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ON GARBAGE AND ICE: ETHICS OF THE SLUMS
IN KATHERINE BOO'S *BEHIND THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVERS*

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Abstract: *The present paper dwells on the complex representation of the Indian slums in Katherine Boo's 2012 novel Behind the Beautiful Forevers. Leaving behind the conventional over-sentimentalised and over-optimistic literary and cinematographic depictions, the writer places her text on the boundary between fiction and journalism, discussing poverty, inequality, hope and despair in one of the most surprising cities of the globalised world, from a new perspective.*

Keywords: *beautification, impossible ethics, policies of representations, relocation, urban planning*

1. Introduction

The confrontation of our contemporary world with the ever-increasing globalisation, extensive urbanisation and new neo-liberal policies has drawn attention to the life, politics and aesthetics of the slums around the world. Their eradication vs. their assimilation has inspired endless debates and analyses, statistics and governmental policies – that promote either unrealistic or apocalyptic assessments, along with literary and cinematographic representations, most of the time focusing on idealist and sentimental depictions. Though slums are a global phenomenon, we tend to juxtapose the image of the slum with the overcrowded, squalid and insalubrious Indian slum.

Mostly ignored by the urban upper classes and generally invisible for the governmental officials, with the brief exception of election periods, slums have become the evidence that global capitalism, the rapidly spreading urbanisation and the aggressive neoliberal policies might have a gloomy counterpart. Slums often translate as the spectral space inhabited by the new urban poor, a space usually associated to violence, moral degradation and criminality, and thus demonised and economically excluded.

Katherine Boo, an investigative reporter for *Washington Post* (between 1993 and 2003) who also wrote for *The New Yorker*, took an active interest in the lives of the poor communities living in the big cities of America, especially in the wake of Clinton's welfare reforms, and in the possibilities of improving their living conditions. The investigation she carried on related to the learning-disabled people's status in the American contemporary society brought to light many dramatic and traumatic revelations (also shedding light upon many unexplained deaths during the 90s) and brought her The Pulitzer Prize in 2000. *After Welfare*, the investigation on the life in the ghettos, was rewarded with the Sidney Hillman Award (2003), whereas *The Marriage Cure*, an analysis of the African-American women's situation involving the government-sponsored marriage programmes, brought her another prestigious National Magazine Award (2004).

Boo's interest in the Indian slums came shortly after her marrying Sunil Kilnani, the director of the Indian Institute at King's College London. "Ten years ago," she confessed in

the Afterword of her non-fictional novel *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*, “I fell in love with an Indian man and gained a country. He urged me not to take it at face value” (Boo 2012:247). She did not “take it at face value”, as warned, but underwent a meticulous research on the Indian slums that resulted in three years of living in India (between November 2007 and March 2011), in the slum she was investigating, sharing the same experiences as her characters, being a keen witness of the events narrated in the book, going scavenging or running away from the police along with her teenage heroes, checking on all the available official records and police documents. In an interview given for *The Hindu* she explains the methodology she generally uses in her researches and investigations and this is obvious in the way in which she wrote *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*:

I’m watching people negotiate the dilemmas of their lives in real time. Simultaneously, I’m using investigative techniques, including right-to-information act requests, to illuminate events that involve the police, courts, voting offices, public hospitals and morgues, and even charitable institutions. (Menon 2014)

Her aim in writing *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* (2012) – which brought her the 2012 National Book Award for Nonfiction and PEN/Kenneth Galbraith Award for Nonfiction – was to answer to a shortage of non-fiction about India. Her documentary storytelling and her style, described as immersion journalism, are marked by an obvious detachment from the idealist and spectacular representation of Indian poverty that sells well in the West but does not always reflect the truth. Her entire endeavour – “time spent, attention paid, documentation secured, accounts cross checked” (Boo 2012:249), also displays profound sympathy for the people she studied.

As a writer I’m not looking to tell the most flamboyant tales, nor to describe only the most virtuous and super-talented people. I’m looking for resonant stories—stories that might illuminate something about the structure of a society. And it’s difficult to predict in the beginning which individuals’ experiences, months or years later, will come to shed that light”. (Interview with Kate Medina)

2. Ethics of Representation

There are obvious discrepancies when it comes to the extremely diverse representations of the slum, depending on their purpose, target public and political interests that generated them. Official statistics tell us that 924 million people (31.6 % of the entire world population) lived in slums in 2001, and out of these, 554 million slum dwellers were located in South Asia. The rapid urban growing and the ensuing social segregation generate these “gigantic concentrations of poverty” (Davis 2006:5) that expose ever deeper social inequities and extreme exploitation. According to the UNHABITAT 2003 report “slums are a physical and spatial manifestation of urban poverty and intra-city inequality. However, slums do not accommodate all of the urban poor, nor are all slum dwellers always poor” (UNHABITAT 2003:xxvi).

Extremely poor living conditions, squalid housing and lack of basic infrastructure are the general coordinates by which we assess and represent the slum. Seen as a result of intensive urbanisation and industrialisation that triggered massive migration from rural areas and engendered the urban poor, the slum has been and continues to be caught between governmental vain promises, shiny neo-liberal policies and idealistic vs. demonic media representations. The UNFPA (The United Nations Population Fund) 2007 contradicted the generally accepted claim that the urban poor represent a drain to economy by bringing arguments that demonstrate the capacity of this “informal sector” to offer a considerable potential that makes it a very dynamic field well integrated into the urban economy.

The slum has been variously and conflictingly represented in the global geography of the “megacity” as offering an active “home-based entrepreneurship” (Nijman 2010:13) that redraws the dialectics of centre and periphery – now seen as a “potentially generative space – a source of innovation and adaptation”, that may lead to the “destabilisation of the center” (Simone 2010:40) or as representing a space of “subaltern urbanism” (see Roy 2011) that undermines apocalyptic representation of the megacity.

The forces generally working upon the fluctuating geography of the slums and of their representation are most of the time dialectical. They can be negative policies, related to forced eviction and slum clearance, performed in the name of and under the pretext of city beautification, spiced up with beautiful electoral promises of better relocation, and to benign neglect that renders slums virtually invisible and leads to involuntary resettlement. These negative policies most of the time create negative representations mainly focused on sordid, naturalistic descriptions of utter poverty, lack of hygienic conditions and high criminality.

The positive policies applied on the slum are largely equally inefficient. They are based on self-help and *in situ* upgrading – thus forcing slum inhabitants to bring adjustments and alleviation to their own lives. Different enabling rights-based policies seem to offer relatively more reliable, at least in theory, solutions through urban poverty reduction and economic structural adjustment policies as well as urban planning based on urban inclusiveness.

If official representations (statistics, analyses, surveys, etc.) are most of the time engendered according to the interests of the moment (during electoral campaigns or whenever the issue of governmental reform is brought up), fictional accounts are also sometimes accused of perpetuating a false image of India, mostly Western oriented. In literature, texts that depict the slums are not numerous and if they tackle the subject, they do it quite fugitively, except perhaps for Rohinton Mistry’s *A fine balance* (1995), Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) and *Last Man in Tower* (2011), and Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A* (2005), which dwell on more extensive approaches of the slum. In cinema, classical works like *Boot Polish* (Prakash Arora, Raj Kapur 1954), *Salaam Bombay* (Mira Nair, 1988) and *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle, 2008), praised, awarded and warmly received in the West, are however criticised in the East for promoting a sentimental perspective and putting forth unrealistic solutions.

2.1 New versus old India

The slum may or may not be ugly, it may or not symbolise absurdity, but it always has a story to tell about the state of the vitality, creativity and moral dynamism of the society that defines the relationship between the slum and suburbia. That story can take many forms. The slum can be read as the past of the suburbia or as an alternative to or decline from it. (Nandy 1999:11)

Katherine Boo chose to tell the stories of a particular Indian slum, Annawadi, a place where 3,000 people live in 335 more or less improvised huts. Her stated intention is in fact to make all the silent little stories of these unfortunate people heard and to render them visible. Boo is mainly interested in getting her readers acquainted to what it means, at least in theory, to live in the slum and what the mechanisms that make it function are. For Boo’s characters life in the slum means a continuous struggle to survive. It looks like a sentence to lifetime prison – implying low-paid temporary occupations, lack of means of subsistence, taking up degrading jobs like waste picking, cleaning, tanning, etc. – that does not allow an easy escape but, at the same time, does not completely annihilate hope and aspiration.

Living in the slum, however unlikely it might seem when seen from the perspective of gloomy statistics and apocalyptic assessments, is governed by general ethical principles among which the most basic ones are “Avoid trouble!” and “Don’t call attention to yourself!”,

translating as an urge for self-effacement and invisibility. Invisibility is utmost bliss in a place where poverty is the norm and sickness and guilt are inevitable conditions: "To be poor in Annawadi, or in any Mumbai slum, was to be guilty of one thing or another" (Boo 2012:xviii). This is what the main characters in *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers* know all too well. They all try to survive and still preserve their humanity in spite of the harsh slum dynamics that mainly operate on hunger and economic envy, thus opposing the general urge to annihilate any sense of community and solidarity in favour of selfishness and personal profit.

"Every house was off-kilter, so less off-kilter looked like straight. Sewage and sickness looked like life" (Boo 2012:5). Life in the slum is given a very accurate and vivid description in Boo's novel. It is a continuous struggle but, as the title suggests, hidden beauty might also be found somewhere behind the encrusted layers of ugliness and extreme poverty.

This is a space located at the intersection between the old, caste-conscious India, that cherishes traditions, customs and colonial reminiscences, and the new India, ever-thriving, ever-globalised, postcolonial and capitalist, between the formal and informal city. Annawadi is situated near the Sahar Airport Road and the International Airport. It is, in fact, a space where "new India and old India collided and made new India late" (Boo 2012:5), an isle of poverty and garbage, surrounded by five luxurious hotels – "Everything around us is roses and we're the shit in between" (Boo 2012:xii) – and separated from the rest of the world by a tall wall on which series of posters advertise for Italian floor-tiles, under the slogan: BEAUTIFUL FOREVER.

Initially built by a team of workers from the Southern state of Tamil Nadu who, after finishing their work, decided to settle there, probably lured by the economic possibilities the proximity to the airport might have offered, it was extended with the addition of new shanties improvised by migrants coming mostly from rural areas. Poverty spread and deepened, though official statistics do not count Annawadians among the poor people but include them among the one million Indians allegedly freed from poverty by economic liberalisation.

3. Ethics of the Slum

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 future were a cousin arriving on Saturday, as if the future would look nothing like the past. (Boo 2012:xvi-xvii)

Judging according to how media represent the slum, goodness and beauty might seem incompatible and unexpected in such a place, but Boo discovers them in the personalities and philosophies of life of many of her teenage characters. Abdul is the central character, a garbage sorter a notch above his fellows in the social hierarchy of the slum. His earnings bring prosperity to his family and this is obvious in the progressive consolidation of their shanty and in the climactic attempt at redecorating the kitchen with Italian floor tiles. In the noisy process of redecoration, Zehrunisa, Abdul's mother, starts a fight with her crippled neighbour, Fatima, the One-Leg, who, envious of the Husains' better living conditions, complains about the noise, pours kerosene upon her clothes and sets herself on fire. Surviving this self-immolation, she accuses the Husains of attempted murder.

The accounts of the police investigation give Boo the occasion to severely criticise the Indian justice system and its extreme corruption. Abdul, his father and sister are taken to the police and forced to indefinitely wait for what turns out to be a Kafka-like process. After Fatima's death in the hospital, the Husains lose everything they possess while trying to prove their innocence, even if the entire neighbourhood could have testified for their good intentions.

The Husains' story, in no way unique, lays bare the new mentality of the slums, inspired by the global market society on whose criticism Boo extensively dwells. A combination of desire and hope is what keeps people going on and provides them with the motto of the New Indian Miracle promoted by Bollywood and Hollywood: "from zero to hero". Starting from this, a sharp tongue, "discretion and subtlety" (Boo 2012:19) and the art of dodging catastrophe become the leading life principles in the slum.

In Annawadi, fortunes derived not just from what people did or how they well they did it, but from the accidents and catastrophes they dodged. A decent life was the train that hadn't hit you, the slumlord you hadn't offended, the malaria you hadn't caught. (Boo 2012:xx)

The inhabitants of the slum seem to perpetually oscillate between the permanence of poverty and destitution, and the provisionality of jobs, fortune and good health. The inheritance of guilt and bad luck seems also to be sometimes counteracted by an instinctual ethical sense that engenders goodness, beauty and dreams of a better life. Even if dreaming unrealistic dreams is like "trying to write your name in a bowl of melted kulfi" (Boo 2012:15), Boo's characters never cease to hope and to offer instances of unexpected ethical philosophy.

There is a general longing for rebirth in the slum: Abdul Husain, the main character and Boo's favourite teenager in the book, dreams of social rebirth translated as an attempt to transcend his condition while preserving his ethics – "aiming for a future like the past but with more money" (Boo 2012:111); Mr. Raja Kambal dreams of medical rebirth that might provide him with a new heart valve; Asha, uneducated, unscrupulous, promiscuous though very beautiful, dreams of political rebirth as the first Indian slumlady, whereas her daughter, Manju, dreams of personal rebirth through education, as the first college graduate of the slum. Her childhood friend, Meena, wishes for a happy family life and Kalu, the top slum thief and entertainer wants to keep children happy through his jokes and funny impersonations. Such characters as the hard working Abdul, the virtuous Manju and Sonu provide Boo with insights into the ethical principles of the slum. The solutions found to the various problems of living in this space of fierce struggle for physical and spiritual survival range from finding an "entrepreneurial niche", embracing politics and corruption, to education.

3.1 The philosophy of garbage

Through the real voices of her characters Boo gives her readers a valuable lesson of life starting from the science and philosophy of garbage, since garbage is the most powerful metaphor in the novel and garbage pickers and sorters, her main heroes. Seen as remnants of an urban prosperous overcity civilization, garbage becomes, in the undercity, a real waste business, an example of vendible excess that ensures people's daily means of living since someone's waste is someone else's prosperity.

There is a paradoxical equation between garbage and progress which is visible when we try to quantify progress in the amount of things we consume rather than produce, so that the huge expanses of landfill and garbage piles where people, live, work and die are the obvious measure of our progress and welfare. This is a thorny issue in the case of a metropolis like Mumbai, the global city by excellence, which privatises any available spot, maximises profit and assumes a fierce global competitiveness. Discarding 8,000 tons of garbage on a daily basis and producing 6.11% of the Indian total waste in 2012 (according to *The Indian Express*, 2014), Mumbai is actively involved in garbage management strategies that might alleviate the plight of the inhabitants of its slums.

Boo uses garbage as the most powerful metaphorical image in the novel, using it to comment upon life, politics and humanity. Thus, the ever worse quality of waste indicates

social decay and a general deterioration not only of people's living conditions but also of their sense of solidarity and humanity. To the same extent, sorting garbage becomes a means of sorting people, according to the garbage they produce. "It made sense to Abdul that in a polyglot city, people would sort themselves as he sorted his garbage, like with like" (Boo 2012:13). Garbage finally becomes an image of an ever more divided society and of a fractured humanity, as well as of chaotic and dysfunctional institutions: "The criminal justice system was a market like garbage, Abdul now understood. Innocence and guilt could be bought and sold like a kilo of polyurethane bags" (Boo 2012:107).

Waste segregation provides a helpful metaphorical means not only of assessing the corruption of major Indian institutions but also of building new national myths – the fluctuating quality and quantity of garbage mirrors the "chaotic unpredictability of everyday life" and this "chaotic uncertainty" engenders "a nation of quick-witted, creative problem-solvers" (Boo 2012:219).

3.2 Instinctual ethics

The ethical world of the slum as depicted by Katherine Boo, though sometimes totally obliterated by greed and economic envy, is governed by solid principles of life and conduct in the slums. Typical examples are Sunil, the little boy in charge with taking care of his sister, for whom "the habit of not asking anyone for anything had become a part of who he was" (Boo 2012:35) and Manju, who uses virtue almost as a weapon against her mother, wholeheartedly embraces education and clings to the study of the English language as to a life buoy.

Abdul adopts an instinctual rejection of vices thought to impede on his working capacities. He completely embraces righteousness and summarises his life philosophy in the metaphorical images of water and ice – that translate both the slum, as a place where sharp contrasts meet, where beauty and ugliness are inseparable, and human nature as a battle ground of opposite drives:

Water and ice were made of the same thing. He thought most people were made of the same thing, too. He himself was probably little different, constitutionally, from the cynical, corrupt people around him. [...] If he had to sort all humanity by its material essence, he thought he would probably end up with a single gigantic pile.

He wanted to be better than what he was made of. In Mumbai's dirty water, he wanted to be ice. He wanted to have ideals. For self-interested reasons, one of the ideals he most wanted to have was a belief in the possibility of justice. (Boo 2012:218)

Abdul is perceptive and wise enough to realize that the world – as seen by Asha, the upstart of the slum, and Fatima – can also function on no ethics at all and might leave no space for solidarity, empathy and kindness. Under these conditions the slum becomes a space that does not recognize the link between effort and result, virtue and moral reward. In such a place he knows nothing and nobody could change, he craves for purification and self-improvement: "He wanted to be recognized as better than the dirty water in which he lived. He wanted a verdict of ice" (Boo 2012:220).

4. Conclusion: Impossible Ethics

In spite of Abdul's idealist principles and in spite of the fact that many other characters never cease to stick to their moral ideas, the slum proves to be a space that most of the time resists ethics. If Mumbai itself represents "a hive of hope and ambition, festering grievance and ambient envy" (Boo 2012:20), the slum can only intensify and bring corruption to a dramatic climax. This is ironically and cynically depicted in the way in which the Husains' trial is conducted, in the manner in which politicians make use of and manipulate the

slum inhabitants according to their electoral purposes, in the absurd accusations of violence against animals when children are exploited and abused with no legal consequences, or in the mind-blowing governmental decision that Abdul's sorting garbage business damages the quality of air and life in Annawadi. Equally hilarious, even Abdul's age is a matter of negotiation in the Detention Centre for Juveniles: he "was seventeen years old if he paid two thousands rupees and twenty years old if he did not" (Boo 2012:129), thus making his punishment as a child or as an adult dependable on his bribe. On the other hand, corruption seems to be the only means of surviving in the slum and it provides the only way out of the chaotic bureaucracy.

In the West, and among some in the Indian elite, this world, corruption, had purely negative connotations; it was seen as blocking India's modern, global ambitions. But for the poor of a country where corruption thrived a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained. (Boo 2012:28)

The dysfunctions that mar all Indian institutions, including the medical, educational, and justice systems, engender a pervading indifference to human suffering and a generalised sabotage of the innate capacity for moral action. "If the house is crooked and crumbling and the land on which it sits uneven, is it possible to make anything lie straight?" (Boo 2012:254) People still dream it is, they still conduct their life according to moral principles and Katherine Boo (2012:253) herself claims "hope is not a fiction" in the end of her book, but reality seems to point towards a gloomy image and impossible ethics.

The fact that Boo used real people and real incidents as the core of her non-fictional novel has often been questioned. Moral issues have been debated since many lives and slum experiences have been exposed to public attention, in the attempt to ameliorate things, but also to public retaliation. Nobody can question the moral aims of the novel that tried to defend ethics in a world where "much of what was said did not matter and much of what mattered could not be said" (Boo 2012:172). Once uttered, Boo's stories succeeded in touching many hearts but did not produce the expected effects as practically no character's life was changed for the better after the publication of the book, but drew public attention, once more, upon a problematic reality. Slum proves to be an insidious prison (of one's life, mentality, and self-esteem) with almost no means of escape. Abdul, finally, best summarizes this state of things when stating:

For some time I tried to keep the ice inside me from melting. But 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 how the world is. (Boo 2012:241)

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