the street where Karam and Zehrunisa guard them so nothing will be stolen. Other Annawadians pass by, curious to see what the Husains really have. They are richer than their neighbors suspected, with real furniture and ceramic cooking wear.

As the Husains are improving their conditions, they invite jealousy and spite from their neighbors. Stealing other's belongings is a reliable way to raise one's own situation. The Husains have kept their good fortune a secret so far because showing off their valuables is an invitation to have others try to knock them down.

Kehkashan grumbles at the obvious jealousy of their neighbors, but Zehrunisa is proud to show off their good standing. Improving the house has obvious health benefits, but it also means that the Husains could be in better standing to receive housing relocation if Annawadi is ever destroyed by the airport. Slum residents who have squatted here since 2000 are entitled to an apartment, and the Annawadians think that a better house will convince officials that they have been there longer.

As much as Zehrunisa loves the chance to prove to the other Annawadians that they have "won" the competition to survive here, she also wants to give her family a legacy that will carry over even if Annawadi is destroyed. While it may seem silly to sink money into a place that the Husains know could be erased, it shows their intense desire to be recognized as legitimate members of the city.

By the second day, the small window is finished and the Husains hammer their stone floor flat to prepare for tiles. Karam goes to buy the ceramic tiles while Fatima yells through the wall at the Husains to keep the noise down. Abdul ignores this, focused on making a flat shelf on a crooked **wall** in a house on a crooked foundation. He decides he should chip into the wall to cement the shelf into place.

The close quarters of Annawadi means that any action one family takes affect all of their neighbors. Abdul sees the interconnected nature of the neighborhood in the crooked wall of his house. This wall was built on a foundation in Annawadi that has been crooked for so long that there is no chance to make something straight. In this environment, Abdul also cannot make straight-forward choices.

Fatima yells even louder as **the wall** that her hut shares with the Husains begins to shake. Zehrunisa half-heartedly placates her while Abdul continues to ignore her. Fatima gets louder, until Zehrunisa gets irritated that Fatima is complaining about a wall that the Husains built and nicely let Fatima's family use. Meanwhile, Abdul is disappointed to find that the bricks of the wall are so poorly made that they are disintegrating when he tries to chip into them.

In another example of the competition in Annawadi, improving life for the Husains means making things worse for Fatima. Success for anyone necessitates failure for someone else. Following from this, it is incredibly difficult to make anything good that will last. Abdul sees this in the bricks, which show the Husain's grand hopes and the ways that their supposed success does not actually live up to the dream.

Zehrunisa and Fatima each go outside, yelling and shoving each other about the wall. A crowd forms to watch the fight, and Abdul rushes outside to pull his mother away from this shameful display. Fatima leaves and Abdul goes back inside to finish while she is gone. He is heartbroken to see that the stone shelf has fallen in his absence, taking another chunk out of **the wall.** Abdul sighs and gets back to work.

The fight between Fatima and Zehrunisa shows the inability of anyone in Annawadi to celebrate another person's good fortune. Following this fight with the broken wall, a metaphor for how difficult it is to truly make something permanent in this slum, advances Boo's argument that it is precisely this lack of support that worsens the difficulties for the slum residents.

Fifteen minutes later, a neighbor tells Zehrunisa that Fatima has gone to the Sahar Police Station to accuse Zehrunisa of assault. Kehkashan tells her mother to go to the station to share her own side of the story. While Karam returns home empty-handed, Zehrunisa runs to the station and interrupts Fatima's story of how the Husains beat a cripple. Both women begin to cry, making the police angry that they have bothered official police with silly women's problems. The officer tells Fatima to go home and leads Zehrunisa to a chair to wait.

The police in Mumbai are not a trustworthy authority for the slum residents. Zehrunisa knows that the police will not look for the truth, but prosecute whoever has the most to pay. Karam's failure to get the tiles is another sign that Zehrunisa's grand dreams of improving life in Annawadi are not possible given the harsh circumstances of being poor in Mumbai.

Asha, at the police station helping police offers fix a government loan, sees Zehrunisa and jumps on the chance to increase her goodwill and influence in Annawadi by solving this fight. Asha tells Zehrunisa that she will convince Fatima to give up the accusation for 1,000 rupees. Zehrunisa does not trust Asha, and turns down her offer. Zehrunisa doesn't trust the police either, who often ask for bribes to make sure justice goes to the right person. She already paid off an officer named Thokale for running a business on airport land, and does not want to pay any more.

Asha offers to help Zehrunisa only because there is significant personal gain involved, not out of any goodwill for her neighbor. Zehrunisa rejects the corrupt system that governs "justice" for the citizens of Mumbai. Money is the easiest way to get off from a charge – even if the charge is completely false. However, Zehrunisa naively wants to trust that the truth will be more important than the bribes she hasn't paid.

Back in Annawadi, Kehkashan is guarding her family's things and fuming at the sight of Fatima putting on elaborate make-up. Kehkashan insults Fatima and threatens to twist off her other leg, while Fatima insults Kehkashan's inability to keep a husband. Karam comes outside to defend his daughter's virtue.

Family loyalty is one of the few things in Annawadi that disrupt the general perspective of "every man for himself." Kehkashan nobly defends her mother, but unfortunately ends up making the situation worse.

Inside, Abdul is trying to clean up after finishing the shelf. He is disappointed that the grand plans for improving **the wall** have turned out so poorly, then shocked to hear his father, Karam, call him to come beat Fatima. Abdul has never disobeyed his father, but he doesn't want to hit a cripple. Luckily, Kehkashan interrupts and leads Karam home while Fatima continues to threaten them from inside her house.

Even practical Abdul, normally so cautious, became swept up in the idea of making a better home. The crooked wall, too difficult to fix properly, stays as an example of the legacy of poor choices in Annawadi. Karam is about to make another mistake by threatening Fatima, exacerbating the fight instead of letting the anger fizzle out.

Kehkashan starts a fire for dinner. Meanwhile, Fatima's daughter Noori returns home for dinner to find the door to her house shut. Noori gets her mother's friend Cynthia, who can't open the door either. Cynthia lifts Noori up to a hole in the wall where Noori can see her mother pour kerosene on her head. Noori starts to scream that her mother is on fire. Men rush across the street and break down the door where they find Fatima inside, having set herself on fire and then doused the flames.

Setting one's self on fire has a long history in India. Most famous is the practice of sati, in which a widow set herself on fire during her late husband's funeral. For Fatima, stuck without options for improving her life and reminding once again that no one in Annawadi respects her, burning herself seems like the only way to express her intense dissatisfaction and pain with the oppression in her life.

A crowd forms outside, clucking at Fatima for burning herself for attention. Fatima screams that this is the Husain family's fault. Kehkashan tells her brothers to go to the police station to tell their story before Fatima can accuse them of burning her. Fatima begs for water, but only a poor girl named Priya will get near to her; everyone else is afraid of ghosts if Fatima dies.

Fatima's burning is another violent act that the residents of Annawadi seem to accept with little question, as Boo again underscores how prevalent pain is in this environment. Fatima and the Husains are on their own to pick up the pieces after this disaster, with everyone else watching the spectacle instead of helping.

The crowd argues about who should take Fatima to the hospital, eventually settling on Asha. Asha offers to pay for an auto rickshaw, but refuses to go herself. Secretly, Asha thinks that Zehrunisa should have let her help before Fatima became this hysterical. She laughs that the Husains would be in prison forever if Fatima were to say that the Husains burned her for being born Hindu. The crowd disperses, deciding to let Fatima's husband worry about the hospital.

As there is no emergency response program in Mumbai that will come into a slum, Fatima's only hope for receiving medical attention would be if someone paid out of their own pocket to get her to the hospital. This is incredibly unlikely, as no one seems to have any sympathy for Fatima. Asha even laughs at this problem, simply thinking of how Fatima could ruin the Husains if she were to connect this to the old divisions between Hindus and Muslims. Social division and selfishness in the slum is much stronger than any human connection.

CHAPTER 7: THE COME-APART

At the Burn Ward in Cooper Hospital, Fatima enjoys being treated like she matters. She lies in her first bed, surrounded by dirty medical equipment, and relishes the stream of visitors from Annawadi. The most important of these is Asha, who tells Fatima that it would be dangerous to lie about how she was burned considering the many witnesses. Furthermore, Asha has arranged for the Husains to pay for the hospital if Fatima drops her charges.

Fatima, who has worked her entire life to make herself important to the other slum residents, a feat which required her to sacrifice her health and her body. Yet as much as Fatima would like to erase the real narrative in favor of one that makes her a hero, Asha reminds Fatima that she has more to gain by giving in to what really happened and letting the Husains pay her to forget everything.

Fatima has already registered accusations against Karam, Abdul, and Kehkashan. This prompted Karam's arrest and Abdul's subsequent flight to the police office. But Fatima's daughter Noori has refuted these claims by saying she saw her mother light herself on fire. Now Fatima has to update her story and prove that the Husains incited her to commit suicide, a serious crime in India after British colonizers tried to end the historical practice of widows burning themselves on their husband's pyres. Fatima makes a new statement to the Special Executive Officer explaining that she lit the match, but Abdul threatened and beat her until she felt she had no other choice.

In previous times, convincing widows to burn themselves was a smart financial choice for families that could not afford to care for a woman with no husband to provide for her. The lack of economic agency among women is echoed by Fatima's feelings of helplessness. While it is not true that Abdul convinced her to burn herself, Fatima truly did feel as if she had no other choice for expressing her frustration with her limited life and the ridicule of her neighbors.

Fatima spends three days at the public hospital, with her husband forced to buy all her food and medicine on the black market and bring it in to her. The doctor just tells Fatima's husband to apply an expensive burn cream and bring Fatima three bottles of water a day. Fatima's family can't afford this.

The public hospital is barely equipped to shelter people, much less give medical care. Fatima's family is on their own to care for her with no resources. For the poor who cannot afford private hospitals, going to the public hospital is practically a death sentence.

Over in the Sahar Police Station, Abdul is beaten with a leather strap. The officer warns Abdul that if the disabled women dies, Abdul will be charged with murder. After what feels like hours of pain, Abdul hears Zehrunisa crying to the receptionist. He tries not to scream but can't help himself. Eventually, Zehrunisa's crying gets quieter and Abdul hopes that she has gone home.

The police brutalize Abdul instead of giving him due process and protecting him as a citizen of Mumbai. To the officials of the city, people as poor as Abdul and Zehrunisa have no feelings and do not matter.

Abdul and Karam are kept in the police station's "unofficial cell" where the police do not have to fill out paperwork to detain them. For three days, Abdul is kept there as the police ask over and over why he beat a crippled woman. Abdul has no answer but the truth, that he insulted Fatima but never touched her. The police move on to Karam, asking how he expects to feed his family from jail. Karam knows they just want to extort as much money as possible. The Husains will be innocent or guilty depending on how much they pay.

Karam and Abdul are held at the police station but kept off the official record, another way that public authorities in Mumbai erase the existence and pain of those who live in poverty. The police show that they care nothing for the truth of what happened, but only for how much money the Husains will pay to make the whole problem disappear. Though the bribes would be expensive, the police remind Karam that going to jail would be ultimately worse for his family financially.

Abdul and Karam debate about paying these bribes, knowing they will have to save money for a lawyer if Fatima dies. Zehrunisa appears periodically to give updates on how much Asha is asking to make this whole thing go away. After helping Zehrunisa talk to the police for free the first day, Asha now wants 50,000 rupees. Zehrunisa is hesitant because she has already paid Officer Thokale to keep the interrogation fair. The Special Executive Officer who takes the Husains' statements also wants money to spin the official record in their favor. Zehrunisa would rather pay Fatima's husband directly so that Fatima can go to a private hospital instead of dying in the public Cooper.

If Fatima dies, she would no longer be able to take back her charges and the Husains would be forced to go to trial. With literally everyone involved asking for money, the Husains have no idea who to pay. No one is offering to help the Husains without the promise of personal gain. Zehrunisa's instinct is to cut out the middle men and pay Fatima's family directly, hoping to make the conflict go away with individual action rather than depending on anyone else. However, Boo suggests that this is one thing that the Husains cannot fix by themselves.

As the days in the station stretch on, Abdul ignores all of this, thinking of an action movie called *Alive* where a man was imprisoned for years for a crime he didn't commit. Abdul never had big dreams for his future— he just hoped to earn money to live comfortably. He thinks about his mother's nostalgia for the old days when people accepted their fates and suffered together. Now, the world is so competitive that no one will help the Husains as their future crumbles.

Abdul escapes into fantasy as his life becomes unbearable, hoping that he can emerge like that hero even though he usually does not indulge in such dreams. Abdul's hopes for his life seemed so small, but the hard conditions and precariousness of life in the slum have made even this small hope impossible. With the new focus on individual achievement in capitalist India, the Husains have no one to turn to now that they are not successful.

Abdul spends his days in a haze, unaware of much besides the periodic beatings. Eventually, he overhears a phone conversation between Officer Thokale and Asha which has the miraculous result of making the beatings stop. Abdul wonders why Asha would help him, eventually deciding that Asha has seen his hard work over the years. Karam knows that Asha is only trying to show her own power in the police station.

Abdul hopes that Asha has noticed him, displaying the shared drive of the Annawadians to be seen for their good qualities rather than disappearing in the faceless masses. Karam knows Asha's true motive is more self-serving, as pulling strings with the Husains will convince other Annawadians to pay Asha to help them when they get in trouble.

Four days after Fatima's burning, a Muslim fakir (monk and miracle-worker) comes to Annawadi. Kehkashan jumps at the opportunity to receive a blessing before she herself must go into custody at the police station. Next door, Fatima's husband curses the fakir and Kehkashan feels that he has set up himself and Fatima up for bad luck. Indeed, Fatima dies that night.

Kehkashan falls back on the old ways in the midst of this trouble, trusting her faith to protect her when the "modern" public systems have not. Fatima's death after her family refused the blessing seems to support this choice. Even in the New India, the old traditions still hold weight in times of tragedy.

Fatima's burns are recorded as the official cause of death, but it is really an infection that kills her. Kehkashan and Zehrunisa, as the only other Muslim women in Annawadi, take over the burial rites, while Zehrunisa sobs about the new false charges of murder against her family. The Husain boys carry Fatima to the graveyard, past the luxury hotels where Americans gleefully discuss the new business opportunities in a wealthier India. Fatima's daughters are sent to Sister Paulette's orphanage.

The hospital erases what really killed Fatima so that their image will not be further tarnished to the city officials of Mumbai. The hospital's self-serving action get the Husains in even worse trouble, as their crime against Fatima now seems more serious. Yet the Husains do not shirk their duty to their faith community even in this awful time. Boo admires their loyalty to the old ways, putting them in sharp contrast with the foreign investments that now govern India.

CHAPTER 8: THE MASTER

The rains come again as July turns into August and sewage floods Annawadi. Sunil once heard that the rains wash the mean out of people, but he only sees the rain washing his profitable garbage away. The Husain family also suffers, as Mirchi tries to take Abdul's role but is not as adept at judging the worth of the trash. Zehrunisa is too busy begging her family for Abdul's bail money to help. She can get nothing because she has no collateral to offer for the bail bonds. All the Husain's possessions are in Karam's name alone.

Sunil's future, as hard as he works, is totally dependent on arbitrary things such as the weather remaining still enough for garbage to collect in the street. Meanwhile, the Husains have also felt the harsh effects of having such a tentative business plan.. Zehrunisa's family abandons her, another example of the selfish focus on personal success in India, while the old tradition of keeping women at home means that she has no economic agency while her husband and sons are incarcerated. The legacy of past oppression in India continues to hurt the Husains even as the future vision for India excludes them.

Karam is desperate and angry every time Zehrunisa visits him because his health is failing in the crowded cell. To make matters worse, Officer Thokale is furious that Zehrunisa told people in Annawadi that he took a bribe to protect Abdul and Karam. Zehrunisa babbles that she never told a soul, unsure what she has said in her grief. She second guesses everything she did, wondering if she should have paid Asha in the first place now that the Husains are facing a very expensive trial.

All the police officers take bribes, but they want to preserve the illusion of honest service. Though Officer Thokale is at fault for accepting the corrupt offer, he prefers to blame Zehrunisa for ruining his reputation. Zehrunisa is unfairly held responsible for all the mistakes that have led the Husain family to this awful place.

The only choice Zehrunisa felt good about was paying the officers to try Abdul as a child. She thinks Abdul is 17, but she truly has no idea exactly how old he is; her only clue is that Saddam Hussein was killing people while Zehrunisa was pregnant. Thanks to a false school record claiming Abdul is 16, Abdul is sent to a juvenile detention center in Dongri.

Abdul has no formal record of his birth, another way that being born into poverty makes him less than an official person in the eyes of the state. But Zehrunisa uses this fact to her advantage, getting an easier sentence for Abdul by potentially lying about his age.

Dongri is in a thriving middle-class Muslim neighborhood. On his way there, Abdul notes the people in the street living happy, peaceful lives. The detention center itself is a pleasant, moss-covered stone building built by the British in the early 1800s. Abdul is given a uniform and sent to a large room full of other new arrivals. The wardens are almost kind, as they have been frightened by a recent newspaper article that had caught the attention of human rights activists who declared conditions in Dongri cruel and unusual.

Outside of Annawadi, Abdul sees a vision of how easy his life could have been were he to live in such an environment – ironically as he is going to be imprisoned. Yet in one of the few examples of foreign involvement improving conditions for Indian citizens, the efforts of human rights activists make the Detention Center an oasis for Abdul in the midst of his turmoil and uncertainty.

While Abdul waits to be called by a warden for inspection, he looks at the portraits of famous Indians on the wall. After Abdul is registered, a muezzin calls for evening prayer, calming Abdul though he is rarely clean enough to go through this ritual at home. Abdul's faith in Allah is purely economic: if rich people spend money to worship Allah, he must be real. At first, Abdul resists the daily baths at Dongri, clinging to his dirt as a reminder of his old life in Annawadi. But after three days of getting no breakfast without washing, Abdul gives in.

The portraits of the famous Indians on the wall remind Abdul that he is part of a united India, even if the legal system has thrown him away so that he will never leave a legacy like these famous men. The attitude of the New India affects Abdul's faith by considering Allah in terms of profit. Abdul also compromises his principles for personal gain, letting go of the dirt that connects him to his past to get food. Boo presents this as the correct choice, a way to move forward rather than a betrayal of his past.

Abdul's days at Dongri follow a regular pattern. He and the other boys (who are mostly Muslim, a group overrepresented in Indian prisons) have mandatory exercise in the morning then spend their days doing nothing. The boys tell stories and complain about their charges. Most have been detained for breaking child labor laws, which Abdul thinks is an unfair punishment for people who are already so poor that their children have to work. He finds himself forming the odd opinion that the young boys should be "free" to work. As Abdul has time in Dongri to rest and think about things other than work, he becomes much more sympathetic to the troubles of other boys.

Though India would like to appear fully multicultural, Muslim citizens are still discriminated against in legal and criminal matters. Abdul also sees injustice in the arrests of child laborers. Depriving families of able-bodied workers is not going to improve conditions for these children, especially if the families were already so poor that they needed their children to seek employment. Abdul's sense of freedom involves work because that is all he has ever known, though his time away from the competition of Annawadi does allow him to develop his moral conscience.

One morning, Abdul has a hospital inspection to see if he is really a minor. The doctor examines him, then tells Abdul that he will be 17 if he pays 2,000 rupees and 20 if he does not. Abdul is furious, prompting the doctor to explain that he has to take bribes in order to make enough to feed his family. Eventually, the doctor relents and declares Abdul 17 without pay. Abdul is surprised to find he feels bad for the doctor, who also has a hard life.

In the current economic climate of India, Boo explains that even otherwise honest men like the doctor feel compelled to take bribes simply to survive. Corruption pervades every aspect of the society, as Abdul's actual age never enters into the equation. Yet Abdul is surprised to find a human connection with the doctor, when he is used to relating to others in Annawadi only in terms of profit or loss.

Another afternoon, the Dongri boys are sent to listen to a man called The Master. The Master, a pudgy Hindu man, tells the boys a sob story about what happens to disobedient people who end up in jail. The master cries as he describes the reform and redemption that await the boys who abandon their criminal ways. Almost despite himself, Abdul cries with The Master and exalts in his newfound inspiration to become a refined and honest man.

The Master presents a way for Abdul to erase his past and his birth in order to become an upstanding member of Indian society. He desperately wants to be seen as a virtuous man, despite the fact that everyone considers him a criminal.

Abdul assesses his life so far and decides that he has been mostly virtuous already, but he could be better. He decides he will never again buy stolen goods. He intends to remember these moral judgements even when he is released back into the corruption of his world.

Away from Annawadi, Abdul can focus on moral judgements because he is not constantly working toward his survival. At home in the slum, choices have to take into account their value in keeping his family alive, not just their moral value.

CHAPTER 9: MARQUEE EFFECT

In July, Asha, Mahadeo, Rahul, and Manju visit the small village where they lived before moving to Mumbai. Asha feels like a giant, coming back a rich hero to this place where she had worked herself to the bone as a child. The true purpose of this trip is to arrange a marriage proposal for Manju, though Asha pretends she is here to celebrate the wedding of one of Mahadeo's nephews.

Though Asha and her family may live relatively poor lives in Annawadi, their situation in a Mumbai is still far better than the lives of most rural Indians. Many Indians have moved to urban centers looking for greater economic opportunity, adding to the slum problem for the cities, but improving their own conditions.

Despite the supposed wedding festivities, all the village residents are preoccupied with the drought of the past month. Most of their expensive cotton seedlings have died and there is little that this farming community can do but pray that rain comes soon to save the rest. Asha is surprised that the village looks better than it did when she was a child, as public works projects have improved the buildings. Yet the conditions of rural poverty have not actually gotten better, and thousands of farmers commit suicide every year. The government records these deaths but does little to correct the drought situation.

Unlike the city where there are several routes out of poverty, there are no options in rural India to earn more money than to hope that the crops yield well. Government aide helps somewhat, but it does not address the true problem with the farming life in India – as livelihoods are dependent on weather patterns that cannot be controlled. Instead of recognizing this short-coming and finding new ways to help rural Indians, the government mostly ignores this problem.

Real opportunities are hard to come by in India unless one is already wealthy. Public funds are often diverted to private interests and government relief programs are controlled by the highest contributors instead of working to actually help citizens. Rural farm workers remain hopeful, but even things that are supposed to help, such as the pesticides that the government provides, only make their lives harder by causing new diseases and injuries. More and more rural residents are moving to the city to find new opportunities, exacerbating the overcrowded slums in Mumbai.

Even programs that claim to help the rural poor are often siphoned through so many corrupt deals that almost none of the funds reach their intended recipients. Neither is it enough to simply give the rural farmers modern technology like pesticides without fully understanding what those chemicals are going to do to the workers or the crops. While moving to Mumbai is risky, it is better to go and have options than to stay and face certain starvation in the fields.

The night before the wedding, Manju walks through the village leading prayers for the bride and groom. The whole village comes to the temple, ostensibly honoring the betrothed couple, but really paying attention to Manju. She is an exciting prospect to almost all the village families, but Asha has high expectations for Manju's husband. The next day at the wedding, Asha focuses on a young soldier. Manju brings the soldier tea, deciding that he is not bad looking but that she would rather run away than go obediently to a life in this rural village.

Manju represents the future of India to this rural community, as a woman who has achieved a college education and lives in the freedom of the city. Yet Manju has little control over her own life, as it is Asha who will be choosing Manju's husband and Manju's husband who will be commanding Manju's future. Manju herself wants to return to the opportunities of the city, not move "backwards" into rural India.

The Waghekar family returns to Annawadi, where Asha ignores Zehrunisa's pleas for legal help and focuses on her own education. To truly transcend her rural background, Asha decides to act like the first-class people until she is accepted as one of them. She counsels Manju to "by-heart" (meaning memorize and pretend) her way into improving their conditions by asking first class people how to act like them. Asha believes that acting like a higher social class will eventually allow them to join that group. For herself, Asha asks the politician she works with for his blunt opinion of her appearance. Manju brings back more style advice from college and considers the power of the "Marquee Effect" – a term she has heard in her Photoshop class that means making something look better than it is.

Asha reuses the phrase "by-heart" (originally used by Manju to refer to her efforts to memorize books for her literature class) to mean that she can memorize the actions of first-class people well enough to act like them. Yet the phrase also calls attention to the force of Asha's desire. She wants to be first-class so badly that she literally wills herself to be so. Manju considers all of this to be pretty veneer over their real lives, like the marquee effect on Photoshop that displays a running tag. Asha thinks that labeling themselves first-class will be enough to make it true, while Manju knows that you can make the marquee say anything you want.

Taking advantage of her mother's more open mindset, Manju cautiously brings up the subject of marrying a man of her own choosing. Asha still doesn't want to get that modern, and wants to find a suitable husband for Manju who will lift the social status of the whole family. The soldier from the village is dismissed and Asha focuses widening Manju's social circle. Asha gets Manju a job selling life insurance to rich people, promising that the insurance will undo any tragedies that happen in their life.

Asha is willing to be modern when it nets her a profit, but she is not willing to let go of the control over her daughter and the potential money to made from a traditional arranged marriage. As in Manju's college reading The Way of the World, love is not a consideration for Manju's life partner. Rather, she is supposed to find someone who will act as "insurance" for the Waghekar family to keep them in the first-class circles.

Manju applies herself to learning the insurance business, finding that she has to play up the profit that can come from owning insurance and never mention the possibilities of death or accidents. In Manju's own life, she sees how everyone in Annawadi and in her college classes only focus on the potential profit of their actions. Manju herself tries to stay true to her dream of running a school for underprivileged kids but it's difficult when no one else seems to see the long-term benefit of educating slum children. Even the Catholic charity that funds Manju's afternoon school doesn't seem very concerned about whether the school is successful or not.

In Manju's eyes, Indians today do not want to think about the troubles of their lives but simply want to focus on how to make their lives better. The new emphasis on capitalist earnings in the economy have convinced Manju's clients that better always means richer. Manju wants to define profit in something other than monetary terms, but she is seemingly alone in her desire to work for the good of anyone but herself. Without the support of a community, Manju's school seems destined to fail.

Asha begins to think that Manju is spending too much time on her slum school project. Asha forces Manju to teach only every other day, but Manju then spends her free time volunteering for the Indian Civil Defense Corps, a middle-class service organization that trains people to save others during floods or terror attacks. With the recent bombings in Bangalore and Ahmedabad, Manju and others are increasingly worried about terror attacks in Mumbai. During crisis practice, Manju's slender body means that she is always chosen as the victim to be rescued. She loves her role, especially when a young man named Vijay is chosen to save her. She tries to keep herself from caring for Vijay, knowing that he would never look twice at a slum girl.

Manju tries many methods of making a united India for herself, through both education and service. Yet the Indian Civil Defense Corps, which claims to work for the benefit of all Indians affected by terrorism, really focuses only on protecting middle-class neighborhoods. Manju knows that these middle-class people do not care about the residents of Annawadi, and that a relationship with a middle-class man like Vijay is highly unlikely for her no matter how much her mother wants Manju's marriage to help them climb this social ladder.

On Asha's 40th birthday, Manju passes around cake to the family. Asha tries to celebrate, but is distracted by the constant call of a certain policeman on her cell phone. Asha finally answers the phone, then tells her family she has to go. Manju is angry, knowing that her mother is leaving to have sex with the policeman as part of the deal that Asha has struck with many of these men.

Asha again proves that profit is more important to her than morals, giving up her body to maintain a good relationship with the police who help her make money through illegal fraud. Manju rejects this lack of virtue, as she herself would rather be less successful economically and keep her virtue.

Asha ignores her daughter's tears, justifying her extra-marital liaisons as necessary for the money and power that has allowed Asha to send Manju to college and consider a fabulous marriage for her. Asha walks out into the night and gets into the back of a white police van.

Asha deems corrupting her own life worth it for the chance to give Manju a better life. Though Manju thinks that Asha is only focused on the short-term gain of the liaisons, Asha actually has a long-term plan for bettering their family's economic situation.

CHAPTER 10: PARROTS, CAUGHT AND SOLD

In late July, Sunil finds a scavenger lying in the road with an open wound in his leg. Too scared to call the police because he might be blamed, Sunil walks past and hopes someone else will help. Others walk by but are too busy with their own troubles to stop. By 4 pm, the police pass by and enlist other scavengers to load the man, now dead, into a van so that they will not catch any diseases. At the hospital, the cause of death is recorded as tuberculosis and the body is given to the Medical College to be dissected.

Boo uses this example of a wounded scavenger to illustrate the many factors that keep people in Annawadi from helping each other. While the Annawadians know it is wrong to leave this man helpless, the foreboding specter of police brutality, the sheer business of survival, and the threat of disease means that assisting this man is too risky to contemplate. Donating this man's body to science shows how little the Mumbai officials care for the slum residents – the scavenger was worth more dead than alive.


Several other bodies are found over the next days, until Annawadians become afraid that Fatima left a curse on the whole slum. Rumors that Annawadi will soon be destroyed by airport developers grow. Sunil is worried about these rumors, but more concerned with the immediate problem that his sister Sunita continues to grow while he seems to be shrinking.

Death is a constant presence in the slum, though the residents look for supernatural explanations to assure themselves that it isn't the slum itself that is dangerous. Their entire neighborhood is at risk, but boys like Sunil can't worry about the larger picture when they are struggling to survive and grow each day.


One afternoon, Sunil sees Sonu Gupta, another scavenger two years older than Sunil, walking down the road with a full bag of trash. Sonu has a host of health problems, and is not seen as a valuable partner in the slum, but Sunil wonders how Sonu finds so much material. He follows Sonu that night and sees that Sonu has partnerships with security guards at the airport who give Sonu trash after Sonu sweeps their walkways. Sunil wants to be disdainful of this "begging," but he can't help but admire Sonu's success.

Friendships in the slum are based on mutual benefit, and a boy like Sonu cannot earn Sunil any prestige with the larger boys who would be more lucrative partners for trash picking and theft. Yet Sonu has turned his weaknesses into strengths, using his small size and pitiful aspect to earn sympathy from the guards at the airport. This exclusive access to trash is more important to Sunil than his pride.

Sunil begins to work with Sonu, helping him sweep and then searching the airport grounds for more trash. After a couple days, the pair are making a dollar each a day and have almost developed a friendship. Sonu tries to counsel Sunil on how to live a healthy and good life. Sonu avoids the thieves in Annawadi and even spends his nights studying, though he can't go to school during the day. Sunil admires Sonu's dedication, but isn't sure that a public school education will really let him get ahead.

The friendship between Sunil and Sonu is only possible because they help each other make more money. Though each would like a deeper bond, it is risky to show true affection in Annawadi as the other boys would take it as weakness. Sonu still trusts in the power of education to get him out of poverty, but Sunil simply sees the shortcomings of public school. He would rather focus on making money.


Sonu and Sunil may do well outside of Annawadi, but they are still targets for the bigger boys in the slum. Sunil wishes he had lots of brothers to protect him, but all he has is Kalu, one of the thieves who has taken Sunil under his wing. Sunil smokes with Kalu, out of Sonu's judgmental sight, while the two survey Annawadi from the height of a rubble pile. On the other side of the slum, there is a small farm where most of the boys try to steal parrots. Sunil convinces Kalu to leave the parrots alone, as he enjoys listening to the squawks each morning.

Kalu is one of the rare Annawadians who is nice to a boy like Sunil without receiving anything in return. Sunil shows that he is still young and optimistic by caring for the parrots on the farm. Where others see profit, Sunil sees beauty that should be allowed to stay free. In the same way, Sunil and Kalu still have beauty (in the form of caring for others) that has not been beaten out of them by economic concerns.


Kalu specializes in stealing from the recycling bins that the airline catering companies use, but his route has caught the attention of the local police. To get out of police custody, Kalu agrees to become an informant on the drug dealers in Annawadi. Kalu feels stuck, scared of both the police and the cocaine dealers in Annawadi. He wishes a girl would appear and save him from this situation, like the happy endings of Bollywood films, but his only option is to move back with his abusive father in a slum two hours from Annawadi. Sunil is incredibly sad that Kalu will be leaving, missing both Kalu's company and the prestige that he receives from hanging out with a thief.

Young boys like Kalu are preyed on by almost every powerful group in Annawadi, both illegal gangs and the law itself. Though cities like Mumbai offer economic opportunity, they are also sites of conflict and danger in this swirl of potential profit. In Annawadi, Kalu's life means less than his ability to make a profit for someone. Kalu dreams of escape, but there is not true escape for a boy with no options. While Sunil mourns his friend, he also understands that his connection to Kalu was profitable for him by raising his social status above the other trash pickers in the slum.

A few weeks later, Zehrunisa is allowed to take Abdul home from Dongri as long as Abdul checks in at the detention center every week until his trial. There is no date set for the trial yet, but Karam and Kehkashan are still being held in prison. Abdul is angry that Zehrunisa released him instead of focusing on Karam but Zehrunisa has no money for Karam's bail now that the garbage business has collapsed under Mirchi's direction. Abdul sighs, knowing the hard work ahead of him trying to rebuild their recycling business without falling back into buying stolen goods.

Though the Husains are glad to even be getting a trial rather than having the police declare them guilty to save time, the long, drawn-out time frame of the Indian justice system is financially ruinous for people who must work every single day to make enough money to survive. Abdul's return will offer some relief, but there is no guarantee that the Husains can get back their previous success. One mistake, baiting Fatima, is enough to redirect their entire lives.

After his time at Dongri, Abdul is more talkative to the scavengers he trades with. He seems especially intent on spreading his lessons from The Master throughout the slum. The only person who will listen is Kalu, freshly returned from working construction with his father. Zehrunisa compliments Kalu on how healthy he looks now (after weeks spent in the country without sniffing Eraz-ex), but she worries that Kalu will return to his bad ways in the city. For now, Kalu scavenges with Sunil instead of stealing.

Abdul continues to work on the moral awakening that began in Dongri, trying desperately to fit the lessons of right and wrong he heard there into the corrupt environment of the slum. Meanwhile, Kalu also deals with the potentially harmful effects of returning to Annawadi. Life here is built on so many illegal and dangerous actions that it is almost impossible to remain virtuous.

The next evening, Kalu and Sunil are selling airport trash to Abdul when a disabled man suddenly walks up and punches Abdul in the chest. Abdul does not react at all, wary of another Fatima situation. Abdul and Sunil go home, leaving Kalu to wander back to the airport. In the morning, Kalu is found dead in the airport hedges.

Abdul has learned that defending himself leads to worse consequences, allowing others in the slum to beat him in order to stay out of trouble. Kalu's sudden death is a reminder that no one in Annawadi is safe.

CHAPTER 11: PROPER SLEEP

Zehrunisa is terrified that the police are coming to her house to arrest Abdul for the attack by the disabled man, but the police have come to ask if anyone knows where Kalu's relatives are because Kalu is dead. Abdul is shattered by the news, both grieving for his friend and convinced that he will be arrested for this murder, as well.

Abdul's intense grief over Kalu's death has many layers due to the complicated nature of relationships in Annawadi. Though Abdu truly did care for his friend, concerns about mourning a loved one are also mixed up with concerns about Abdul's personal well-being and the further loss that could come from this crime.

Some of the slum boys, including Sunil, run to see the body, both out a morbid curiosity and to make sure that it is really Kalu who has been found. The police keep them away from the body, but Sunil sees Kalu being loaded into a police van. Sunil walks home along **the beautiful forever wall**, feeling more hopeless than ever about the fate of small slum boys in a big world.

The slum boys understand that Kalu could have been misidentified, knowing that the police do not care enough about slum boys to tell them apart. Kalu's unceremonious death, on the rich grounds of the airport, reminds Sunil that the divide between the rich and the poor in India is too wide for him to cross.

The Sahar Police Station makes a habit of recording the murders of "inconsequential people" as deaths due to disease. It is decided that Kalu died of tuberculosis and his body is cremated to erase any signs of attack. The police also take advantage of Kalu's death to make sure that no other slum boys are allowed on airport grounds. They arrest any boys found inside the airport fences and threaten to charge them with Kalu's murder if they stay in Mumbai, neglecting to mention that Kalu's death record has already been filed away.

For the police, the majority of Indians are inconsequential people because their families could not afford to pay the police to do a full investigation. The deaths of the poor do not matter to the officials in India, such that Kalu's death is used as a further excuse to scare the slum boys and restrict their movements.

Sanjay, one of the Annawadians arrested after Kalu's death, comes sobbing to Zehrunisa with the real story of how Kalu died. Kalu had been attacked by a prominent gang for no understandable reason and Sanjay is now just as afraid that the gang will come for him as he is that the police will arrest him again. Sanjay flees Annawadi and moves back with his mother in the slum Dharavi, five miles south of Annawadi.

Life and death follow no understandable path to slum boys like Sanjay. There is no true reason why Kalu was killed, and his death will not matter to anyone of a higher social class. Living in Annawadi, for Sanjay, means accepting that he could be the next to die a faceless and meaningless death.

Back in Dharavi, Sanjay becomes much more protective of his younger sister in the wake of his friend's murder. His younger sister is confused, wondering if Sanjay is so saddened by the news about Kalu because Sanjay is high on Eraz-ex. Sanjay tells his sister to get proper sleep, then seems to fall asleep himself on the floor of their hut. A few hours later, Sanjay's mother comes home to find Sanjay convulsing on the floor. It turns out Sanjay drank rat poison while his sister was making dinner. He dies two hours later. His death is recorded as the suicide of a heroin addict who couldn't afford another hit.

Sanjay's suicide, rather than a rejection of life all together, is a passionate refusal to live a meaningless life. In his conversations with his sister, Boo shows that Sanjay does care deeply about those around him and wants them to have prosperous, comfortable lives. Yet Sanjay cannot see a way for a slum boy like himself to ever matter. He takes his death into his own hands rather than waiting for someone else to steal his life as Kalu's was stolen.

Sunil and Abdul become closer after Kalu and Sanjay's deaths. They theorize on who killed Kalu, guessing that airport security guards or drug dealers had gotten to him. Kalu's father can find out nothing, while Sanjay's mother is completely distraught. No one will tell her anything about why Sanjay would kill himself, not wanting to get into the messy circumstances of Kalu's murder. Meanwhile, the police and the airport security forget anything about the deaths of two meaningless boys.

Kalu and Sanjay's families are given no closure, as helping these grieving people would open the other Annawadians to the hardship and death that these boys faced. Again, personal profits have to take precedence over kindness. To keep living themselves, the Annawadian must forget Kalu and Sanjay – though it is more painful for them to do so than it is for the authorities to completely forget the lives of these two boys.

CHAPTER 12: NINE NIGHTS OF DANCE

The section opens with advice from Zehrunisa not to think about terrible lives. The chapter then skips ahead to late September 2008. Asha has become slumlord of Annawadi, promoted by Corporator Subhash Sawant for helping delay the trial for his faked caste documents. However, this success has come at the cost of alienating her family. Manju is disgusted with the way that Asha uses extra-marital affairs to gain control.

Zehrunisa's advice can in some ways apply to any of the lives Boo has described so far in the book, opening this section to explore just how the Annawadians distract themselves from their terrible lives. Asha distracts herself through her ambitions, accepting the hatred of her family for the sake of gaining political power.

Fatima's death still haunts the women of Annawadi as the deaths of Kalu and Sanjay haunt the boys. Fatima has become a symbol of everything the Annawadians dislike about their lives, especially oppressive marriages. Two women follow Fatima's example by setting themselves on fire. Meena and Manju even discuss suicide methods one night. Manju is ashamed of her mother's dishonorable behavior, while Meena just wants an escape from her abusive family. Meena hopes to cope with their problems by talking them out, but Manju prefers to keep her troubles compartmentalized so she can focus on studying for her college graduation.

Death hangs over the Annawadians, even as they try to ignore it in order to continue with the business of surviving. Fatima, who tried so hard in life to matter, is now a hero in death to other women who would like to escape their terrible lives. With no options to improve their circumstances, these women turn to suicide as a last resort. Even Manju and Meena, with their whole lives ahead of them, feel stifled enough to consider suicide as a viable option out.

Manju lives and breathes her college studying, which helps to block out the painful experience of being rejected by Vijay. Yet it is hard to forget romantic issues, as late September is the season of the flirtatious Navrati festival where female divinity is celebrated and girls are allowed to dance freely. Asha pours her energy into planning this year's festival, knowing how much it means to the girls and seeing that the Annawadians need a release after the tension of the recent global recession.

Manju, despite her mother's grand schemes, now sees that marrying up and out of poverty will be hard as long as India's class system still discriminates against the poor. As a distraction from this disappointment, Manju, Asha, and the other women focus on the grand festival of Navrati. Dancing will not actually make their lives better, but it will at least allow them to forget their troubles for a few days.

The political response to hardship in India usually involves throwing a grand party on festival days. This year's Navrati festival will have extra DJs and lights, a fact welcomed by Meena who is dreading her imminent move to a rural village where she has been promised as a bride. Meena dreams of being one of the modern, powerful women she sees on television, but her life is completely controlled by her family. Even worse, moving to a village will be like moving back in time, to an India that still believes in the caste system. As a Dalit, the lowest caste, Meena will be seen as contaminated.

The festivals in India offer respite and release from the everyday pain and drudgery of living poor in this country. Meena sees this festival as a last time of happiness before the life-sentence of marriage in a rural village. The uncontrollable fact of being born a low-caste woman means that Meena will be completely controlled by her husband with no options to improve her situation. The endless opportunities of the New India do not apply to her.

A week before Navrati, Meena and Manju meet at the public toilet to discuss Fatima's "way out" of their worries about arranged marriages. They don't want their beautiful skin to be spoiled by burning, so they agree that poison is a better option. Meena becomes superstitious that Fatima's ghost is listening and the two girls go home after their few moments of freedom.

The girls' nonchalant discussion of suicide seemingly shows that they do not care about their lives. Yet Meena and Manju are only considering this in response to arranged marriages, revealing that they care so much about living freely that death is preferable to a life with no chance of improving.

The women furiously clean the streets of Annawadi the day before Navrati. Manju rushes about trying to finish her housework so that she will have time to study and work on festival preparations. She ignores Meena waving from her house. When Manju finally finishes all her work, she goes to visit Meena. Meena looks pale and sick and refuses to talk to Manju. Meena opens her hand to show an empty tube of rat poison. Manju realizes that Meena has swallowed the whole thing and she runs to get Meena's mother.

The festival does not mean a break from work for the women, as even these days claiming to celebrate women simply create more tasks for the already over-loaded women of Annawadi. Even Meena and Manju's strong friendship must come second to their obligations, though Meena disrupts this life of work by eating poison.

Meena's mother is inside making dinner when Manju tells her about Meena eating rat poison. Meena's mother insists that Meena is faking it, throwing a tantrum because she was beaten three times today for various small offenses, such as sitting outside the house. Manju goes back outside, afraid to alert anyone else for fear of ruining Meena's reputation. Desperate, Manju calls Asha from a pay phone and tells her what Meena has done. Asha tells Manju to force Meena to swallow tobacco so that she will vomit, but Manju cannot buy tobacco without tarnishing her own reputation.

Meena's family does not take her death seriously, preferring to think that Meena just wants attention so they will not have to deal with the situation that has made Meena unhappy enough to take her own life. Even stakes of life and death are not enough for Manju to risk Meena's reputation – as a bad reputation could interfere with Meena's marriage prospects. Manju knows that marriage is not a good deal for the girls of Annawadi, but it is better than the life of a spinster.

Manju sees some women pass by Meena's house. She quietly tells them that Meena has poisoned herself. The women ask Meena what happened and Meena explains that she had to do this because it is the one choice about her life that she gets to make. The women force Meena to swallow a bar of laundry soap and Meena throws up violently. Meena says she feels better and goes inside to sleep. Manju goes home to wash and prepare for Navrati. That night, the first night of Navrati, Meena's brothers beat her for eating rat poison.

The women come together for Meena in a rare show of community support in Annawadi. Yet this support is for something that benefits the community, and not Meena herself. Meena wants to have this one choice about her life, but the community of Annawadi will prosper more if Meena does not commit suicide. Rather than understanding Meena's choice, everyone around Meena punishes her for this small attempt to take control.

Meena is admitted to Cooper Hospital and dies on the sixth day of Navrati. The women of Annawadi cluck that she was simply bored of her world, while Meena's family blames Manju's influence. Manju mourns her friend staring at the letters "Meena" that someone had carved in the cement outside the toilet and wishing that her friend had left more of a mark in the world.

Everyone finds a different explanation for Meena's death that supports their view of the world. For the women, boredom is better than admitting that Meena was miserable at the prospect of living a life like theirs. For Meena's family, blaming Manju is a way of staying true to their traditional values rather than admitting that India is changing. For Manju, Meena's death is a reminder that girls in Annawadi are invisible until they are disobedient. It inspires Manju to make sure that she does leave a mark.

CHAPTER 13: SOMETHING SHINING

In November, the prices of recyclables fall drastically due to the recession in America and the global economic crisis. Abdul consoles the other scavengers by telling them that the tourists will still come in winter and bring back the economy. Yet the news is full of terror attacks and the adults of Annawadi are afraid that the airport and the luxury hotels will become targets. When an attack does come to the nearby Taj Hotel, the Annawadians know that the tourists will not be coming this year.

India's economy depends on international trading and tourism, meaning that any changes in these global markets can have disastrous consequences on a local level. Circumstances outside of the their control determine whether the Annawadians have a chance at improving their lives at all.

2009 brings economic hardship for the Annawadians. By January's end, most people are eating rats and catching frogs. Sunil has become a thief, desperate to make money. Sonu is disgusted with Sunil's dishonorable behavior, but Sunil knows he must do what he has to for survival. Furthermore, Sunil is well suited to thievery; he's small enough to deflect suspicion and smart enough to only take calculated risks.

As brutal as the recession was in developed countries, the effects in the precarious economy of Annawadi were ruinous. In this environment, everyone must let go of their pride or their morals in order to keep eating. Though Sunil does not respect thievery, he is forced into it so that he can eat.

Other thieves want Sunil to help them steal from a construction site at a new catering company, but Sunil is wary of the police after the beating he got last time he was caught. He prefers to steal from a construction zone at a parking structure in the airport's international terminal. He goes there to look for German silver, the most lucrative metal in the current market, but also to take advantage of the space on the parking structure's unfinished roof. Looking down on the expanse of Mumbai, Sunil feels both small and important as he watches the people below.

Sunil may be a thief, but he has not given in completely to that lifestyle. Boo shows Sunil's complex emotions about being forced into a life of theft, and his intense desire to be noticed for something other than crimes. Like most of the boys in Annawadi, Sunil wants his life to matter beyond the confines of the slum. On the roof, Sunil can at least pretend he is a part of the greater world of Mumbai.

Back in Annawadi, Sunil thinks sadly about all the people who want to die due to the hard economic times in Annawadi. He misses Kalu and his goofy jokes. Abdul is more sober company, always talking about philosophical questions such as what other people's lives feel like. Abdul muses aloud to Sunil that even a life where only terrible things happen is still a life. When Abdul voiced that thought to his mother, while she was beating him, Zehrunisa told him not to think about terrible lives. Sunil thinks about this later, deciding that his own life does matter even if it only matters to himself.

Boo shows that the many deaths weigh heavily on Sunil, though he only allows himself to think of these things when he is alone so as not to appear vulnerable. In the face of so much death, Abdul and Sunil consider what makes life worth living at all. They eventually settle on the idea that life is meaningful simply because it is life. Sunil takes pride in his own life, deciding that he does matter even if no one powerful or important can see that.

In February, another thief beats up Sunil and forces him to become part of the operation to rob the new catering building. Sunil earns enough money from the stolen goods to buy food and get himself an earring. After a few more weeks of lucrative theft, Sunil realizes that he is growing again and is almost as tall as his little sister Sunita.

Though Sunil resisted becoming a dishonest thief, it is the only way that he will thrive in Annawadi. The circumstances of the slum are so harsh that some corrupt actions is necessary to really survive.

CHAPTER 14: THE TRIAL

Karam teaches his children to believe in the justice of the Indian courts, though he privately understands that it all comes down to bribes. Still, he sees the courts as one place in Indian public institutions where a Muslim might make his voice heard. Fortunately, the Husain case is assigned to the Fast Track Sessions Court, rather than being relegated to the normal system which can take up to ten years for a verdict and cost ruinous amounts of money in the process. This trial only considers Karam and Kehkashan's involvement in Fatima's burning, as Abdul will be tried as a minor.

Karam also perpetuates the myth that India is fair to the poor, though he understands that money controls all the public administrations. Still, he trusts in the legal system not to carry on the discrimination he sees elsewhere in Indian society. Boo suggests that the court system is improving, even if it is still far from perfect in the way it handles these small trials.

Kehkashan, and Karam take the bus to the courthouse in a Mumbai neighborhood called Sewri. The judge is impatient for the trial to start, as she has over 35 trials going simultaneously and at least nine hearings to hold today. Kehkashan and Karam sit on a crowded bench of the accused as the evidence of their case is parceled out. The prosecution calls many "witnesses" from Annawadi who hadn't actually seen the event. Kehkashan sits in her burqa and sweats, grateful that no one can see her ashamed face.

Though it is a progressive achievement in India that the judge is female, Boo still points out that the court system is set up to make judges care little about the outcome of any one case. With so much work to get through, judges care more about whatever is fastest rather than whatever is true. Kehkashan, in her burqa, is essentially erased from the legal process, though she is somewhat glad for this invisibility as the trial is not actually considering anything that she did anyway.

The special executive officer who took their statements right after the event asks again for a bribe to ensure that no new evidence of malicious intent appears. Karam refuses, preferring to pay his lawyer and trust that the judge will see the truth. Priya is the first Annawadian called to the stand, which worries Kehkashan because Priya and Fatima were close. But Priya tells the truth on the stand, saying that she hadn't seen the actual event but that Fatima started many fights in Annawadi. Another witness whose evidence was rumored to be damning for the Husains also says that he wasn't even in Annawadi during the incident. Kehkashan begins to feel more optimistic.

Bribes seemingly never end for the Husains, as everyone wants to milk as much money from them as possible without caring for the hardship this family is facing. Kehkashan is surprised that people are actually telling the truth on the stand, as truth is rarely a concern in the corrupt Indian courts. The trial becomes a waste of time for all involved, as "witnesses" who did not see the event refuse to offer false evidence against the Husains.

The trial drags on until April, with short hearings on random days spread over the weeks. The judge becomes fed up with her stenographers' poor Hindi skills and eventually just starts telling the stenographer what to record in the official record. It becomes clear that the judge considers this whole affair a petty problem not worth her time. But Kehkashan and Karam are still facing the possibility of ten years in jail. They lean forward in their seats, trying to hear what is happening in the court room over the sound of traffic in the street.

The random schedule of the trial keeps the Husains from fully returning to work, another factor that discriminates against the poor who often do not eat on days they don't make a profit. The judge, again caring more for speed than accuracy, erases the words of the slum dwellers. Their testimony does not truly matter when the judge wants the simplest explanation instead of grappling with the nuance of the slum dweller's lives.

Fatima's husband finally takes the stand. Kehkashan remembers how the Husains had celebrated the holiest Muslim celebration, Eid, with Fatima's family this year. Despite this appearance of solidarity, Fatima's husband is angry that his late wife's word is being questioned in the trial. He wants to blame someone for his wife's death, and the Husains are the easiest target. He doesn't care if the Husains are innocent, since he is concerned that his daughters will grow up motherless. He removed them from the orphanage after seeing bruises on their arms, and he now brings them to the trial to see their mother avenged.

Fatima's family continues to compete against the Husains even though they are supposedly bonded in their Muslim faith. Concerns of profit and pride trump any collective feeling that these neighbors might feel through their Muslim brotherhood. Fatima's husband has to protect his daughters above all else, even more than he has to do the right thing and admit that the Husains were not at fault.

Fatima's husband is sworn in, but he quickly becomes flustered at the prosecutor's questions. After stumbling through his name and address, Fatima's husband insists that Fatima told him on her deathbed that the Husains had beat her with a large stone. Fatima's husband is so elated at getting this "evidence" out that he doesn't notice that the defense brings up Fatima's two previous attempts to burn herself with kerosene after the death of their youngest daughter.

Fatima's husband makes up even more lies about the Husains, completely ignoring the evidence that his wife was in intense emotional turmoil. Fatima's previous burn attempts attest to her sadness over her daughter's death even though she tried to put up a brave face in front of others. It is another example of how personally the Annawadians grieve in a world that is not set up to allow them to mourn in peace.

The next witness is Fatima's friend Cynthia. The Husains refused to pay Cynthia not to lie about the fight right after the incident and have been dreading her vengeance for months. Cynthia prepares her appearance carefully the day of her court appearance and readies herself to bring down the Husain family that she has been jealous of for so long.

Cynthia, while acting out of loyalty to her friend, also has feelings of personal competition with the Husains. The Husain family's good fortune in Annawadi earned them many enemies who saw their success as the reason that others, like Cynthia, failed.

Yet when the judge calls Cynthia forward, it's not like the movie trials that Cynthia has seen. The prosecutor does not give her enough time to tell her made-up story about how she tried to save Fatima. During the cross-examination, Cynthia gets tripped up in her own lies and the judge throws out her testimony. Cynthia yells at the court to wait, but the judge pays no attention. Closing arguments for the Husain case will come in two weeks.

Cynthia has grand dreams of her day in court, expecting life to be like the movies that convinced her she would matter in court. The judge and prosecutor do not care about Cynthia's words, speaking over her and eventually erasing her from the official record because it makes the trial easier.

CHAPTER 15: ICE

One afternoon after the trial, Abdul, Mirchi, Zehrunisa and Karam consider the trash left in the storeroom. They have to sell it now, even though prices are still low, because they have sold the storeroom to pay for the lawyer. Their profits have been even further depleted by Abdul's frequent trips to check in at Dongri and their new vow not to buy anything stolen. The police continue to sniff around the family, hoping to catch them doing something wrong so they can extort even more money.

Though the trial is now close to over, it continues to have a deep impact on the Husains' lives. This one disaster was enough to lead them to failure in the competitive world of Annawadi. The justice system and the police do not care about the Husains economic hardship, demanding that the Husains be perfect even if that means they cannot make a profit.

As the family recycling business fails, Mirchi has been forced to take any job available, so he works construction and loads a freezer for a catering company. He prays that someone will notice his talent, charm and hard-working nature. But there are too many boys in Mumbai looking for permanent work and Mirchi is stuck with temp jobs.

Mirchi desperately wants to be noticed and singled out as special in his jobs outside Annawadi. But the wider world of Mumbai considers all slum boys unimportant and interchangeable, leaving Mirchi to survive on his own from day to day.

All of Mumbai begins to follow another case in which a young Pakistani man is the lone survivor gunman of a terror attack. Karam laments the terrorists who twist the words of the Koran and Abdul feels hopeful when he sees that the Hindus of Mumbai don't seem to transfer their anger to all the Muslims of the city. Rich people in Mumbai are also hopeful that they can rehabilitate the Indian government into a government capable of keeping its citizens safe, as security is the only thing that the rich can't buy privately.

India seems to have made some progress towards tolerance when the actions of one Muslim man do not lead to the exclusion of all Muslims from Hindu society in Mumbai. This terrorism ironically works better to bring a united national sentiment than any of the government programs, as the rich see that they have to invest in their country in order to ensure their personal safety.

The terrorist attacks act as a reminder that most public services, including police, medical response teams, and military squads, are dangerously untrained and underfunded. Parliamentary elections at the end of April bring record numbers of middle and upper-class candidates running for office to bring change, as well as a new fervor for voting among the rich and the poor.

The rich are willing to address problems in India's infrastructure only when their own lives are at risk, showing that personal gain is still the biggest motivator even when it looks like all of India is coming together in this parliamentary election.

The Husain family's business finally fails completely when another garbage trader moves in to Annawadi. Abdul tries to trade in a nearby neighborhood, Saki Naka, but mostly he just sits and enjoys being in an environment where everyone does not know his tragedies. He thinks about water and ice, two substances made of the same thing, just as all people are made of the same thing. Yet ice is better than what it is made of, in Abdul's opinion, and Abdul hopes to be the "ice" that rises above the dirty water of his slum. Being ice means believing in ideals and the possibility of justice.

Outside of Annawadi, Abdul can again reflect on the circumstances that have brought him to this low point. The intense competition and constant corrupt deals that mark every aspect of life in Annawadi have created a culture in which every Annawadian is marked by that harsh life. Abdul recognizes that he is part of Annawadi, but hopes to retain some morals despite how stepped he is in Annawadian culture.

A new judge is appointed when the judge who has heard all the Husain family's evidence gets transferred. The Husains are crushed that they will have to convince yet another person of their innocence. The special executive officer tries to get the Husains to pay her to have Fatima's husband call off the trial, hiding the fact that this is a criminal trial that cannot be shut down by a private citizen. Karam checks with his lawyer and refuses the special executive officer's corrupt bargain.

Every time the Husains believe their trial is over, the convoluted workings of the Indian justice system again throw an obstacle in their way. Yet Karam's insistence on doing things the right way and resisting bribes finally pays off, as he catches the special executive officer in a lie and is able to save some money for his family. Boo suggests that corruption in India will eventually become less prevalent as the poor are given more access to information about how their country actually works.

Part of popular Indian mythology is that Indian success comes from the very instability of their country, which forces Indians to constantly adapt. Yet for the poor, forced to reinvent themselves over and over, this adaptability no longer brings profit. Abdul wants to believe that his new persona as a virtuous student of The Master will finally bring him the good life he is looking for, but each day Abdul cannot earn any money in Saki Naka.

The constant shifting nature of life in Annawadi means that the poor can never be sure exactly what is going to bring them success. Abdul, who has been working hard for years, has already seen how his entire life could fall apart in one day. His new devotion to living virtuously could follow a similar path if Abdul is unlucky.

As a distraction one afternoon, Abdul goes to Haji Ali, the biggest Muslim gathering place in the city. He sees the beauty of the temple as it is shown in postcards and calendars, but he also sees the throngs of disabled beggars lining the road up to the mosque. He leaves quickly, reminded too much of Fatima. He prays that the courts will see him as ice, proclaiming him innocent despite the dirty water of his life.

The vision of India and Mumbai shown to tourists is far different than the city that Abdul sees as he lives there. The postcard version erases much of the poverty and the hardship of this life. Abdul hopes that living in the midst of this corruption and inequality has not permanently marked him, but the desperation of this scene suggests that Abdul's hopes are unlikely.

CHAPTER 16: BLACK AND WHITE

Asha continues to try to rise above Annawadi, but none of her new schemes work in the first months of 2009. One of the policemen she sleeps with finds a new mistress, and even her connection to Corporator Subhash Sawant goes sour once Subhash is dismissed from his post when a judge finds him guilty of low-caste fraud. Despite the excitement and duties of the upcoming parliamentary election, Asha just wants to stay in her house and cry.

All of Asha's immoral ambition seems to come back to bite her, hinting that corruption will not actually lead to long-term success for India and Indian citizens. The same systems for helping the oppressed in India (such as those born low-caste) can only be exploited for so long before the rich are held accountable for their actions. In writing about Asha's life, Boo helps expose some of this fraud.

Manju is saddened to see her mother depressed, and she tries to cheer Asha, but Asha can't let go of her long list of disappointments and she broods over the smallest slights. Asha's competitive spirit had told her that she was winning because other people like the Husains were failing, but now Asha sees that she has not actually made much forward progress. She still lives in a small hut with an alcoholic husband in a neighborhood where people are starting to dislike her.

The competitive nature of Annawadi, in which success meant watching other people fail, is exposed as an unsustainable approach to true progress. In order to improve her life, Asha must do something other than take advantage of other people. Watching other people live worse lives can only satisfy Asha for so long as her life does not improve.

All of Annawadi starts to actively hate Asha when Asha tries to make a profit from the widespread fear that Annawadi will soon be destroyed by the airport officials. City officials in Mumbai are more focused on clearing the Annawadi slum than ever. Slum relocation efforts in other parts of the city have not relieved the problem, simply pushing slum residents onto other slums and reinforcing the issues of over-crowding. Mumbai needs Annawadi to be a success story to show that the city really is addressing urban poverty. Asha is angry that the slums are seen as a sign of backwards India, but she decides to see this sad news as a money-making opportunity.

Annawadi begins to reward community minded behavior more than individual beneficial behavior as their community itself is threatened. All of Annawadi has to come together to protect against the encroaching power of the city government to wipe Annawadi off the map, or the risk being part of the huge population displaced from their homes in the name of progress. Asha again places these emotions below the chance to make money.

Asha helps Annawadians sell their homes here to middle class Indians who think these houses will soon be valuable to the city government. Anyone who can show that they have been an Annawadi resident since 2000 is entitled to a tiny apartment with the prize of running water, which means that plenty of middle class Indians try to falsify papers to say they are Annawadians in order to take advantage of this luxury. Asha helps politicians buy her neighbors' huts, until one young mother decides she doesn't want to leave. The hut's new buyer sends a gang of men to force the woman and her children from the house and all Annawadi watches as Asha does nothing to help this poor slum resident. Asha gains a reputation for ruthlessness and greed.

While the Annawadians originally respected Asha's single-minded determination to make money, Boo shows there is a breaking point to the glorification of profit above all else. With everyone in Annawadi uncertain about their future, Asha's exploitation of vulnerable families is seen as the monstrous act it is – not a clever scheme to get ahead. While the middle-class Indians might not care about the Annawadians they are abusing, the Annawadians have finally gained a community consciousness.

Asha becomes more cautious in her economic schemes, but she still gets involved in a government program that publicly claims it will educate all the poor laborer children of Mumbai and privately hopes to line investors' pockets with government funds. Asha already has a properly registered non-profit license from a previous corrupt endeavor, so she is chosen to receive the government checks for this education fraud and distribute the money to the proper people. When the first government check clears, Asha feels that all her corrupt dealings have been for the greater good of her family.

Despite the points that Boo has been making about the ultimate damage that corruption does to Indian communities, Asha's corruption finally gains her personal profit. Rendering the government's efforts to help poor Indians futile, Asha takes part in fraud like that happening all over India. Corrupt deals such as this one keep entire communities, like Annawadi, from thriving as individuals get rich.

Asha tells Manju not to worry about getting a job after her studies anymore, now that the small empire of fake schools will fund them for life. Manju is uncomfortable with this, but gives in when Asha uses some of their new money to get a computer and an Internet connection. Asha completely shuts down the Annawadi slum school Manju had been running, and Manju can't help but feel that their punishment for this sin is coming—she has just read about the ultimate reckoning of *Dr. Faustus* for her English class.

Even Manju, who had once been so committed to helping the poor girls of Annawadi, give up some of her moral high ground in return for the personal profit of a computer. Yet Manju's reference to Dr. Faustus – a man who sold his soul to the devil for money – subtly hints that Asha may have gained economically but has not become truly successful.

Nearly half a billion people register to vote in the parliamentary elections that will choose the representatives – who then decide on India's new prime minister. Annawadi's representative will almost certainly be a woman named Priya Dutt, since she has a double advantage: she is not only from a Bollywood family, but her father held the seat she's running for before her. Priya's political party gifts Annawadi with new sewer covers to ensure their vote, then takes them back when they need more support in a larger Mumbai slum. The Annawadians laugh at this blatant corruption.

Despite the national fervor for this year's elections, Boo points out that political dealings in India are still based on concerns other than policy. Elections most often go to those with fame and connections, rather than those who will truly help Indian citizens. The Annawadians see that Priya Dutt does not care about them personally, but still accept that corruption is the only way that Indian politics can be.

Voting rights are scattered and often withheld from the poorest minorities in India, such as Zehrunisa and Karam who have tried to register for seven years and been denied. Slum dwellers who desperately want to get on the rolls and prove that they are a legitimate part of a state that despises them go to Asha for help. Asha ignores them, having decided that being slumlord is far too much work for far too little profit. Asha's corrupt school empire makes her a member of the middle class in India, at least in her imagination, and she does not have to pay attention to underlings in the slum.

Voting rights, the one way in which Annawadians consider themselves equal to all other Indian citizens, are not even universal. The poor, who are already disadvantaged, are also disenfranchised so that their voice will not be heard in the elections that decide the future of their country. With no representation in the Indian government, it seems clear that the discriminated groups will remain in their lowly states. People such as Asha, who were once part of that group, exacerbate the problem by ignoring their roots rather than lifting up their communities.

CHAPTER 17: A SCHOOL, A HOSPITAL, A CRICKET FIELD

In mid-May, the election results come in. The status-quo is mostly maintained and the previous prime minister is returned to office. All hopes of real change for the poor in India are postponed. Plans to demolish Annawadi begin as the **Beautiful Forever wall** is taken down and construction begins on the edges of the slum. Children flock to the construction sites, finding plenty of recyclables churned up by the bulldozers. As rumors of what this land will become fly—a school, a hospital, a taxi stand, and a runway are all considered—Annawadians are glad that they can at least make some profit off of this change.

Though change does not come at the highest level of Indian government, Boo does suggest that there will be some differences in how the privileged in India deal with the poorest citizens. The imminent destruction of Annawadi, though sad, is not presented as a tragedy. Indeed, the absence of the wall means that the slum residents may finally be seen by those in power instead of hidden away. With Annawadi gone, the Annawadians believe they have an opportunity to improve their situation.

A few weeks later, reporters come to Annawadi for a story on the public outcry over Robert Pires' recent business efforts to pass off horses as zebras for children's parties. Animal rights activists lament the poor state in which these animals are kept, though Annawadians had often been jealous of the relative luxury these horses had enjoyed. No attention is given to the still uninvestigated deaths of Kalu and Sanjay, and the slum boys accept that the lives of horses mean more to prosperous Mumbai than the lives of the poor who Mumbai would like to pretend do not exist.

Robert Pyre, the original slumlord of Annawadi, resigned because he no longer wanted a part of political corruption in Annawadi. Ironically, he is arrested rather than Asha who actually benefits from illegal deals. Animal rights activists also focus on the wrong thing, worrying about the welfare of horses and ignoring the deplorable conditions that human children endure in Annawadi.

Still, activist activity in Annawadi inspires the Annawadians to begin making noise about the human rights issues that have been present for so long here. Abdul has elaborate fantasies of reforming the police station. Yet the Annawadians do not band together in their efforts to improve Annawadi, each pouring energy into individual causes and fighting ferociously among each other for which cause should receive attention.

Instead of rising up with one goal, the Annawadians remain split in their individual issues. Boo points out that this lack of community cohesion is one of the biggest factors in Annawadi's destruction. Without social support, all the causes the Annawadians care about are doomed to fail.

In June of 2009, the rains begin again and the new judge hears more witnesses in the case against Kehkashan and Karam. Kehkashan gives up on caring about the verdict, since she is too consumed with the day-to-day state of her family as they try to get enough to eat. With the collapse of their garbage trading business, Abdul has taken jobs transporting other people's trash to the recyclers and another one of the younger Husain brothers drops out of school to work temp jobs with Mirchi.

Kehkashan and Karam can no longer care about the larger trial looming in their lives, as immediate concerns of getting their family food must take precedence. Yet another child in the Husain family has his future cut short by the pressing need to survive that day, giving up his chance at an education to get a job. The poverty of the Husains thus continues for another generation.

Finally, at the end of July, the prosecutor and defense make closing arguments for the Husain case. After teasing Kehkashan for her burqa and Karam for his job "in plastics," the judge pronounces them not guilty. All that is left of this miserable business is Abdul's case in juvenile courts. The hearing is postponed again and again until 2009 is almost over.

The judge who has complete control over Karam and Kehkashan's future obviously has no respect for their lives as Muslims or as part of the working poor. They are pronounced not guilty, but it is a small victory in the face of all their other troubles and Abdul's continuing case.

Zehrunisa pays a Sufi mystic to see if Fatima's ghost is responsible for dragging out Abdul's case. The Sufi takes Zehrunisa's money, assuring her that the trouble is now gone. Yet another year passes with no movement on Abdul's trial. At the end of 2010, Abdul decides he is destined to live his entire life suspended between innocent and guilty. He gives up on his discipleship of The Master and allows himself to become "dirty water" in Annawadi, giving in to unethical choices to make sure his family has food.

After aspirations of modern Indian have failed Zehrunisa, she turns back to the old ways of her faith. Yet even this can no longer comfort her or Abdul as he rests in limbo between innocent and guilty. This state metaphorically applies to all the poor of Mumbai, who are just waiting to be arrested for the "crimes" of living in slums where the rich of India do not want them.

Karam sadly gives up on the dream of Vasai, giving long impassioned speeches on how the Husain family missed out on their future. Abdul pays no attention to this, focusing on his work transporting recyclables around Mumbai. On his various routes, he sometimes dreams of never returning to Annawadi, but he always comes back in the end.

Karam accepts that his family will never get out of Annawadi (or another slum like it). The cycle of poverty continues, as efforts to break out of this way of life are often cut short. Abdul's days seeing the Mumbai in which he will never belong are a small version of Karam's resignation.

One morning, Abdul runs in to Sunil, who asks for money to get something to eat. Sunil has gone back to scavenging rather than thieving as the police are getting stricter again. The young boy has almost given up on trying to plan his future, simply taking each day as it comes. Abdul thinks that he will probably never see Sunil again after Annawadi is demolished, but he wishes the younger boy luck finding trash this day.

Though theft offered Sunil money, the threat of police brutality returns Sunil to the more familiar danger of starvation. Sunil sees that ambitions to leave Annawadi rarely pan out, and that grand dreams should be secondary to everyday survival. While the Annawadians must limit their concerns to their immediate surroundings, Boo brings their lives to the world through this book. She makes Sunil matter, showing both how the community of Annawadi fails to thrive and how the same issues of poverty threaten millions of boys like Sunil around the world.

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