

## **Through the Lens of Literature: Comparing Slum Life in ‘Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity’ and ‘City of Joy’**

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In this world of rapid urbanization, metropolitan cities have become the primary focus of migrants. People from different religions, cultures, and races migrate to cities for better prospects, but due to a lack of job prospects, they end up living in slums. The ‘slum’ life, where people live under the most deplorable conditions, is associated with poverty, pollution, theft, violence, and little access to water, food, and sanitation facilities. Within this paradigm, Katherine Boo, in her novel, *Behind The Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in Mumbai Undercity*, portrays the slum, Annawadi and showcases the lives of a ragpicker Abdul, his family, and the other residents of the slums. Another well-renowned author, Dominique Lapierre, in the *City of Joy*, expounds on the harsh slum dynamics of Hasari Pal, Stephan Kovalski, and other inhabitants of Ananda Nagar. The present paper expounds on the struggle of the slum dwellers of the Indian metropolitan cities of Mumbai and Calcutta and brings to the fore how the characters are socially excluded and marginalized. An attempt has also been made to highlight the hardships faced by women in slums as they struggle to take care of their families and even make ends meet. The comparative study of the two texts presents the misery, the hardships, and even the moments of achievement and happiness experienced by the inhabitants of two entirely different cities.

**Keywords:** Katherine Boo, Dominique Lapierre, Calcutta, Mumbai, Slum Life, Exploitation, Metropolitan cities

## **Introduction**

Over the last few decades, there has been an influx of people from rural to urban areas due to rapid urbanization, resulting in the overcrowding of various cities. After migrating to the cities, it has been anticipated that people consider these megacities their home as they become an integral part of the city. In India, metropolises such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi, and Chennai are the most famous residential spaces for people looking for opportunities and prospects. Thousands of people migrate from their rural areas to urban areas with the ambitious hope of achieving a better lifestyle, better jobs, or for higher education. Although many industrial sectors demand labour and manpower, it is not true that all migrants can find jobs and get their daily wages to earn a living. The dream of living in a contemporary metropolis is a challenging, sailing experience. It constitutes a constant onslaught of socio-cultural problems such as lack of community living, poverty, pollution, robbery, and degeneracy.

These cities have become the most occupied space for slum dwellers to settle in, and the area used for slum settlements is downgraded and frequently situated in the most hazardous urban landscape where the individuals face health problems, low level of income, lack of social amenities, and poor housing conditions. The world's largest slums are in South Africa, Kenya, India, and Pakistan. These slums are usually packed, congested, and jammed with countless people, and are areas where the day-to-day activities are performed in limited space. The existence of slums results due to several reasons, including rapid urbanization and rural-urban migration, where people move into cities for work and eventually end up living in slums due to economic stagnation and high unemployment.

According to Harris, "A slum is a residential area with substandard housing that is poorly serviced and/or overcrowded, and therefore unhealthy, unsafe, and socially undesirable" (2009, p. 157). Slums have existed alongside cities since their earliest development, reflecting the perennial struggle with urban poverty. They represent the stark reality of urban poverty and inequalities in many cities. Over

the last few years, there has been tremendous growth in the urban population. Due to this rapid growth, the proliferation of slums has become a pressing issue. Megacities such as Mumbai and Calcutta have thousands of residents residing in slums, merely surviving in the squalor and dirt. These slums are often overcrowded, and the houses are created from waste materials such as cardboard, plastic and tin. The inhabitants of slums do not have access to essential services such as water, electricity, hygienic toilets, or garbage disposal. In slums women and children bear a disproportionate burden of the harsh living in slums. Limited access to healthcare, barriers to education, gender-based violence, and precarious work conditions are some of the challenges faced by them. Therefore, it can be said that slums and poverty are two sides of the same coin. The lack of proper infrastructure perpetuates a cycle of poverty, making it difficult for individuals and families to break free from economic marginalization. These slums have become a focal point of the cities and have been depicted by writers and filmmakers in their works, time and again. The movie *Slumdog Millionaire* by Danny Boyle exposes the effects of poverty in Mumbai by depicting the life of Jamal Malik and Latika from the slums of Juhu. Another Indian filmmaker, Zoya Akhtar places the slums and skyscrapers of Mumbai in her 2019 movie *Gully Boy* and depicts the class struggle through the protagonist Murad Ahmed. The movie shows the difference between rich and poor and highlights the family's severe poverty. In addition to filmmakers, poets have also depicted the slums vividly through their poems. In the poem, *A Poem In Praise Of A Slum*, Goodwin masterfully portrays the slums and paints a vivid and appreciative picture. He writes:

It would be called, I suppose, a slum  
small wooden houses packed tightly together  
on an unpaved dusty road, kids playing  
in the dirt, riding bikes and making noise... (Goodwin, 2012).

Besides movies and poems, novels such as *Shantaram* by Gregory David Roberts, *Planet of Slums* by Mike Davis, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, and many more depict the slums as utterly terrifying and damning. These writers represent the poor and subaltern

people as untouchables with limited resources and advantages. Among these well-known writers, two brilliant writers, Dominique Lapierre and Katherine Boo, have portrayed the lives of slum dwellers in a manner that arouses shock and sympathy in the readers. These two non-Indian writers described the poor living conditions of Mumbai and Calcutta in their novels. Their novels portray youngsters, women, and children suffering from poverty, disease and abuse in slums.

The present paper *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, And Hope In A Mumbai Undercity* by Katherine Boo and *City of Joy* by Dominique Lapierre, dwells on how the two famous creations bring before the eyes of the readers the grim realities that the poor of the world suffer.

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, And Hope In A Mumbai Undercity* by Katherine Boo is set in the Indian metropolis of Mumbai and describes the Annawadi slum, located at the periphery of the Sahar International Airport Road, which was settled in 1991. The novel delineates the life of a young garbage trader, Abdul, his family, and his friends. The slum, Annawadi, is settled in the shadows of luxury hotels near the Mumbai airport. With little luck and much hard work, the Muslim teenager, Abdul, his family, Asha, her daughter, and other slum dwellers try to survive and prosper in life. Boo, widely known for writing fiction and non-fiction, has received the National Book Award for her non-fictional novel *Behind The Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, And Hope In A Mumbai Undercity*. Bornstein states, “It is a masterfully crafted real-life narrative that seamlessly integrates thorough empirical research, filmic description, and a gripping plot” (2014, p. 180).

The *City of Joy*, by Dominique Lapierre, approaches Ananda Nagar, a slum in Calcutta, to depict the inhuman side of the city. Although slums are a living hell for the poorest people, in this novel, Stephan Kovalski, a Polish Catholic priest, makes the slum his home to care for the poorest people. The novel, known to be inspired by real life, is based on the area of Pilkhana in Howrah, West Bengal, and is based on the life of Gaston Dayanand, who dedicated his life to attending to the well-being of slum dwellers. “Lapierre did not just visit the poor;

he spent three years researching and living among the residents of one of the worst slums in one of the most impoverished cities on earth” (Bumiller, 1985). The characters like Hasari Pal, his family, Stephan Kovalski, Bandon, Selima, and everyone living in Ananda Nagar lived amid terrible poverty, hoping to survive and prosper in life.

This paper focuses on assessing the slum-subaltern in the selected works. It will also examine how the slum dwellers struggle and toss in the urban cities, i.e., Calcutta and Mumbai, by comparing and analyzing the selected works. The paper highlights marginalization of slum dwellers, social life in slums, and women in slums.

### **Marginalization of Slum Dwellers**

The marginalization of slum dwellers comprises a profound exclusion from social, economic and political spheres, demoting them to the status of subaltern within the urban landscape. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines subaltern as “a person holding a subordinate position.” where the subordinate person refers to a person occupying a lower rank, place, or position in society. The term ‘subaltern’ as used by Ranajit Guha refers to “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether that is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way” (1988, p. 35). The term ‘subaltern class’, focuses on the working class, who are largely shunned to the margins with no privilege to enjoy. Antonio Gramsci (1971), the Italian Marxist who is believed to have introduced the term ‘subaltern’ in *The Modern Prince* and *The Prison Notebooks*, describes the ‘subalterns’ as people who are excluded from any eloquent role in a government of power. These people who are excluded from society are oppressed and have no voice. These subaltern groups continue to remain voiceless and shunned by society. An Indian historian, Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Subaltern Studies* writes,” the word ‘subaltern’ in *Subaltern Studies*... refers to the specific nature of class relationships in India, where relationships, at almost all levels, are subsumed in the relations of domination and subordination between members of the elite and subaltern classes “ (1985, pp. 375-376). The slum dwellers, also

referred to as subalterns, face systemic barriers that perpetuate the socio-economic disadvantage. They often inhabit neglected areas of cities that lack proper infrastructure and are subject to environmental hazards. People living in slums not only grapple with formidable challenges but are also burdened by the weight of societal exclusion. This physical segregation reflects deeper social stigmatization, where slum dwellers are viewed with suspicion and are treated as others.

In the past few decades, some prominent writers have engaged in presenting the oppressed and socially excluded people in their works. Katherine Boo and Dominique Lapierre highlight the distinct subaltern group- the slum inhabitants in the city of Mumbai and Calcutta and also point out the stereotypes of poverty, desolation, and suffering associated with them. People living in slums are the most disadvantaged and socially excluded people in our society, and this exclusion is not just about one city or country; instead, this exclusion is in every town and country. These slum inhabitants are largely shunned to the margins of the city. While talking about the slum subaltern, it may be noted that these slum residents live in the most abysmal conditions, having limited resources and no proper houses.

James Ford in his book *Slums and Housing: History, Conditions Policy*, describes slums and says, “The slum is a residential area in which housing is so deteriorated, so sub-standard, or so-unwholesome as to be menace... to the health, safety, morality or welfare of the occupants” (1936, p. 11). These residents of slums live in densely packed houses where they struggle daily with limited resources and no recognition from the government.

Talking about these inhabitants living on the periphery, Katherine Boo writes, “Only a coconut- tree-lined thoroughfare separated the slum from the entry lane to the international terminal.” (2012, p. xiv). Since the three thousand people had no help from the government, they lived illegally at the airport and constantly received threats to clear the area. Most of these inhabitants who worked as rag pickers had no proper house. They lived in small huts without solid walls and dreamed of leaving these slums. While describing the house of Husain, Boo writes, “Now they had a roughly carpentered

wooden cupboard for their clothing- a cupboard twice as large as Asha's. A small television bought on installment plan... A cracked mirror, a tube of Brylcreem, a big bag of medicines. The rusty bed “ (p. 85).

The family of Husain installed all the things in just one room where the family lived. Similar to Boo, Lapierre discussed the house of the slum dwellers of Annawadi. The dwellers of Ananda Nagar had limited resources, no furniture, no electricity, and sometimes no food. These people suffered from unemployment, low wages, child labour, diseases, and the impossibility of saving money. While discussing the house of Mehboub, the priest Kovalski says,

The room measured barely six feet by four. Two thirds of it was taken up by a low platform made out of planks which served as a table by day and bed by night, when it was covered over with a patchwork of rags. (Lapierre, 1986, p. 126)

These dwellers lived in such substandard conditions that their survival was highly challenging and almost impossible. By highlighting the shantytown where the slum dwellers reside with limited resources, both Boo and Lapierre demonstrate the real, candid picture of the life of the poor.

### **Social Life in Slums**

Over the last few decades, there has been a tremendous increase in the population of slums. Due to rapid urbanization, slums in cities like Calcutta and Mumbai have witnessed several diseases and social issues like drug abuse, excessive alcohol consumption, poverty, unemployment, and food shortage.

In his article “Definitions of poverty: twelve clusters of meaning”, Paul Spicker argues that there are twelve clusters of meanings with regard to poverty. “He argued that poverty is ‘lack of material goods and services’, ‘existence of deprivation’ and ‘circumstances in which people lack the income, wealth and resources to acquire or consume the things which they need’” (Spicker, as cited in Cerio, 2019, p. 34). At the Global level, poor people face extreme problems, including lack of food, less access to education, and poor health. The ratio of the poor is different in countries across the world

depending on their economic conditions. The presence of poverty highlights the downside of every country. The poor being tossed into slums due to the inability to live in better places indicate that poverty has no end. Therefore, it becomes difficult for the inhabitants to survive in this urbanized world. Since these inhabitants lack multiple resources in their life, such as a lack of proper jobs, resources, food, and the power to speak for themselves, they suffer from psychological deprivation. Both Lapierre and Boo have highlighted the life of people living in slums, where the characters have different struggles.

Most people living in slums travel from rural areas to cities in search of jobs and end up living in slums due to a lack of opportunities and several other factors. Lapierre and Boo have highlighted the struggles in the lives of people living in slums, where the characters undergo struggles of different types. In *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope In A Mumbai Undercity*, Boo, who has been unique in her portrayal of the protagonist Abdul, a ragpicker from his slum background, who depicts poverty, violence, and crime in the slums. According to Rogobete, “Boo uses garbage as the most powerful metaphorical image in the novel, using it to comment upon life, politics, and humanity” (2017, p. 18). Despite living in a metropolis, people did not have proper jobs to earn a living. Boo says, “True, only six of the slum’s more than three thousand residents had permanent jobs” (2012, p. 6). The people of Annawadi lived in poverty with limited food and resources, and the residents trapped rats and frogs to fry them for dinner. Not just rats or frogs, these inhabitants ate scrub grass at the sewage lake’s edge. Sometimes, when these inhabitants had no food, they felt helpless and were forced to beg. Like Abdul, Sunil, a twelve-year-old scavenger, also lived in Annawadi and suffered from poverty. When Sunil had nothing to eat, he used to sell stuff like his father’s sandals and cooking pot to Abdul for money. Boo (2012) writes:

Another day, he’d sold his father’s cooking pot. His own chappals he’d exchanged for rice, after which there was little left to sell. The hunger cramps could be treated by hits off discarded cigarettes. Lying down also helped. But nothing soothed his apprehension that the hunger was stunting his growth. ( p. 35).



The hunger of Sunil highlights the condition and situation of poor people living in Mumbai slums. Those hunger cramps felt by each slum dweller forced them to sell their belongings for a few bread crumbs.

Mumbai city, the dream city of many inhabitants, is full of achievers and strugglers. In the novel, Boo presents the people living in slums as strugglers and those living in the hotel as achievers. The entire section of people living outside the airport indicates that the society is divided into different sectors, where rich people belong to the upper class and the ragpickers of slums to the lower class. These ragpickers looked for garbage tossed by the rich people. “Rich people’s garbage was every year more complex, rife with hybrid materials, impurities, imposters” (Boo, 2012, p. 12). These ragpickers worked day and night to earn a living but still did not have money to buy food for an entire day.

The monsoon season adds to the misery of the slum dwellers and exposes the unpleasant condition of poor people compared to the comfortable life the rich lead. Boo makes telling comparisons when she describes the unpleasantness of the monsoon season for the poor. Boo writes, “NOW I POURED, a stinging rain. On the high grounds of the liquid city, rich people spoke of the romance of monsoon: the languorous sex, retail therapy, and hot jalebis that eased July in August” (2012, p. 117). So, the rainy season, a blessing for rich people, was a curse for the poor. In the slum, the sewage leaked, people got sick, and rain banged on the rooftop, and it became punishing for the slum dwellers.

Although the hardships continue almost permanently, the festivals come as a breather and provide them with some respite. People in different countries consider these festivities an escape from the harsh reality. For them, these mega-events bring them closer to each other. Festivals unravel the rich cultural heritage of different countries and cities. The novel, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* pivots around characters demonstrating plenty of zest and enthusiasm when celebrating festivals. These slum dwellers of Mumbai gear up for the Navaratri festival with large pandals, huge idols of Goddess Durga,

fairy lights, and music. Since girls were not allowed to soak themselves during Holi, they looked forward to and had high fervour for the Navaratri festival, where they spent hours getting ready. On a similar note the Annawadians, whose everyday life revolved around struggles, found the festivals to be an exuberant distraction where they celebrated together.

In a manner much like *Boo*, Lapierre highlights the struggles of slum dwellers through the life of Hasari, a rickshaw wallah who moved to the city with his family in search of a job. Every year, thousands of inhabitants move from villages to cities for better prospects. Hasari feels Calcutta city is 'inhuman' as thousands of people starve themselves in the hope of feeding their families. All the inhabitants living in slums suffer from the issue of hunger and food insecurity. In the *City of Joy*, Lapierre's central character Stephan Kovalski, a Polish Priest, describes the sufferings of his neighbour Mehboub, another slum dweller who occupied his adjoining room along with his family of seven members. Due to a dramatic incident, Mehboub, lost his job and could not provide food for his family. Lapierre describes how Mehboub could not possess the necessary basic things due to lack of income. "His stomach racked with hunger, he walked miles each day around the industrial suburbs of Calcutta in search of any available means of earning a crust of bread" (Lapierre, 1986, p. 125). Since Mehboub could not provide for his family, his elder boy Nasir started working in a sweet shop and earning twenty rupees monthly. Even though Nasir worked for his family, he could not provide enough resources to every family member. The feeling of deprivation and starvation was the story of not just Mehboub but every slum dweller residing in Ananda Nagar.

Lapierre also highlights the social inequality where the poor people are the primary victims of exploitation by government workers and politicians. When the Communists instituted a law stating that no individual had the right to own more than ten rickshaws it created a nuisance for the rickshaw pullers. "Several big shots in high circles even wanted to ban rickshaws altogether, under the pretext that they were an insult to human dignity and that the pullers were exploited like workhorses" (Lapierre, 1986, p. 125). However, the truth was

that the rickshaw pullers were exploited as they did not have any other means to earn money. There were millions of poor people without any jobs, and if these so-called politicians and government workers banned rickshaws, half of the poor people would starve to death. So, it was not a favour for the poor people; instead, it would have been a significant problem for them. However, the exploitation did not stop there. The slum dwellers were forced to work for twelve to fourteen hours at a stretch and did not even have a day off. If they took a day off, they were fired from their jobs. So, these people were not treated as human beings but merely as machines and would be laid off if they were late for their jobs.

Just like Boo, Lapierre also represents the slums as stacked next to lavish mansions to represent the class difference in our society. On the one hand, a family of ten people lives in a small hut with no resources, whereas, on the other hand, rich people have large furnished houses and possess luxury cars and motorcycles. Lapierre (1986) describes a rich character in a sharp contrast. “His house was truly palatial. Outside the door were three Ambassador cars complete with radio antennae and protective screens at the windows, plus several motorcycles like those the police use to escort ministers and heads of state” (pp. 301-302). The slum dwellers living in dreadful conditions are all alone during life’s difficulties. While the rich people were enjoying the rainy season, the slum dwellers were unable to survive in those tiny huts. For these people, the monsoon was as dreaded as hunger, bringing diseases and water flooding into their homes, where they were trapped for hours without electricity. When the slums were hit with boils, carbuncles, and mycosis, thousands of inhabitants fell sick and the situation was disastrous. Lapierre says that when the epidemic broke out, the slums were nothing but a polluted marsh with flies, water, decayed dogs, cats, and even humans. For these slum residents, there was no help from the government during the epidemic, they all were alone helping each other.

Despite living in deplorable conditions, Boo and Lapierre highlight that celebrating festivals for these slum residents was a way to escape their sadness for a few days. The splendour and fervour of Durga Puja brought hope and joy to the lives of slum dwellers. The

Hindus, Muslims and Christians joined hands and helped prepare for the Hindu festival by whitewashing the hovels. Lapierre (1986) writes:

As the day approached, a kind of vibration washed through the slums. Large bamboo frames shaped like Roman triumphal arches began to pop up everywhere... Discharged by loudspeakers, songs and music poured out over the slum, day and night, endorsing the fact that everywhere in India celebrations are accompanied by excessive noise. (pp. 217-218)

All these slum dwellers, accompanied by their families, wore new clothes, the men wore woollen sherwanis, and women wore silk kurtas. Although these dwellers lived in deplorable conditions, they all supported each other, celebrated festivals together, and even stood for each other during tough times. Festivals like Durga Puja, Vishwakarma, and Christmas made them joyful and enthusiastic.

### **Women in Slums**

Slum life, which has never been easy for the poor, is more challenging for women. Limited or almost no access to basic hygiene, safety, food, and the lack of individual toilets make their lives miserable and complicated. Due to the existing unsanitary conditions, women suffer from serious health issues such as intestinal infections, ulcers, and skin diseases, which cause more severe problems. The women also suffer from gender inequality and other forms of subjugation in the slums. In general terms, in the urbanized world, women are either unemployed or have low wages compared to men. However, in the case of many slums, women's unemployment is not the case. In many slums, women work hard to study and earn a living. They even move from rural areas to the cities with their families to earn a living or secure a better future for their children. However, women are not encouraged to study and are forced to engage in household chores only. In a few cases, women are allowed to work if the husband cannot financially support the family. In the past, in many countries around the world, girls have faced more restrictions, and boys are given priority over girls in terms of opportunities to study and work. However, today, the situation is changing. If the family can afford it, both boys and girls are encouraged to pursue their education. This

idea of women pursuing education and working outside their homes is well-depicted by Katherine Boo in her novel. In *Behind The Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in A Mumbai Undercity*, Boo highlights the life of Asha and her daughter- Manju.

Asha Waghekar, a thirty-nine-year-old lady, used to teach kindergartners at a large municipal school for modest pay. She also used to spend her time conducting Shiv Sena business. She was bold, and sharp and dreamed of achieving something while living in the stinking slum. She did not just wish to survive in the foul-smelling slum but wished to become a person who was recognised and appreciated. Her husband was an alcoholic construction worker with no ambition. However, she tried her best to work hard by handling the insignificant Annawadi problems handed to her by the Corporator. “Asha took these things to be signs of an imminent triumph. Eight years after arriving in Annawadi and investing her hopes for economic advancements in political work, she had an influential patron” (Boo, 2012, p. 19).

Working women become more vulnerable and suffer as they struggle with health problems, are sometimes insulted and molested, and bear the burden of feeding and looking after their large families. Due to gender inequality, these vulnerabilities transpire more in slums where women are preyed on by drunk men and sometimes by their husbands. Katherine Boo, through the character of Asha, remarks that these drunk and jealous men, having no ambition in life, prey upon and attack women who are trying to improve their life. While Asha was becoming popular and powerful, men in her locality were jealous and preyed on her. Boo (2012) writes:

Many of the men had preyed on her, early on. Assaying her large breasts and her small, drunken husband, they had suggested diversions that might allay her children’s poverty. The volatile Robert had made his own blunt proposal one evening as she was filling a pot of water at the tap. (p. 19).

However, Asha did not let these comments affect her. She did not think that employing the silent treatment was the best way to deal with disagreement. So, when Robert made his own proposal, she

revolted and said: “Whatever you want. Tell me, bastard. Shall I strip naked and dance for you now? No women had spoken to the slumlord that way” (Boo, 2012, p. 19). Asha had to survive in this slum, and to do that; she had to be brave and independent and handle such issues in the best possible way. Therefore, she used her sharp tongue as a helpful defence when dealing with difficult men.

In Annawadi, most people had no goals or ambitions for themselves. But Asha had high hopes for her daughter Manju, and she made sure that her daughter would pursue her education and someday they would move out of the slums. Manju would go to college in the morning, her home in the afternoons, and she would also run the only school in the slum in the evening. “Manju can definitely be perceived as a leader who could potentially encourage other women living in slums to pursue an education and help others within her community” (Estes, 2019, p. 2). Manju, who was studying English literature, would run the school financed by the central government, where Asha was employed. Due to Asha’s occupancy in the Shiv Sena business, Manju would work hard and provide two hours of daily lessons to child labourers or girls who were kept home for household responsibilities. Although slum kids are not allowed to study due to household chores, Manju was fortunate enough to pursue her education. Boo writes, “As every slum dweller 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.” (2012, p. 62).

Manju was determined to achieve something in her life and was supported by her mother to become a teacher so that their family could uplift middle-class society. Through the character of Asha and Manju, Katherine Boo highlights that despite living in slums, women are determined, hardworking and strong enough to face drunk men.

Just like Boo, Dominique Lapierre also highlights the plight of women living in slums, i.e. Ananda Nagar. He constructs the image of a young Assamese girl named Bandona who lived in the slums with her family. She was four years old when her family moved to Calcutta. After the death of her family, her mother used to retrieve metal objects

from the rubbish heaps and sell them to a metal dealer to fill the stomachs of her four children. Unlike Boo, Lapierre highlights that not all women get the privilege of education in slums. Some of them are forced to leave their education and start working from childhood to earn a living for their family. Not all families in urban slums can provide for and educate their children. And hence, children, especially women, become the sole breadwinners for the urban low-income family. Due to poverty, women and even children are indispensable in providing basic needs to their families. Lapierre (1986) writes:

At the age of twelve Bandona had started work, first in a cardboard factory and then in a workshop that turned out parts for trucks. From then on she became her family's only supports, for her mother was struck down with tuberculosis. (p. 167)

So, life for Bandona was tough as she used to work from early morning to late at night. She did not have the opportunity to educate herself like Manju from *Behind The Beautiful Forevers*. Bandona earned four rupees a day, which she used to pay her house rent and food for her family once a day. Despite working for days and nights, Bandona, who was just a child, could not earn enough to have food thrice a day. In fact, she did not even rest on Sundays as she used to help out troubled people in slums. Bandona is unable to study and dreams of moving out of the slums of Calcutta whereas Manju gets the opportunity to educate herself, work hard and move out of the slums of Mumbai. So, even though both the characters are girls, living in slums of different cities, facing the same struggles in life, both are different in terms of opportunities and prospects they have in life.

In India, studies show that urban slums have higher rates of illness, health-related problems, illiteracy rate, and population. Cities such as Mumbai and Calcutta have the highest rate of population, as half of the population resides in slums. Due to this increase in population in slums, slum-dwellers cannot provide for their families. Due to this increase in population, the sole bread earner cannot provide for each family member. So, the family can eat only once a day or sometimes twice. Because of this helplessness to provide for the family, women

indulge in abortion practices to reduce stress and also to earn money for the family. Lapierre, through the character of Selima, highlights the weakness of women.

Selima, a young Muslim woman, was approached by Mumtaz Bibi, who asked her to abort her child, for which she would provide her two thousand rupees. Lapierre (1986) writes:

The opulent dowager of Nizamudhin Lane was carrying on the very latest of Calcutta's clandestine professions: the sale of human embryos and fetuses. The mainsprings of the industry were a network of foreign buyers who scoured the Third World on behalf of international laboratories and institutes for genetic research. (p. 185)

Mumtaz Bibi, who exercised occult powers, tried convincing Selima to abort her child so that the foetus could be used for scientific work. Selima had four children, and her husband could not even provide daily food for the family. She was confused, horrified, and unable to decide, but when she looked at her four children, she realised and remembered her helplessness to feed the family, the pressure from Mumtaz, and the voice of her children crying out with hunger. So, she decided to abort the baby as she could not keep feeding scraps and a few peelings to another child. Boo highlights the hardships faced by women in her work and the women who have dreams and opportunities. In contrast, Lapierre brings forth women who are unable to educate themselves, unable to feed their families, and also incapable of addressing basic needs. The depiction of women facing troubles, hardships, and challenges with no hope and dreams to improve their life makes the idea of women being in danger a tangible truth.

## **Conclusion**

Millions of people reside in slums and live in substandard conditions. In different metropolitan cities, especially in India, the number of slum dwellers keep increasing yearly. In this paper, an attempt was made to highlight the slums of Mumbai and Calcutta and represent the disadvantaged people of our community. Both the authors- Katherine Boo and Dominique Lapierre, highlight the lives of these residents who struggle, suffer, and receive little or hardly



any help from the government. The inhabitants of the slums are the most disadvantaged and socially excluded people.

In the novels of Lapierre and Boo, the characters are marginalized, oppressed, have no help from the government, and are socially excluded. Both writers depict that during the monsoon season, only the poor people suffer while the rich people can enjoy the season. These inhabitants are deprived of necessities and are the primary victims of class inequality. Although both writers illustrate the life of women in slums, both are different in their portrayals. Boo presents strong, determined women who are trying to chase their dream of moving out of the slums, whereas Lapierre presents weak, illiterate women who aren't able to dream while living in Ananda Nagar. Both novels have captivated the global audience's attention as they depict the slum reality of two different metropolitan cities where the characters' lives revolve around poverty, hope, violence, and strong determination.

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