

# Gender division in annawadian society



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Gender division has been a global struggle for centuries, from rights to the general treatment of women. Women have been struggling to achieve equality because they have been experiencing discrimination, been steadily concerned about their futures and safety because they are female, and undergoing brutal cultural oppression by their communities. The book *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* by Katherine Boo demonstrates a society in which the quality of life for women and girls is much poorer than it is for men and boys.

In Annawadi, rigid cultural restraints have formed restricting societal expectations and gender constructs that cause life to be worse for women than it is for men. Gender constructs influenced by societal expectations made life for women a constant battle of contemplating the risks of their actions that men would not need to consider. Unlike the men of Annawadi, the women are regularly conscious about how the results of their actions could be possibly detrimental to their societal ranking. Image plays a crucial role in making a decision that could be destructive to their placement in a community where survival is partially based on hierarchy. “ A young woman in the slum had to weigh the value of each potential interaction with a male against the rumors it would inspire” (60). Throughout the novel, there are fewer indications that the men of the slum exhibit similar behaviors of worryment and consciousness or feel the same societal pressures. Having the constant fear of rumors threaten the women’s everyday interactions indicates that the gender constructs created by the slum’s community are not favorable to women and girls. Women in general seem to have less power and fewer opportunities than men. It is a mindset that is carried from generation to generation.

In Annawadi, both men and women seek safety; however, for women the endeavor proves much more difficult. Women are pressured into a constant state of anxiety for the futures of themselves and their daughter's safety. Physical harm isn't the only thing women are afraid of. A culture in which women are seen as sexual objects poses new threats. Boo writes " Her mother, fearing what might happen to a beautiful young woman in the police station, had pleaded with Officer Thokale to keep her out of custody as long as possible" (113), and " Asha was uneasy about sending her only daughter to Africa, where she'd heard that pretty girls got sold into slavery" (144). Being female in the slums of India is another component of difficulty and fear for mothers of girls.

By describing the women's emotions as " fear" and " uneasiness," the language is demonstrating the detriments of being female has on one's conscious. If a woman or girl is considered " pretty" or " beautiful" horrific consequences like rape and slavery are insinuated unlike the men in Annawadi. These characteristics are of females that fall victim to threats that men don't experience. Male expectations restrict Annawadi women from gaining power in society, and constrict them into a weaker, more targetable, and one dimensional stereotype. Mothers struggle to protect their daughters more than their sons because of the discrimination they have endured themselves for being women . These societal expectations and gender constructs are all derived from the rigid cultural restraints that make being female in Annawadi even more undesirable.

Women encounter the unfavorable repercussions of a merciless culture in Annawadi. The life of a female is portrayed as worse because the community

interpretation of the gender as a whole is seen as inferior to men. Men and boys are fortunate to be culturally valued higher than women and girls. Boo describes the burden of being born a female by writing: “ Young girls in the slums died all the time under dubious circumstances, since most slum families couldn’t afford the sonograms that allowed wealthier families to dispose of their female liabilities before birth” (76). Although poorer families may kill a child based on health instead of gender, the author is specifically describing what happens to females. Families may be more reluctant to kill a male baby if it is sick than they are to kill a girl. When the girl is married off, the family must pay a dowry, and that is seen as a negative reason for having a girl. By using the word dispose, the author is indicating to the reader that a female is similar in worth as garbage. Comparing a hypothetical girl to trash and describing her as a liability exemplifies what the general perception of females is in Annawadi. Since girls have fewer opportunities to make money and find jobs when they grow up, families consider them instantly less valuable than boys.

The cultural oppression begins at a young age, and is a contributor to the self depreciation of females in the future. For girls and women, the novel ranges from frustrations to suicides. Boo shows the reader an example of how cultural domination is yet another aspect of life women have to submit to: “ Manju wanted to be a teacher when she finished college, and her great fear was that, in a fit of pique, her mother would wed her to a village boy who didn’t think that a woman should work” (61). Manju’s aspirations are threatened by the possibility of becoming involved with a man who may think differently than her. Once again, men are portrayed as the gender with

an advantage in power over women. When a male character can solely and completely disallow a woman from achieving her ambitions, it demonstrates a community and culture in which men have superior lives and more control than women. Manju has been raised to in a culture in which domestic submission will completely prevent her from succeeding.

Annawadi's unequal culture allows men the power in any relationship, whether it with a stranger or a spouse. Due to the hierarchy between men and women in Annawadi, women's opportunities are constricted, making life less apprehensive for men. The cultural stigmatization of women in Annawadi denies the community the possibility of convergence between genders because of generations of oppression. The reality of the Annawadian's society ultimately benefits men to a greater extent than women.