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Breaking Bones, Building Voice: The Politics of Expression in *Trying to Grow*

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Abstract

Aims: This paper seeks to explore *Trying to Grow by Firdaus Kanga as an intricate literary work, examining the constructs of disability, sexuality, and cultural identity in postcolonial India, while* challenging the systems of a disablism framework. In doing so, the study aims to situate the novel as both a compelling piece of life writing and a significant intervention in South Asian studies of ableism, queerness, and hybrid identity.
Methodology and Approaches: The investigation relies on a close reading of the text of the novel alongside its analytical comparison with other related Indian and international texts. The research is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Disability Studies, Queer Theory, and Postcolonial Theory, particularly the medical versus social model of disability, intersectionality of multiple identities, and postcolonial civic national identity politics.
Outcome: The research demonstrates Brit Kotwal, Kanga's protagonist, undermines the expected literary representation of a queer or disabled character. Through her wit, agency, and self-resistance, Brit dismantles dominant models of hetero-masculinity and heterosexual normativity as well as bodily normativity. This article also shows how disability, queerness, and the marginalized Parsi culture intersectionally shapes the identity Trying to Grow seeks to express.
Conclusion and Suggestions: In attempting to wind up the argument, the paper attempts to defend *Trying to Grow* as the first English fiction from India which fundamentally and distinctively alters an archetypal coming of age story through the lens of marginalization. Further studies might examine approximate analyses in Indian literature focusing on the critique and reception of queer- disabled identities in the broader cultural frameworks of South Asia.

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Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* isn't just another coming-of-age story—it's a sharp, personal, and surprisingly funny dive into what it means to grow up when your body and desires don't fit the world's expectations. Set in Bombay during a time when India itself was on the brink of major change, the novel gives space to a voice that literature often overlooks: a queer, disabled, middle-class Parsi boy trying to navigate his way through life. What's striking is how unfiltered and direct Kanga is. Through his fictional stand-in, Brit, he doesn't ask for sympathy or try to wrap his experiences in dramatic flair. Instead, he lets Brit speak with humor, bite, and a kind of honesty that catches you off guard (Kanga 45).

Brit isn't written to inspire or be pitied. He's just living. There's this line early on where he says, "They always said I was brave, just because I got out of bed in the morning. But it wasn't bravery. I just wanted to live" (Kanga 23). It's simple, but it hits hard. That moment captures the whole vibe of the book. Kanga strips away the cliché of the "heroic disabled person" and shows us someone who wants to be seen as ordinary, even if the world keeps trying to cast him as extraordinary for doing everyday things. There's something powerful in that quiet defiance.

What really makes Brit such a standout character is that he refuses to be boxed into any kind of symbol. He's not there to uplift or represent anyone in a neat, polished way. He's selfish sometimes. He's brutally honest. He makes jokes that sting. He's sexual, sarcastic, and sharp as hell. At one point, when someone asks if he's ever wished he could walk, he throws back: "Why would I want to be ordinary when I can be extraordinary while sitting?" (Kanga 78). It's one of those lines that catches you off guard—not because it's meant to inspire, but because it flips the whole narrative. Brit doesn't view his disability as something to overcome; it's just part of who he is, like his love for literature or his Parsi background or the fact that he's attracted to men. It's not tragic. It's not heroic. It just is.

And that's where things start to get really interesting. Brit isn't just navigating life as a disabled person—he's also queer, he's Parsi, he's middle-class, and he's growing up in a city that's constantly shifting. All of those identities layer on top of each other and make things more complicated. Kimberlé Crenshaw talks about this in her idea of "intersectionality," where different parts of someone's

identity overlap and create unique experiences of discrimination or pressure (Crenshaw 140). Brit lives that reality. Within his own Parsi community—which can be pretty closed-off and traditional—he's already on the margins because of his disability. But being queer? That pushes him even further out. He says at one point, "There was a time when I thought if I kept quiet about who I was, they'd let me stay. But silence is a kind of dying" (Kanga 112). That line hits hard. It says so much about what it costs to hide—and how finding your voice can be the first step toward survival.

Language is another big theme in the novel, and it works on multiple levels. Brit is fluent in English—almost too fluent. He quotes Shakespeare, devours British novels, and uses English like a weapon and a shield. In postcolonial India, English is loaded with meaning. It's tied to status, education, and often exclusion. For Brit, it becomes both a lifeline and a barrier. It lets him shape his identity and assert his intellect, but it also cuts him off from the local languages and cultures that surround him. At one point, he says, "I could quote Shakespeare better than I could curse in Gujarati. That didn't make me proud—it made me feel like a guest in both houses" (Kanga 89). That sentence says so much in so few words. It captures that strange in-between feeling—being fluent in a language but not at home in it, being part of a culture but also apart from it. It's one of the quiet tensions running through Brit's life.

What's remarkable about *Trying to Grow* is that it doesn't try to resolve all these contradictions. It sits with them. It lets Brit be funny and angry and messy and full of desire. It doesn't sanitize his experiences or reduce him to a lesson. The novel pushes back against the urge to make marginalized characters "likable" in conventional ways. Instead, it argues that honesty is more important than likability, and that telling one's story—truthfully, with all the sharp edges intact—is a radical act in itself (Davis 56).

There's something raw and startlingly honest about how Brit talks about desire. He doesn't just hint at queerness—he names it, owns it, without flinching. In a world where straightness is the norm and anything outside of that is seen as strange or taboo, Brit's attraction to boys is neither hidden nor dramatized. It just is. "I liked boys," he says. Simple, direct. He notices how they smell, how they

walk. There's a sense of wonder in how he describes them—not guilt, not confusion. Just... joy (Kanga 102).

And yet, it's not that simple. Desire, in Brit's world, doesn't come without baggage. His body—fragile from birth due to osteogenesis imperfecta—is seen by others as something to pity or marvel at. People are drawn to the idea of him, not the messier, real version. One of the more painful lines comes when a lover backs away, and Brit thinks to himself: they didn't want him, they wanted the story—the brave boy, the one who smiled through everything (Kanga 134). That kind of moment sticks. It shows how people often admire difference from a distance but aren't prepared for what it really means.

Brit resists all of that. He pushes back—sometimes gently, sometimes sharply—against the roles people try to put him in. There's a moment where he reflects on his mother's expectations. She loved him, clearly, but also wanted something safer. A version of him she could show off. "I was the kind who made her nervous," he says (Kanga 67). That tension—between love and control, acceptance and discomfort—is woven throughout his relationships. He knows he makes people uneasy, and sometimes he leans into that. Then there's Bombay. It's not just a setting—it's part of the story. It's loud, chaotic, indifferent. For someone in a wheelchair, it's also harsh. Stairs, stares, spaces that aren't meant for you. And yet, Brit builds a life there. He has moments of connection, even joy. The city never gives him everything, but it doesn't stop him either. There's this bittersweet feeling throughout the novel—of getting close, but never quite arriving (Kanga 156).

The story doesn't end in triumph. There's no dramatic arc where everything resolves, no applause waiting at the end. Instead, what we get is something truer: a life in progress. Brit tries. He learns. He hurts. And he keeps going. As Lennard Davis notes, disabled bodies refuse to fit into neat categories (Enforcing Normalcy 72), and that's exactly what Brit's life does. He doesn't overcome his condition. He lives with it, around it, though it—and that's enough.

But *Trying to Grow* isn't just one boy's story. It also says something bigger about how identity is shaped. Brit is caught in a web of things he didn't choose: colonial history, community rules, cultural expectations. Being queer, disabled, Parsi, and English-speaking in India—all of that creates a kind of tension that

can't be resolved easily. Homi Bhabha calls it the "Third Space," this in-between place where identity is always shifting, never settled (Location 54). That's where Brit lives. And he makes it his own.

Even language—English, specifically—is complicated for him. It gives him power, yes. It lets him tell his story, connect to literature, articulate what matters. But it also sets him apart. "English was my kingdom, but I was not its king," he says (Kanga 178). That line hits hard. It's like being fluent in a tongue that never truly feels like home—a guest in every world. Brit's relationship with his father adds another layer to his sense of not quite belonging. Unlike his mother, who is loud and commanding, his father mostly hovers in the background—quiet, unsure, maybe even uncomfortable with who Brit is becoming. But when he does speak, his discomfort spills out. "Why can't you be more like other boys?" he asks. Brit's reply cuts through the moment like a blade: "Because they don't have to try. I have to try every day, and that's exhausting" (Kanga 145). It's a sharp, weary truth. It's not just about being different—it's about the work that difference demands, every single day.

What we see here isn't just a clash between father and son—it's a larger critique of what society calls "normal." Who defines it? Who benefits from it? Brit's story refuses to play by the rules of conformity. Lennard Davis reminds us that "normalcy" didn't always exist; it was manufactured—built on statistics, industrial efficiency, and the idea that deviance was something to be erased (Enforcing Normalcy 23). Brit won't be erased. He refuses to be quiet, even when silence might be easier. "They wanted me to be invisible, but I was too loud, too bright, too full of life to disappear," he declares (Kanga 189). That line isn't just a personal statement—it's a political one.

This hunger to be seen, to be heard, is also part of Brit's queer defiance. In a country where queerness was once criminalized, Brit's openness about his sexuality is not only brave—it's revolutionary. He doesn't hide, doesn't offer apologies. His desire, his heartbreak, his pleasure—they're all laid bare. His love for Rashid, for instance, is full of warmth but also edged with sadness. When Rashid eventually yields to social pressure, Brit doesn't collapse. He reflects: "He loved me in the way he could, and I loved him in the way I needed. That wasn't enough, but it was something" (Kanga 167). That quiet acceptance carries weight.

It's not the story of tragic gay love—it's the story of love that tried, and maybe failed, but still mattered.

Brit's queerness doesn't exist in isolation either. It threads through everyday life—through school, friendships, awkward family dinners. And in doing so, it challenges the dominant scripts that claim queerness is foreign, unnatural, or dangerous. As Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai demonstrate in Same-Sex Love in India, queerness isn't new to Indian culture—it has always been there, even if people tried to erase it (Vanita and Kidwai 112). Brit's story brings it back into view. José Esteban Muñoz once said that queerness is about imagining a world that doesn't yet exist (Muñoz 22). *Trying to Grow* becomes part of that vision—a small, glowing fragment of what might be possible.

Disability, too, is reframed in this novel. Brit's condition isn't treated as a tragedy. It's just part of who he is. His body bends differently, breaks more easily—but the real difficulty often comes from the world around him. No ramps. No support. People who stare, or worse, people who pretend not to see him at all. Disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson urges us to move from the medical model to the social model—to see how environments, not just bodies, create barriers (Extraordinary Bodies 45). Kanga seems to understand this deeply. Brit doesn't want to be "fixed." "I needed a world that didn't see me as broken," he says (Kanga 203). That single sentence flips the script. It's not Brit who needs changing—it's the world.

And if there's a kind of justice in this novel, it doesn't arrive in courtrooms or protests. It comes in smaller, more intimate moments, like when Brit gives a speech at school. At first, he's mocked. But then he speaks—really speaks—and something shifts. "You laugh at me because you think I'm small. But I am bigger than your laughter, bigger than your fear. I will not shrink to make you feel comfortable" (Kanga 211). It's a quiet revolution—a moment when voice becomes power.

Storytelling itself becomes an act of defiance. As Toni Morrison once said, "The function of freedom is to free someone else" (Morrison 89). Kanga's writing does exactly that. By choosing to tell Brit's story in English, by putting a queer, disabled, Parsi boy at the center, he's kicking open the doors of what Indian literature usually looks like. It's bold. It's necessary. What's more, Kanga doesn't

universalize Brit's experience. He roots it deeply in Parsi life—with its rituals, fears, and contradictions. The Parsi community is small and often portrayed as either charming or eccentric. But Kanga offers something deeper. He shows how family can be both loving and controlling, and how community can both embrace you and hold you back. "They wanted to protect me," Brit says. "But sometimes protection is just a prettier name for control" (Kanga 198). That line lingers. It captures the complex dance between love and autonomy, especially when you live at the intersection of multiple identities.

Trying to Grow is a really layered story that hits on a bunch of big ideas—like disability, queerness, identity, and how we're all shaped by society. Brit's life shows how rules about how bodies and people "should" be don't always fit, and he both deals with and pushes against those rules. Think of it like Brit trying to figure out where he belongs while fighting all these invisible pressures. The story doesn't wrap up with everything perfect or solved. Brit even says, "I'm not trying to grow anymore. I'm just trying to be" (Kanga 224). In a world that's always telling you to do better or fit in, just existing as yourself can feel like a big, bold move.

His body—affected by osteogenesis imperfecta—isn't just about limits or struggles. Brit talks about how people expected him to "break," but he's tougher than they thought (Kanga 56). It's like disability here is shown as strength, not weakness, flipping the usual story. Another important thing is that Brit tells his own story. This matters a lot because when disabled people tell their own experiences, the story changes from pity to power. Brit wants to live fully—to love, to feel lonely, to mess up, to be happy. He says, "I wanted to kiss life, even if life didn't always want to kiss me back" (Kanga 178). That's powerful—showing his real human wants and needs.

Then there's his sexuality. Brit's queer, and he's honest about it. Society often ignores disabled people's sexual lives, but Brit doesn't hide his feelings or desires. His relationship with Rashid and his crushes are real parts of his life. He says, "Desire didn't pity me. It came to me just like it came to anyone else" (Kanga 134). This challenges all those old ideas about queer and disabled people being invisible or asexual.

Language also plays a big role. Brit writes in English, which was the colonizer's language, but he takes it and makes it his own. He says, "I made English my playground. If they thought I didn't belong, I would write myself in" (Kanga 89). This is a way of saying, yeah, English is tied to colonial power, but you can flip it around and use it to fight back. So overall, *Trying to Grow* isn't just Brit's story—it's about speaking up and not letting society erase you. It's about celebrating who you are, even if that's different from what people expect.

One of the biggest influences in Brit's life is his community—the Parsi community. It's a place full of its own traditions and worries, especially about their shrinking numbers. But for Brit, it's complicated. He doesn't always feel like he fits in, not because of his disability, but because he doesn't want to follow all the rules about how he's supposed to be—especially the expectations around being straight and male. His mom cares deeply about him but also pushes those traditional ideas. She wants him to fit in so badly that she even dresses him "like a doll" to get people to admire him. But Brit wants people to see him for who he really is, not what others want him to be (Kanga 112). That tension between Brit and his mom is something many queer or disabled people face with their families—it's a kind of clash between old values and new ways of being.

Still, Brit doesn't completely reject his community. He pokes fun at it, calls out its contradictions, but also draws strength from its history and customs. This mixed feeling—both critical and connected—is pretty common for people who feel on the edges. Like Stuart Hall said, identity isn't fixed; it's about where you stand in different moments (Hall 15). For Brit, being Parsi, queer, disabled, and living in a postcolonial world all come together, shaping who he is in ways that aren't just separate pieces but parts of a whole.

To really get Brit's life, you have to think about intersectionality—that idea Kimberlé Crenshaw talks about (Crenshaw 140). You can't understand his struggles by looking only at one part of his identity, like his disability or queerness or ethnicity. They all mix together and create his unique experience. For example, when kids exclude him at school, it's not just because of his body—it's also about how people see him as different in other ways, like how he acts or where he comes from. His challenges come from all these angles at once, so understanding his strength means looking at all those layers.

Brit's way of pushing back is usually quiet but strong. He's not out there leading revolutions; instead, he just lives his life in his own way, refusing to change to fit what others expect. His sharp humor, his bright personality, and his smarts all become ways he resists. Sara Ahmed talks about how being "willful" means being labeled as difficult or troublesome (Ahmed 67). That fits Brit perfectly. He might be "difficult" to some, but he's also full of life, daring, and deeply real.

School is a tough place for Brit, but it's also where he finds some hope. There, he meets cruelty but also discovers books, debates, and the power of words. He loves Shakespeare—not just because it's schoolwork, but because he connects with the characters. Take Hamlet, for example. Brit says Hamlet "didn't know where he belonged" and was always thinking and feeling too much, just like him (Kanga 145). Through literature, Brit finds a way to imagine himself differently, a place where he can be more than just what others see.

Belonging—or not quite belonging—is a big theme through the whole story. Brit lives in several worlds but never fits perfectly into any of them. He's Indian but thinks and talks in English. He's Parsi but questions some traditions. He's male but challenges typical ideas of masculinity. His mind is strong, but his body is fragile. He's queer in a society that tries to police who you love. But none of these things are presented as a burden; instead, Brit calls himself a "mosaic," made of broken parts that still hold together (Kanga 201). It's a beautiful way of saying identity isn't about being perfect or neat—it's about being a whole made from many pieces.

Kanga's book fits into a bigger tradition of Indian English literature, where writers like Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy explore mixed identities and speak out against injustice. But Kanga does something special by putting the disabled queer body front and center—a body that usually gets left out of these stories. Brit's voice is not just his own—it speaks for anyone who's been told they don't fit or aren't enough. When Brit says, "I am not a mistake" (Kanga 212), it's a powerful shout-out. In a world that values people based on how "productive" or "normal" they seem, this statement demands respect. It's about claiming dignity for everyone who lives on the edges.

As the story goes on, it's clear that Brit's narration isn't just about telling what happened to him—it's about taking back control of his own story. Kanga writes Brit's voice so closely you feel like you're inside his head, seeing the world through his pain, humor, desire, and sharp observations. Usually, disabled bodies don't get this kind of attention in stories. But here, Brit's body—though fragile—is full of life and memory. "Every fracture wrote something into me," he says. "I carried a story in every bone" (Kanga 34). His body becomes a living record, showing both the violence he's faced and the strength he holds.

Elaine Scarry talks about how pain can be impossible to put into words (Scarry 4). But Kanga does the opposite. He tells Brit's story of pain without making him just a victim. Pain is there, but it doesn't take over everything. Brit's life is too rich and complex for that. His body is a place of struggle but also laughter, love, dance, and joy. "They said I was broken," he remembers, "but no one asked me how beautifully I could bend" (Kanga 167). That line flips the idea of what it means to be "broken," showing a beauty in difference that's all about real life, not just fitting in.

Brit's challenge to what people consider normal beauty and sexuality is pretty clear. In Kanga's India—where being queer is still largely taboo—Brit's openness about his feelings is refreshing and brave. From his early crushes on boys to exploring what intimacy means, he refuses to hide who he is. He lives his truth, no matter the risks. Considering that homosexuality was criminalized until recently under Section 377, this honesty takes real courage. Brit says, "What I felt wasn't wrong. It was mine. And I wouldn't let them shame it out of me" (Kanga 189). That kind of refusal to be silenced reminds you of queer thinkers like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who said just being visible and speaking out is a form of resistance (Epistemology 3).

Brit's queerness and his disability aren't separate parts of his life—they overlap and shape each other in complicated ways. This goes against common stories that either erase disabled people's sexuality or treat it as something odd. Disability activist Eli Clare once said that being disabled and queer means facing many challenges but also discovering unique strengths (Clare 45). Kanga shows this well. Even when society tries to silence Brit, he finds ways to express

himself—in his words, his body language, his relationships. His body isn't something to feel sorry for; it speaks many voices.

Language is important too. Kanga mixes Indian sayings, Parsi customs, and British English with humor and style to tell Brit's story. Brit knows English carries a colonial history, but he plays with it, mocking and twisting it to fit him. This is like what Homi Bhabha called "mimicry," when colonized people adopt the colonizer's language to quietly resist (Bhabha 86). Brit does this brilliantly—he copies, but also makes fun of, and reshapes English to express himself.

Plus, Brit controls his story. He's not a character someone else describes; he tells his own story. That's powerful. In a world that often tells disabled people what they can or can't be, Brit grabs the pen himself. He says, "No one ever asked me to tell my story, so I decided to tell it anyway" (Kanga 5). This is his way of saying disabled lives matter and deserve to be heard. Family adds more tension. Brit's parents switch between protecting him and holding him back. His mother, especially, is loving but also limits him. "She built a fortress around me," Brit says, "but forgot I might want to leave it" (Kanga 78). Many disabled people know this feeling—being cared for but losing freedom. Kanga shows this with care, making us understand even love can sometimes hold you back.

His relationship with his father is distant but important. His dad is quiet, uncomfortable with Brit's differences, but never says it. That silence speaks volumes. In many Indian families, silence can be a way to hide feelings or control. Kanga breaks that silence by giving Brit a voice. "My father never said he was ashamed, but his silence roared louder than any insult" (Kanga 112). That kind of emotional neglect can hurt as much as words. Despite all this, Brit creates his own world—filled with books, dreams, friends, and love. His imagination is a safe place and a way to resist. He dreams bigger than what society expects. "I wanted to grow," he says, "not just taller, but wilder, freer" (Kanga 201). This idea of growth—beyond just the physical—is the heart of the book. It shows real growth is about being true to yourself, not fitting in.

At the end of the day, trying to grow is about accepting yourself fully. In a culture that wants to "fix" people who are different, Brit's refusal to be "fixed" is powerful. He doesn't want to be normal; he wants to be whole on his own terms. Disability activist Eli Clare said it best: "I will not give up my body to meet your

definition of health" (Clare 89). Brit's story is about ignoring outside opinions and trusting your own worth—a strong, gentle message.

The novel doesn't end with some big, victorious moment. There's no magical cure, no typical love story, no escape to a dreamland in the West. Instead, we have Brit—still fragile, still full of life, still trying to figure things out his own way. He says, "I hadn't grown much taller, but I had grown" (Kanga 224). That line sums up what the book is really about—not physical growth, but growing inside, in spirit and understanding.

When you look closer at Brit's story, the idea of intersectionality becomes important. Kimberlé Crenshaw originally discussed it to explain how Black women face overlapping forms of discrimination (Crenshaw 140). But it fits Brit too—he's disabled, queer, and Parsi, living in India after colonial rule. These parts of his identity don't just add up separately; they mix and tangle, making his experience unique and complicated. Brit isn't just facing discrimination for one thing, but for all of these together. He says, "They never saw me whole. Just in pieces: a boy with bones, a freak with fancies, a Parsi with a past" (Kanga 156). What's painful is that this broken-up view isn't something inside him—it's how others see him. But Brit pushes back by telling his own story, putting himself back together.

This pushback is political, really. Audre Lorde once said, "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (Lorde 45). That's what Brit does. He won't let others turn him into a simple symbol—like just a brave kid or just a tragic figure. He shows that he's complex. He can be scared and brave, lonely and loved, needing help but still standing on his own. Kanga's writing refuses to see him in black and white. Brit is always changing, always more than one thing.

Language is a big part of how Brit claims himself. Kanga's writing mixes English with phrases and rhythms from Bombay's many cultures. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o talks about how real freedom means speaking your own language (Thiong'o 34). Even though Kanga uses English, it's not the English of colonizers—it's his own kind of English, full of local flavor and personality. One part that sticks with readers is when Brit describes his classmates as "a crowd of brown bodies trying to out-Anglo each other in pronunciation" (Kanga 67). That's

a funny but sharp way to show how colonialism still affects everyday life, especially in fancy schools. It reminds me of Homi Bhabha's idea of "mimicry"—where colonized people copy the colonizer's ways to get by, but in doing that, they also show how silly the whole thing is (Bhabha 86). Brit sometimes plays along, but he's also aware of what's going on.

School is a tricky place for Brit. It's where he dreams and hopes, but it's also where he feels left out. He tries to be the perfect Parsi boy—smart, polite, well-spoken—but his body and feelings make that hard. He gets bullied or pitied, but books become his safe place. He says, "In books, no one cared if I limped or lisped. They cared what I said, how I saw" (Kanga 89). Reading lets him be himself, without judgment.

Brit's friendships don't fit the usual idea of family or romance. They can be messy—sometimes hurtful or full of unspoken feelings—but they're real. With friends, Brit isn't a problem; he's someone to laugh with and lean on. "With my friends," he says, "I wasn't a problem to be solved. I was a joke to be laughed with, a secret to be shared, a shoulder to lean on" (Kanga 134). Being seen like that is powerful, especially in a society that often ignores queer and disabled people.

One of the most moving parts of *Trying to Grow* is how it talks about intimacy—feelings, thoughts, and sex. Brit's sexual life is told openly, without shame or fancy words. Sometimes it's awkward, sometimes wonderful, but always real. This breaks from old stories that make disabled people seem asexual or childlike. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out how literature often treats disabled people like that (Extraordinary Bodies 78). But Kanga's novel goes against that. Brit is full of desire and wanted. He says, "They said no one would want me, but they never met the boys who kissed like I was fire" (Kanga 178). This shows how sexuality can be a source of strength, not something to hide.

Brit's identity is inextricably linked to his membership in the Parsi community, and this brings rich layers to his narrative. The Parsis are a small and unique minority in India who have certain values around family, success, and masculinity. Yet Brit himself is frequently in conflict with these cultural expectations. His interest in English literature and refusal to accept traditional masculine roles indicate a broader tension within postcolonial identities—a

negotiation between tradition and modernity. Homi Bhabha's idea of the "third space" captures this in-between terrain where Brit's identity plays out (Bhabha 54). He is neither in the traditional Parsi sphere nor completely in Western modernity, but rather somewhere in between. His ambivalent emotions regarding British culture—"a refuge and a prison" (Kanga 97)—demonstrate this ambivalence and the difficulties of bridging two worlds.

Bombay itself, as a city, is more than a background; it actually influences Brit's experiences. The city's contrast—between affluence and poverty, tradition and modernity—reflects the contradictions in Brit's own life. Bombay provides Brit with some benefits in the form of linguistic competence and exposure to culture, but it also subjects him to alienation. Public places turn into sites where Brit's disabled and queer body is frequently gazed at, at times out of curiosity, at times out of unease. He muses over this, quoting, "People stare not because they care, but because they don't know what else to do" (Kanga 56). This is a conflicted truth about seeing: to be visible is to be acknowledged, but to be visible is also to be treated as an object of otherness. This is in keeping with Michel Foucault's concept of the "gaze" as one means by which society disciplines and regulates bodies, identifying those who are different as objects to be seen (Foucault 187).

Brit's narrative voice throughout the novel is piercingly clear and self-conscious. He spurns typical clichés commonly leveled against disabled characters—never relegated to an object of pity or a figure of triumph. Rather, he narrates his life with humor and irony, taking control of the way he is portrayed. This act of resistance counters what disability activist Stella Young called "inspiration porn," where disabled individuals are constructed simply as inspirations to able-bodied spectators (Young). Brit's humor is also a defense mechanism, allowing him to fend off pity and take control of his own story.

Perhaps the most innovative thing about the novel is its frank description of Brit's body and sex life. Disabled individuals are often desexualized or made invisible when talk of desire arises in most societies. Brit subverts this trope, speaking openly about his body, his pleasures, and his desires. He demands, "My body is not broken. It's just different, and it has its own rhythm" (Kanga 118). This contradicts the dominant discourse that disability is equal to deficiency or

lack. Rather, Brit's words resonate with critical disability theory, which recognizes difference as a site of identity and pride (Garland-Thomson, Extraordinary Bodies 112). His truthful thinking shatters Indian cultural shames around both queerness and disability, so his narrative is all the more subversive.

Brit's relationships further reveal the novel's rich exploration of kinship beyond traditional family forms. His bonds with his mother, caregivers, friends, and lovers reveal the complexities of care, emotional labor, and power. His mother's protective love, tinged with occasional overbearing concern, captures the complicated dynamics families often navigate when caring for disabled members. These relationships transcend heteronormative notions of family, highlighting how queerness can shape emotional worlds in diverse ways (Sedgwick 56). The novel thereby expands our understanding of what family and intimacy can mean.

The narrative spans Brit's life from childhood through early adulthood, tracing his evolving sense of self. Unlike many coming-of-age stories that emphasize assimilation or overcoming adversity, Brit's journey is one of self-acceptance and refusal to conform. He asserts, "I am not broken. I am trying to grow—not into what the world expects, but into what I need to be" (Kanga 212). This captures the novel's larger point: success and growth are not about conforming to societal norms, but being true to oneself. The episodic structure of the novel reflects this ongoing, frequently lopsided process of self-becoming.

Within the broader context of Indian English literature, *Trying to Grow* is a trailblazer. It came before numerous modern works that deal with queer and disability lives openly, giving a grounded, sincere depiction of marginalized identities. Its unflinching honesty and avoidance of glossing over hard facts render it an anchor book in Indian queer and disability studies (Nayar 45). Meanwhile, the novel speaks to world literature that engages with identity and resistance, connecting Brit's voice with others of authors such as Jeanette Winterson and Audre Lorde, who subvert norms of sexuality and difference.

Critics have noted the ways Kanga's novel challenges dominant narratives of nation and identity. Jasbir Jain discusses that *Trying to Grow* "breaks the homogenizing discourses of nation and identity by bringing to the fore the intersections of disability, queerness, and minority culture" (Jain 78). Breaking this is important to expand notions of Indian modernity to encompass various,

frequently marginalized experiences. By placing Brit's narrative at its center, the novel enhances our understanding of belonging in India today. In short, trying to Grow is a richly textured and unflinching examination of identity, embodiment, and resistance. Brit is a protagonist who will not be reduced or simplified. Firdaus Kanga's book is an exemplary instance of storytelling that centers marginalized voices and encourages readers to rethink disability, queerness, and cultural belonging. It demands consideration of the messy, complex realities of lives too frequently reduced to the edges, insisting that these histories are where the action is, both literarily and socially.

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