

Speaking and 'acting' for the subaltern: representing global subjects in

Behind the Beautiful Forevers

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“Forget *Slumdog Millionaire* – this is the reality.”¹

–Audience member’s reaction to *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*

Introduction

This paper looks at the British playwright David Hare’s latest play, based on *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, which was originally written as a non-fiction narrative by the American journalist Katherine Boo. Boo, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in 2000, was also rewarded a MacArthur “Genius” grant for 2002-2007 of \$500,000² for her reporting on poverty in the *Washington Post*. In 2012, Boo won the National Book Award for *Forever*, which moved the already lucrative book’s weekly sales from \$300 to \$1,200 and soon after \$7,000.³ The book was released in 2012 and was picked up by American producer Scott Rudin to become a theatrical production staged at London’s National Theatre roughly two years later. The dramatic adaptation was written by Hare, whose political dramas often present the perspectives of others.⁴ This paper does not examine solely the book or play in themselves but instead the evolution of *Forever* from its origins in Boo’s reportage in the slum Annawadi to its realization as a dramatic production. It does examine parts of the dramatic text as it pertains to the physical representation of its

¹ "National Theatre: Behind the Beautiful Forevers Audience Reaction." YouTube. YouTube, 4 Mar. 2015. Web. 21 Mar. 2016.

² "Columbia News ::: Katherine Boo, BC'88, Camilo Vergara, GSAS '77, Named MacArthur Fellows." *Columbia News ::: Katherine Boo, BC'88, Camilo Vergara, GSAS '77, Named MacArthur Fellows*. Web. 17 Mar. 2016.

³ "Measuring the National Book Award Sales Effect." *PublishersWeekly.com*. Web. 17 Mar. 2016.

⁴ Hare’s plays usually examine the viewpoint of his political opposite. His play *The Vertical Hour* explores the opinion of American liberals who were in favor of the Iraq War. Despite this, the other is usually within Hare’s own social location, and should not be confused with Said’s conception of the Other.

subjects by British actors on the Olivier stage. By looking at Hare's text, I wish to explore ways in which the mechanism by which *Forever's* came to be has effect on how its subjects' stories are represented. But by and large, this paper argues for a critical analysis of the discourse of the play's artistic team, in addition to the practices of Western journalists and artistic institutions, which normalizes an unequal power relationship between the West and the subaltern.

Forever's, which symbolizes a unique moment in Western theatre when playwrights attempt to give 'voice to the voiceless.' It tells a socially progressive story of globalization and inequality as felt by those living at the farthest ends of the margins – a community of 3,000 displaced Indians who squat on land owned by Mumbai's primary airport and who earn about \$2 a day.^{5 6} However, the mechanism by which Boo and Hare give 'voice to the voiceless' involves the practice of lifting stories from the subaltern for their own material benefit. Artistic projects like *Forever's* reify a system of material accumulation by excavation of narrative capital from the poorest of the world's poor, thus reinforcing a neoimperialist power structure by which the West makes a profit off of the Third World. Consequently, this situates the West's word as dominant and total, and the subaltern's word as submissive and conditional.

I wish to demonstrate that globalization, which I shall define as the marketplace-turned-global in all political arenas from the artistic to the military, creates new conditions under which an old form of cultural imperialism can seep in and take form

⁵ "A Glimpse inside the "undercity" of a Mumbai Slum." *A Glimpse inside the "undercity" of a Mumbai Slum*. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

⁶ Carlton, Camille, Ali Kothari, and Ali Fraenkel. "Network of Collective Action: Rehabilitating Slums on an Individual and Community Basis." 2015. Web. 18 Mar. 2016.

albeit with a new guise and discourse defending it. It is critical to study artistic successes that tackle issues of the marginalized and the subaltern because they resonate with people emotionally, and affect perceptions of broader global phenomenon. Art plays a key role in the emotional realm of globalization, and has the power to manipulate audiences if it employs an effective but skewed representation of people and their issues, and a discourse to defend it. *Forever's* received rave reviews and was a box office success, but an asymmetry in representation happened behind its staging. In this paper I wish to explore how good art can be distracting.

Literature Review

Edward Said notes that imperialism is the practice, theory and attitudes of a central ruling power that exerts authority over a distant region, and that a function of imperialism is not just the physical acquisition and accumulation of land but the ideological and discursive creations that force understandings of racism through language, e.g. the idea of the 'subject-races' or 'subordinate peoples.'⁷ Said's work on cultural imperialism illustrates an asymmetry in representation, and an inequality which allows for the West's cultural production of its Other. Such a neoimperialist pillaging of the 'Third World' involves the lifting of all that it is comprised of – from literature to art to, in the case of *Forever's*, narrative – and all that its people own.

Said's study of the Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi's staging of his opera *Aida* in Cairo in an effort to establish a colonial presence in the region demonstrates how Verdi's *Aida* was created using materials and ideas, albeit misconstrued and Orientalized

⁷ Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993. 9. Print.

ones, from Egypt and the Egyptians. Looking at the context foregrounding Auguste Mariette's contribution to the libretto of *Aida*, Said notes that Mariette

had brought Egypt to Europe for the first time, as it were. He could do so because of his spectacular archeological successes at some thirty-five sites, including those at Giza, Sakkarah, Edfu, and Thebes where, in Brian Fagan's apt words, he "excavated with complete abandon."⁸

While Said notes that while Verdi's music was generally all Verdi's own creation, Mariette's role in the production of *Aida* was crucial to its realization and depended on the kind of material lifting of art that is part and parcel of cultural imperialism. Said summarizes this objective exchange further, identifying the 'cultural machinery...of spectacles like *Aida*', just one part in a larger system of

power to observe, rule, hold, and profit from distant territories and people. From these come voyages of discovery, lucrative trade, administration, annexation, learned expeditions and exhibitions, local spectacles, a new class of colonial rulers and experts.⁹

It is important to note that *Aida* fits into both categories of 'local spectacles' and the new class of 'experts' who assert an understanding of Egypt in the creation of such an opera. But it is primarily in the production of the spectacle in which the lifting of art, culture, and ideas elicits monetary benefit for the colonial class, or those in power. I wish to extend the example of *Aida* as cultural production to *Forever's*, since the process by which it came to the National Theatre was dependent on a cultural excavation on the part of Boo, Hare and the artistic team, and their process models *Aida*'s realization. The cultural production of *Aida* entailed all of the smaller operations that helped build it such as Mariette's archeological digs. I see *Forever's* as a cultural production of globalization

⁸ Ibid.,120.

⁹ Ibid.,131.

in that it began in the literary industry, moved into the theatrical and even made its way into cinemas worldwide – a function of digital globalization. All of these different factors constitute its cultural production.

I also employ Said's concept of the Other as the embodiment of the 'subject race' individual, derived from his study, *Orientalism*. In *Orientalism* Said demonstrates the employment of the racialized Other in colonial modes of thought and literature as a discursive formation. Through Orientalism, the 'subordinate peoples' and the land of the Orient become the antithesis of colonial Europe and its synonymous attributes: civility, nobility, refinement. Conversely, the Orient and the Other represent uncivilized barbarity and primordial modes of thinking and acting, far inferior to colonial Europe whose *civilisatrice* mission became discursively justified through such fictional creations.

American philosopher Linda Alcoff argues for an assessment of the political and ethical dimensions of speaking for others. An awareness of the social positioning of the speaker in relation to who they are 'speaking for' is imperative in assessing whether or not such a 'speaking for' will reinforce the oppression that perhaps it is seeking to end. The location of the speaker can never be discounted as certain locations are allied with certain oppressions¹⁰, and certain locations are 'discursively dangerous.'¹¹ Alcoff's work on positionality seeks to show how essential identities are not and cannot be understood as the sole markers of authority or truth in speaking. Rather, each individual's multiple identities comprise their total positionality, which operates in relation to the context of the speech's multiple dimensions. The dimensions presents questions such as: who is

¹⁰ Alcoff, Linda. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique* 20 (1991): 15. Web.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

speaking in relation to who is being spoken for? Where does the speech travel? If one speaks, does one's speech silence another's speech? I pose these questions when relevant to the speakers involved in *Forever's*.

Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe argues that information flows between Africa and Europe move in one direction: from Europe to Africa. In his essay 'Impediments to Dialogue Between North and South', Achebe recalls an invitation he received to speak at an African arts festival in Berlin with a suggested theme: *The necessity of cultural exchange in a spirit of partnership between North and South*. Achebe ruminates on the proposed topic and points to the key word, 'partnership', which Achebe notes is also the root of the impediment, since a partnership cannot discount the concept of equality.¹² Historically, Achebe points out, Europeans have not had a good track record of granting equality to Africans. In order for the relationship between Africa and Europe to be of equal nature, Achebe stipulates that Europe first must cease talking and start listening.¹³ As Achebe argues, even if listening were to occur, an anxiety is present due to the tendency of the White person to evasions, which either replace or simulate dialogue.¹⁴ Such evasions are immediate barriers to listening and reinforce a neoimperialist agenda and unequal power structure. One such evasion that Achebe points to is the phenomenon of the expert or foreign correspondent whose sole job is to visit the African world and to 'bring home all the news.' The role of the expert undermines any effort of creating an equitable exchange of dialogue, since dialogue rests on the necessity of there being two

¹² Achebe, Chinua. "Impediments to Dialogue Between North and South." *Hope and Impediments: Selected Essays*. New York: Anchor, 1988. 23. Print.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

people engaged in it. No matter how intelligent the monologue is, it remains a monologue, argues Achebe, and not a dialogue.¹⁵

Lastly, I apply Gayatri Spivak's work on languages as tools for cultural colonization, as well as her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', to Hare's play. *Forever's* functions on the premise that the Annawadians are onstage and are speaking, finally, for themselves. This assumption implicit in Boo and Hare's campaign to give 'voice to the voiceless' discounts their roles as Western liberal interlocutors whose efforts amount in transcribing and refiguring the original speech of the Annawadians. Such roles are, as Spivak explicates, found in Western academics and philosophers of the 20th century who homogenize the subaltern by assuming solidarity with them. Such solidarity fails to account for the fact that Western academic institutions are complicit in the marginalization of the people that constitute the subaltern. As well, such solidarity perpetuates the patriarchy and sexed violence of colonialism by analyzing history in such a way that misrepresents and thus silences the sexed subaltern. Western academics thus create no mechanism by which the sexed subaltern can speak for herself. I will examine the roles that Hare and Boo play in the making of *Forever's*, and how they function as instruments of Spivak's argument.

Can the subaltern speak in the case of *Forever's*?

Analysis

After three years of living among the people of Annawadi, recording their stories, trials and tribulations, Katherine Boo turned these stories into a book, which turned into a *New York Times* bestseller. Soon after, a play idea was pitched to Boo, and she originally

¹⁵ Ibid., 25-26.

turned the idea down. The event of her initial denial of the play in the evolution of *Forever's* will bear meaning on the power structure embedded in its design. Boo tells us in the press that she first had reservations about a play, so she asked the Annawadians if this would be acceptable with them, and they agreed to it. Boo then went ahead with the project, for which David Hare would adapt. Hare's play depicts the lives of the people in the book, interweaving multiple storylines all from within and around the community of Annawadi. The play explores the reverberations of one character's earth-shattering actions on the rest of the characters – when Fatima attempts to place blame on the only Muslim family in Annawadi for her disguised self-immolation in order to leverage money. The play premiered at the National Theatre in London in the fall of 2014 and ran until the following spring. The play also was broadcast in cinemas around the globe as part of the NT Live program. The National Theatre's income for the 2015 year totaled to £117.7m, with 21% of that total coming from box office sales at the London theatre as well as NT Live sales.¹⁶

It is within this large institutional context that Boo and Hare, two American and British, both White, and economically advantaged writers, continued their project of excavation in the slum of Annawadi, and built a successful production which found its way to the aforementioned cinemas around the globe. Hare and the play's director Rufus Norris, the now artistic director of the National Theatre, traveled to Annawadi with a designer for the show, for a week's time during its creation. Much like the representations

¹⁶ *Annual Report 2014-2015*. Rep. National Theatre. Web. <www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/annualreport>. FINANCIAL STATEMENTS FOR THE 52 WEEKS ENDED 29 MARCH 2015. p.26.

of Egypt in *Aida* became a device operating in the cultural machinery of imperialism, the poverty of Annawadi is also transformed in the way that people's physical geography becomes commodity. For example, designer Katrina Lindsay's set is literally full of representations of the trash one sees in photos of Annawadi.

But this paper will not examine the set design but play text, and will examine problematic depictions of inequality and the social or economic structures that uphold it in Hare's fictionalized Annawadi.¹⁷ Subjective analyses of the depictions of characters in Annawadi cannot be measured objectively in the way that the transfer of narrative capital can. By narrative capital I mean the marginalized people's stories, whether told or observed, that are transformed into monetary value in the West. But any suggestion that *Forever's* is doing more good than harm simply because it tells a socially progressive story and features a largely underrepresented company of actors should be careful not to absent a consideration of the mechanism by which the story came to be told. That very mechanism which is seemingly external to the play text of *Forever's* has a direct effect on the play's internal, sometimes problematic, dimensions. Those internal dimensions are a direct consequence of the social locations of writers like Boo and Hare, since one does not hold the authority to write about those outside one's own social location after three years of research. Alcoff argues that a speech can never be made valid based on whether

¹⁷ However, nuanced but problematic depictions in the text should not be taken as though they validate or invalidate the main point of my paper that is that the discourse in which Hare, Boo and the National Theatre take place in is one which reinforces a cultural imperialism. A look at the depiction of character, story and histories might, on the other hand, show that power relationships do not exist within vacuums and can often permeate the space of the art, for better or worse. There is no easy answer in the case of *Forever's*.

the speaker has done her research because to any ‘ritual of speaking’, positionality¹⁸, location and context bear on meaning and truth. With this in mind, it is inevitable that certain assumptions and ideas about race are so ingrained in the writer’s nationally, economically and racially specific lens that despite Boo’s journalistic rigor, Hare is capable of misrepresentation. Here arises a paralyzing worry for Western writers here that *no one* can talk about a person outside one’s positionality. This is not, has not, and will never be the case in art making or in journalism. However, when one skirts around admitting and remaining aware of severe limitations by the variance in class and nationality as Hare did, then, almost certainly, new problems will arise in the text. Art does not exist in a sacrosanct space. A writer is always implicated in his or her own social location, and cannot function as an omniscient, neutral third-party. Historically, art and literature have been the very means by which racist schools of thought like Orientalism have been propagated, so one should be doubly critical of a writer that ventures outside of his or her positionality in contemporary, post-colonial storytelling.

Gayatri Spivak argues for an awareness of the difference between reading an English text, for example, to resonate with it, an act which Spivak argues is an application of a kind of psycho-cultural colonization, and reading it to study how the text is working.

What is the basic difference between teaching a second language as an instrument of communication and teaching the same language so that the student can appreciate literature? [...] there is a certain difference in orientation between the language classroom and the literature classroom. In the former, the goal is an active and reflexive use of the mechanics of the language. In the latter, the goal is

¹⁸ Alcoff’s point is that positionality comprises all of our identities – from race to class to gender, and that an individual’s identities exist, all together and at once, in relation to the context they operate in. This is a departure from the idea that identities are essential and fixed.

at least to shape the mind of the student so that it can resemble the mind of the so-called implied reader of the literary text, even when that is a historically distanced cultural fiction. [...] Our ideal student of British literature was expected so to internalize this play of cultural self-representation that she would be able to, to use the terms of the most naïve kind of literary pedagogy, “relate to the text,” “identify” with it [...] these terms...describe the subtlest kind of cultural and epistemic transformation, a kind of upward race-mobility...¹⁹

With this in mind, what are we to make of the play’s eighteen-year-old character Manju?

Manju, an eager girl in the community whose parents allow her to attend school, is best friends with Meena, whose parents restrict her life goals to finding a husband to marry.

Manju’s storyline begins with a comment on Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, a post-World War I British novel.

Manju: *Mrs Dalloway*. I don’t understand it. It’s a book by the English writer Virginia Woolf. Do you understand it? Who are these people? What do they do? I know nothing of these people. I try to read it. Clarissa goes out to get flowers. Later she gives a party. I’m trying to learn it, that’s my only chance, I’m going to learn it by heart.²⁰

Manju’s wrestling with Woolf brings to light the challenge of ‘relat[ing] to the text’ in an effort to shape one’s mind so that it resembles the colonizer’s appreciation of culture.

Manju deals with other British texts like *The Way of the World*, and we see that for Manju, who can access education because her family grants it, these texts are important.

We learn that she believes in the power of education, despite this neo-colonialist framework. In her exchanges with Meena, whose family does not permit her to study, Manju tells her about the plays she’s reading, and Meena voices frustration.

¹⁹ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "The Burden of English." *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012. 35-56. Print.

²⁰ Hare, David. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2014. 6. Print.

Meena: I said again, I want to go to school. My mother said, she won't let me. Ever. They're never going to let me, they say. I'm to prepare for my marriage, work in the home, nothing else.²¹

It is not possible to attribute Meena's demise, who will later go on to commit suicide, to one source. But certainly her family's wish for her to marry and work in the home is in direct conflict with her own wishes for autonomy over her future. Yet, like this, Manju's initial wrestling with Woolf loses a sense of an anachronistic challenge, or a colonial difficulty. The British text(s), which originally was noted for its peculiarity by Manju, is absented in any direct correlation making to or frustration on the lives of Manju and Meena. It merely exists in Manju's life, and she is ambivalent about it.

Manju: All right? Ready?

She takes a breath before leaping in.

There's this play called *The Way of the World*.

Meena: *Of the Wordl?*

Manju: Yes.

Meena: *Way of the World*.

Manju: That's right. The men who are in it, they're called gallants.

[...]

Everyone's in their own world. It's all about position and power. It's about doing well. And advancing.

[...]

Meena: Manju, do you understand it?

Manju: What?

Meena: The play?

Manju: Don't worry, no one understands it.²²

Here, Manju's last line cannot be taken as a critique of British culture's continual presence in India, since she offers no political assessment of the text beyond a semi-comic 'no one gets this stuff' sentiment played to a British audience. Later in the scene, directly following the conversation about *The Way of the World*, Manju tells

²¹ Ibid., 31.

²² Ibid., 31-33.

Meena that if she learns, she'll have power. Because Hare never offers a critique of the operation of these British texts in India, Meena's suicide becomes due to her family's wishes. This is not to suggest that Hare should have made the source of her death be some ominous and destructive colonial-cultural presence, as that is quite abstract. However, the failure to critically comment on the existence of the texts in Annawadi is a missed opportunity. Hare raises the point of Manju's challenges with *Mrs Dalloway* as a self-identifiable text in the beginning, but then refuses to engage further with it. And Meena's problems with family are not entirely separate from the education plotline with Manju, which brushes up against her on the other side. In this way, meetings with Manju in which Manju clandestinely tells her about the texts she doesn't have the opportunity to read otherwise, become an sought after escape for Meena, eager to learn more about the values embedded in some of the texts, which belong to a British colonial tradition.

Meena: I have no life.

Manju: But you will. If you learn. If you learn you'll have power.

Meena strains, thinking.

'Congreve's themes are love, social position and money.'

Meena: Love, social position, and money.

Manju: Say it in English.

Meena does not speak.

Speak one word in English.

There are tears now in Meena's eyes.

Meena: 'Love'.²³

Congreve's values become reflected on their goals and aspirations, and Hare exposes his colonial amnesia. Hare recognizes that this cultural phenomenon exists, but that Woolf and Congreve are instruments to shape the mind of Manju to resemble the mind of the implied reader is utterly lost on him. This storyline ends with Meena killing herself after

²³ Ibid., 34.

she cannot face being forced into a marriage at fifteen with a man she doesn't know. Her suicide has many warnings. Meena is a tragic character, doomed from the first scene. What role does education play in her life then, as we witness this transformation? *Manju's* education, disregarding the remnants of British colonialism embedded in it, becomes that which Meena could never have. This inaccessible avenue becomes not the cause of her suicide but an added defeat, a kind of double tragedy. Speculation aside, the question I pose here is: how might Meena's story have been presented had the woman called Meena told her own story? As a consequence of first Boo's lifting and then Hare's, the struggles of Meena and Manju are never clearly articulated, nor are they ever *by* Meena and Manju. Spivak's work can be applied to art in this example. The subaltern cannot speak. They are being spoken for by Boo and Hare. Consequently, a series of issues in Meena's story become ambiguous as the playwright refuses to articulate their political meaning.

The objects *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Way of the World* are absented of any kind of negative power as a result of Hare's anxiety of being implicated in Britain's history of colonialism in India. While Hare is obviously not a direct player in British colonialism, and while colonialism is long gone, he has reason to be anxious about the legacy of this relationship. Eitan Bar-Yosef's analysis of Hare's *Via Dolorosa*, a firsthand account of his trip to Palestine/Israel he performed as a one-man show, demonstrates how Hare revived Orientalist tropes found in colonial travel literature. With this in mind, it is fair to attribute the presence of the anachronistic British texts in Annawadi as an effort on the part of an already anxious Hare to make some acknowledgement of the legacy of British colonial rule and its literary efforts to, as Spivak notes, 'shape the mind of the student so

that it can resemble the mind of the so-called implied reader of the literary text.’ Yet still, even though the presence of the texts in India was to do what Spivak says they were to do, Hare never makes a mention of such an effort on the part of the British colonial project, or at least of the texts’ present peculiarity of place in globalization. But then if the prospect of a colonized educational world in which she’d have to endure ‘upward race-mobility’ is not to blame for causing Meena the undue stress driving her suicide, then the prospects of a portentous marriage garner meaning. Meena is now up against traditional Indian values that barricade her entrance to the educational world, which exactly parallels to Spivak’s main argument in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Whereas Spivak notes that the Indian practice of Sati, or widow suicide, was something that the sexed subject actually wanted to do as a political act, Hare’s suggestion that Meena’s suicide is a result of traditional Indian values models that of the white Western academic that Spivak critiques. Both essentially suggest that the cause of brown woman’s death is the evil brown man, or a paternalistic family structure in Meena’s case. But in both cases, the sexed subaltern cannot speak for herself. Hare’s missed opportunity is that the alternative reasoning for the suicide could have been more politically embedded, as Spivak points out the actual subject’s was. All the of elements are set up for him to do this – but he never energizes Meena’s awareness that her socio-economic location won’t change or that her education will ruin her psychologically. Her suicide is his suicide.

By contrast, some aspects of Hare’s play advocate for clearly articulated socially progressive ideas. *Forever* broaches various forms of oppression. All characters are brown. All are poor. Many are women. And some challenge societal stigmas. Take for

instance Fatima's first monologue, when she introduces herself in direct address to the audience as the outcast of Annawadi.

A woman has rights. I have rights. From birth nobody loved me. From the very beginning. Everyone told me I was born wrong. And I believed them. I was ashamed. I hated myself. Because I wasn't even a person. I was an animal. One Leg, they called me. Why give a thing a name? Why send a thing to school? People say I'm a whore. How can I be a whore? Whores don't choose. I choose. I'm in control. I choose who comes in and I choose who doesn't. And if you don't like it, tough. Fuck off. And if you do, remember my husband's out sorting garbage, my children are at school, drop by, I'm in every afternoon.²⁴

Fatima, known in her community by the derogatory term "One Leg", reclaims her oppressed identity as a person with a disability, made even more of an obstacle by her identity as a woman. I do not wish to conflate the racist literary depictions found in texts like Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* with ableist or sexist depictions, but I do wish to place these two images in the same vein to demonstrate a positive change in the literature per se. David Hare exists within the same literary tradition of Joseph Conrad, in that Conrad's colonial British literature was a predecessor to Hare's complicated, sometimes downright colonial²⁵ British dramatic literature.

What Hare does in various instances like these is thoughtfully not perpetuate the same kind of representations that existed in colonial literature. In uplifting the social status of Fatima in her bold and unapologetic monologue, Hare leads audiences on to believe that *Forever's* is even a feminist text which gives voice to people like Fatima, and in the most radical way possible. Hare even goes beyond this in depicting a whole array of individuals on the spectrum of oppression who refuse to become fixture pieces of pity.

²⁴ Ibid., 27.

However despite the socially progressive depictions of characters like Fatima, and the Western liberal awareness of writers like Boo and Hare, the cultural production of *Forever's* is not so radical indeed. The how of *Forever's* reinforces a neoimperialist power structure by which information, however its newly directed flow from South to North, still enters the North's sphere of representation by way of the 'expert' interlocutor – Katherine Boo, and then David Hare. As well, it replicates Verdi's staging of *Aida*, in that the West is culturally producing its Other and making a profit off of it.

Another tool of *Forever's*' discourse that works hand-in-hand with the feminist portrayal of Fatima as a distraction from the neoimperialist power structure is the artistic team's vocalization of the major representation of actors of South Asian descent on a major British stage like the National's as positive, progress and growth – even almost on some level as if to suggest that the brown South Asians of Britain are the brown South Asians of Annawadi. Such a suggestion discounts class and nationality. Despite this, director Rufus Norris articulates a self-congratulatory celebration of the majority brown cast when asked if *Forever's* could have been staged ten years ago:

I don't know I think in two ways it would have been difficult from the simple pragmatic point of view ... there hasn't been a wealth of strong actors in [the South Asian] community, historically, but it's getting much much stronger ... I hope I'm not generalizing horribly to say that ten years ago we could have done *Death and the King's Horseman* or we could have done *The Amen Corner*, and did in fact, or those sorts of plays because with the black community it happened earlier for various reasons which probably this isn't the right time to go into...but I think if I manage to not get fired by the time I leave here I would hope that we're in a different place.²⁶

²⁶ "Rufus Norris & Meera Syal on Behind the Beautiful Forever's." YouTube. YouTube, 6 Jan. 2015. Web. 21 Mar. 2016.

In Norris's simplistic look at the history of racial politics of the National, where Laurence Olivier famously played Othello in blackface in 1964, marginalized communities will come to the forefront whenever they are ready, not when those in power like Norris are willing to create space for them. Norris suggests that artistic representation in large institutions is the result of a linear progression, and takes some time. Such a claim is problematic in itself since it doesn't consider racist structures of exclusion, but justifies what Norris will say in response to the next question. When Norris was asked whether someone like Hare, who was most notably absent from many live and newspaper interviews about the play, would have written something of this nature ten years ago, Norris attributes the very recent work coming out of the South Asian community citing *Slumdog Millionaire* as though Indians have only just started writing books in the past 15 years. He also lauds his own work:

... If you look at the work I've done even on this stage, three of the four last ones I've done here have been very culturally diverse...

Such a claim is part and parcel of the discourse of *Forever* which values progress and justice in the West over progress and justice for the subaltern, or even for an equitable *interaction* with the subaltern, and not a continued pillaging and theft of it.

Other parts of the discourse surrounding the production of the play as well as the book insist on Boo's thorough reportage of Annawadi and her seemingly intimate relationship to the people there, who would later become the characters onstage. Boo entered Annawadi with the full knowledge of writing a book about her time there, so that kind of literary representation did not pose any immediate ethical dilemma to Boo's conscience. However, when the original book was published, Boo gave an interview for which she engaged with some of the implications of reporting poverty and

consequentially profiting from those stories. As well, she was also confronted with the question of ‘why India’, implicit in the question is ‘why a book about India’ and a *New York Times* bestseller at that, since this is Boo’s first and only book so far.

Guernica: After reporting on issues of poverty in the United States for so long, what drew you to write about India?

Katherine Boo: [...] at first, I thought, “I can’t do it. I’m not Indian. If I did write anything, I would just be some stupid white woman writing a stupid thing.” But there were people around me who were saying, “If you do it well, then who you are becomes less important.”²⁷

I apply Alcoff to Boo’s dilemma of the lack of an Indian identity being the one thing that stands in the way of being able to write about Indians. Such an opinion does not account for a measure of positionality, which would allow Boo a more complex understanding of why such an act is such a cultural taboo²⁸ for Western writers. Prejudice, which Boo seems to frequently mention, is an age-old phenomenon, which says that Boo is viewed as a ‘stupid white woman’ by the Annawadians because they prejudge her because of the fact of her abnormality in an Indian setting. Though Boo might suggest this is what is at play here, this is not the case. Identity, or a shared one in this case, need not be the unconditional measure of authority. When Boo does speak for others in the case of *Forever*, she is not committing an ethical wrong per se – but she is materially asserting an advantage over Annawadians by closing off a possible circuit of profit for

²⁷ Brennan, Emily, and Katherine Boo. "Reporting Poverty." *Guernica / A Magazine of Art & Politics*. 4 Sept. 2012. Web.

²⁸ This is because of the history born out of European colonialism in which the ‘expert’ ventures to the land of the Other in the same way Conrad did. From Conrad’s efforts result racist depictions. From the imperialist’s efforts result a number of oppressions from confiscation of land to military rule. And lastly on the cultural front of imperialism results a material accumulation of wealth via theft of culture, as in the case of Verdi’s *Aida*.

Annawadians by publishing the bestselling book herself. It is by way of her multiple privileges: her race as white, her nationality as American, and her economic status as advantaged – that assist in her producing *Forever's*. These aforementioned identities comprise her distinct positionality.²⁹ Boo's positionality in relation to the people of Annawadi poses ethical dilemmas because of the great variance between the two's relational markers of status and identity, with their race as brown, nationality as Indian, and economic status as profoundly disadvantaged.

I cringe to imagine how Annawadians sized me up behind my back. I was just relieved that we all managed to adjust to each other after a while.³⁰

In the program of the production, Boo provides this anecdote to address the moment when she knew her 'novelty of presence' hadn't become an issue anymore, or had been normalized. Boo's perception of her own positionality and its variance to that of the Annawadians' is a superficial one. Class, race, nationality are never mentioned. Instead she provides humorous stories about how children called her hotel names because they thought she had gotten lost in the slum. The kind of mundane awkwardness that Boo talks about has to do with prejudice, which can move in both directions. However, oppression only flows in one. In fact, one's place is *never* normalized just as one's positionality or location is *never* fully abdicated. For example, even if a white man gives his home away to live on the streets, he is still white and a man. That Boo's project will bring her monetary gain off of the stories of others narrative capital is a material manifestation of the 'subordinate' people's continued oppression. Her book will probably not affect policy

³⁰ Boo, Katherine, and Kate Medina. *Behind the Beautiful Forever's*. London: National Theatre, 2014. Print. Production Program.

that will advantage the Annawadians. And it will try to humanize the ‘statistics’ of inequality, but at the cost of problematic depictions since they are not humanizing themselves. And all the while, the fact remains that directly out of this project, the following is happening: the rich are getting richer while the poor are staying poor. As well, the rich are getting rich off of the speeches of the poor. While I realize that analyzing identity in relation to positionality rarely amounts in an objective answer involving that which can be proven, it is important to assess these aforementioned aspects of Boo’s discourse because it often serves to obfuscate the objective fact of the matter: the material theft of Annawadian narrative for monetary gain.

In an interview Boo gave in 2012, she was asked to confront the question of the material benefit embedded in her reporting on poverty.

Guernica: At a lecture at American Academy, you recounted that during your reporting on that evacuation shelter for *The New Yorker* a woman told you, “Wait, so you take our stories and put them in a magazine that rich people read, and you get paid and we don’t? That’s some backward-ass bluffiness, if you ask me.” She seemed to sum up the moral dilemma that reporting on poverty raises. Can you speak to some of these ethical questions?

Katherine Boo: She said it better than I did. We take stories and purvey them to people with money. And in the conventions of my profession, which I try to adhere to, we can’t pay people for stories. Anyone with a conscience who does this work grapples with that reality, and if they don’t, I’d worry. I lie awake at night, and I think, “Am I exploiting them? Am I a vulture?” All of the terrible names anyone could call me, I’ve called myself worse.

As generous a gesture Boo’s probing self-examination is, there is absolutely no barrier to allowing such stories, especially when told artistically, to be by the people who have experienced them themselves. Western audiences can be jolted and culturally shocked when the marginalized represent themselves, but if done otherwise we are exposed to the West’s comfortable reliance on the liberal interlocutor(s), in this case Boo *and* Hare. Boo

goes on to say that ‘if writing about people who are not yourself is illegitimate, then the only legitimate work is autobiography; and as a reader and a citizen, I don’t want to live in that world.’ Here again, Boo recycles the same argument against ‘identity as authority’, a claim to which there isn’t ever an objective answer, and then she references a serious concern that is born out of when these conversations shut people down – an inward narcissism of ‘autobiography’ which Alcoff notes as being equally dangerous. Instead, Boo offers a win-lose scenario:

Sunil knows people who’ve been killed and filed away, and he can’t bring that to life. But he can tell me and I can get the documents and do the work and bring it to life. And that’s a trade-off to make.

This need not exist as a win-lose. Any inability that Sunil possesses to tell his own story is being directly asserted by Boo. There is in fact no legitimate barrier to Sunil having autonomy over his story and in the story’s telling. Instead, there is a lot of obfuscating to build up to this trade-off.

One of the reasons I pore over official documents and reportage is because I’m fascinated by the chasm between the lives that people have and the way they’re officially recorded. In Annawadi, when people were killed, they were categorized as sickness deaths because the officials were corrupt, were extorting money from other people, didn’t care to investigate the deaths of no-account people, and so on. The tragedy is that the other children in Annawadi knew that these people were murdered, that their lives had no meaning, that they’d be classified and filed away. The corrosive effect of that knowledge is staggering. When you know that anything can happen to you, that there is no possibility of redress because of who you are, because you’re an embarrassment in this prosperous city, that’s tragic.

No narcissism need exist in art and literature if Boo’s exchange consisted of more direct listening versus a transcription, in addition to a platform provided by the National Theatre. Yes, there is in fact a direct legal barrier to what Boo brings to this problem – Sunil cannot seek redress for these murders - but this is not the problem that the interviewer asked in the first place – which is about who is being given the platform to

tell the stories. Boo's seems to suggest that Sunil just has so much to worry about that he should leave the telling to her. The telling is not being barricaded. While there are other barriers in Sunil's life, telling his story is not an evidenced one. There is a case to be made for those who are privileged to advocate for the poor and marginalized, but such advocating can look differently in which the support empowers the subject to speak for herself, and it need not operate under neoimperialist power dynamics.

Once the project premiered in 2014, Boo's stance had reached a slight transformation. At first, Boo had reservations about the book becoming a play. One can speculate as to why this is and pose different reasons – perhaps one being the fear of it morphing and evolving into its own brand – but the most obvious difference between the two forms is that the theatrical one makes characters more vulnerable by physically depicting them onstage with real actors, and this becomes ethically complicated when the writer has lifted the stories from real people.

[Boo] reveals that she said “no” to the proposal at first, admitting that “I’ve got a jumpy-rabbit heart about a lot of things [in life]”. She elaborates on that initial refusal: “There’s no point in doing work like this if it only ratifies clichés. It has to challenge them.

Certainly, the play does not, as Boo feared it might, “ratify clichés” – but what clichés is she referring to? The play does not ratify the racial clichés of the literary sort, which are found in one of the consequences of Achebe's evasion, so it passes that portion of the “test”, but application of Said's work shows us that a neoimperialist power structure is reinforced. Boo seems aware of the power structure that is found in work like hers in which a white economically advantaged Western writer journeys to do field work on the marginalized – in this case, the subaltern. Boo seems aware of this because she went out

of her way to first ‘check in’ with the residents of Annawadi before pursuing a theatrical version of the play.

So, I went to Annawadi and said, ‘What do you guys think?’ and they [said], ‘Well, fine!’ So I thought, why not? You try in the work to tell a compelling, factually sound story, but you’re also trying to open up a space of deliberation about very serious problems and I said, ‘OK, this play is just opening up a different space’.”³¹

In making this knowledge public, she suggests to audiences and critics that her privilege as an empowered Westerner from the Global North has been set aside for a moment, that by earning the verbal permission of the people the play depicts Boo’s project passes a test of ethics that combats in some way the difference between her positionality and theirs – the power imbalance ceases to exist, and they become artistic partners, collaborators even, in the project and production.

However, Boo’s asking of the residents of Annawadi, or at least making this action public, is the ultimate gesture of privilege, not an abdication of it. If the residents of Annawadi had rejected the idea, Boo could have still pursued the project. Their word has no material or even social clout in the Western world. The subaltern is the subaltern because they have no recourse to a court of law, and nor do they have Western’s society eyes – ironically, Boo wishes to bring eyes to them, but in the end, the ‘them’ she brings is removed so that they are not the ‘them’ that actually exist. The residents of Annawadi would not have had and still do not have access to any material form of pressuring by which they could reject the idea and project. Thus, we rely solely on the ethical

³¹Mountford, Fiona. "Slumming It: The National Theatre's New Head Rufus Norris and Writer Katherine Boo on Creating Indian Epic "Behind the Beautiful Forevers"" *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 8 Nov. 2014. Web.

conscience of the writer, Boo, who tells us that they were “OK” with it. Indeed, Boo’s gesture was symbolic of courtesy, and a heightened awareness of positionality, but it does not have any real bearing on the course of the play.

Boo’s conceit of partnership with the Annawadians is one of the pillars that *Forever* rests on, this idea that her research being so masterfully done that the people actually come alive on the stage. But the Annawadians cannot come alive on the stage for they are being played by economically and nationally privileged British-Indian actors. However, a dangerous language starts to take form when this conceit works. Actors start referring to the characters they play as the actual people, and little separation happens in the mind. The moment at which the Annawadians words become codified as written text via Boo, a modern replication of the work of Conrad’s takes place. Only the façade is different, that there is this pretense of partnership or dialogue, since we’re hearing directly from specific Annawadians. But if we were to be hearing directly from specific Annawadians, the play would have to be written and performed by specific Annawadians themselves, and perhaps even directed, designed choreographed and produced. So then, we aren’t really hearing from specific Annawadians. Rather, we are hearing from Boo, and then from Hare. Achebe’s evasion is still alive, but with a new guise of multicultural, radical inclusiveness on the part of institutions like the National Theatre.

Conclusion

At the outset of this paper I quote an audience member’s reaction to the production at the National Theatre. In this individual’s words, we are to “forget *Slumdog*

Millionaire” because *Forever's* is “the reality.”³² I take this person’s quote to mean that *Slumdog Millionaire* did not try to hide its problematic aspects or politics, from the normalization of poverty to its suggestion that anyone can win in global capitalism. However, this is emblematic of the insidious nature of *Forever's* asymmetry in representation and neoimperialist foundations. Said’s analysis of the cultural production of *Aida* is now more relevant than ever. At its time, the staging of *Aida* in Cairo was considered highly and radically progressive and revolutionary. *Forever's* is also considered highly radically and progressive – a way better, smarter version of *Slumdog Millionaire* with 24-karat liberals like Boo, Hare and Norris to trust. Because of the discourse of Boo, Hare and Norris, *Forever's* gives the impression that *their* kind of giving ‘voice to the voiceless’ has gone beyond Danny Boyle’s for *Millionaire* – *it’s sexy, and it’s progressive! It’s a feminist play! We checked in with them before making it, and they’re OK with it!* However, *Forever's* is at the end of the day high trickery. It is art that effectively engages with people on an emotional level, but as an operation of globalization it replicates a neoimperialist power structure and robs the people it purportedly exists to serve. Ironically, Danny Boyle set up trust funds for the slum children in *Millionaire*. Boo, in 2012, said that she refused to give one of her subjects 10 rupees when she was asked once, because it’s “a violation of ethics.”³³ The real violation of ethics is *Forever's*.

³² This quote is also problematic as it assumes there is a kind of ‘slum play’ that ‘does it right.’ But no slum play can do it right unless the slum has a hand in creating it.

³³ Calkin, Jessamy. "Katherine Boo Interview." *The Telegraph*. 1 June 2012. Web.

Western theatres seeking to hear stories of inequality from marginalized people should consider the workings of artistic and literary exchanges with the subaltern, which now often operate with the American, or Western liberal interlocutor transcribing stories for us. Such an act is a kind of narrative theft that replicates colonial forms of cultural imperialism and upholds the problematic role of the ‘expert.’ Alcoff notes that rituals of speaking are always paralleled to structures of power that reinforce domination, exploitation, and subordination. A dangerous practice arises when speaking for others becomes a kind of discursive imperialism, as Alcoff puts it. Yet a retreat into one’s self and one’s limited world is also unethical as it leads a person to a kind of narcissism out of which they feel no responsibility to the world around them, e.g. the show *Girls*, which is often criticized for a whitewashed portrayal of classist experience of New York. A question presents itself here: why must Boo have looked so far outward to tell a story of inequality? Why hasn’t her previous work on the disadvantaged in America³⁴ made it to a stage of the National Theatre’s caliber? Of course, this question is complicated by the fact that nowadays, it is not so easy to say that there is a Third World and a First World, nor is it anymore easy to say that by country separation we can denote racial separation or class disparities.

As James Sidaway argues in his work on the linguistic dimensions of naming the nation-states who have been severely disadvantaged by colonialism, the ‘Third World’ might look like a hospital. Sidaway interrogates the hierarchy of terms that describe and

³⁴ Boo’s earlier reporting has examined those in the US searching for new homes after being displaced by Hurricane Katrina, women in Oklahoma City trying to better themselves through marriage-prep education, and the mentally ill in government group homes for which she was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in Public Service.

reinstate status in the mind of the perceiver and perceived after globalization unfolds and inequality occurs, evoking certain images and biased assumptions about such sites of poverty. One of Sidaway's notable examples of the greying of demarcations of sites of underdevelopment is language used to describe New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina or poorly run hospitals in Britain that the media calls 'Third World' scenes. Such an analysis illustrates that speaking for others and this kind of unequal artistic exchange can happen within the writer or artist's own developed country. But while the ethical challenges of positionality still apply to an internal encounter like those which Boo had reporting on victims of Hurricane Katrina, the fact still remains that Boo *did* tell those stories – however, she did not make a book (which would later turn into a play) out of these US stories. This fact illustrates that *Forever's* is born out of a historically European legacy of cultural production and theft whereby the West takes from the subaltern. Only the intention is different today – it is still to 'understand' the Other, as Achebe points out, and probably also in many cases it is to reify racism – but now such an unequal exchange is painted with the guise of giving 'voice to the voiceless.' No exchange need not necessarily work this way when the subjects are generally able themselves, if a resourced opportunity were presented.

Despite these further complications, equitable artistic relationships that produce thought-provoking art can still be made so long as marginalized storytellers are given platforms on which they can tell their own stories autonomously. Like this, they represent themselves. This work is being done at theatres in Chicago such as Free Street Theater, which provides students from the Chicago Public School system a paid after school education program through which they are given the resources to write, devise and act in

their own show, which often draws on stories from the students' lives since many face oppression in various forms. It is also being done by the Goodman Theatre, a regional theatre with a \$41 million income for 2015³⁵, in their partnership with Albany Park Theatre Project (AFTP), a social justice-oriented multi-ethnic theatre company in one of Chicago's most diverse neighborhoods. The Goodman provides AFTP's young people with the resources to imagine a play shown on one of the Goodman's large stages that is written and acted by those same young people.

No such physical, legal or economic barrier existed in the making of the National Theatre's *Forever* that would have prevented Boo and Hare from partnering with the Annawadians in a similar fashion. Western artistic institutions that seek to hear stories from places like Annawadi should listen harder, and should consider just whom they are listening to.

³⁵ Goodman Theatre Group, Inc. "FINANCIAL STATEMENTS August 31, 2015 and 2014." *Goodmantheatre.org*. Web.

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