CHAPTER 3

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Firdaus Kanga’s *Trying to Grow* is a novel of education. Kanga’s narrative singularly focusses on the trauma of creativity and the inhibitions and fears in Brit, the physically handicapped Parsee protagonist.

The narrative follows the pattern of exposure, shock of discovery and the gradual adjustment and mature acceptance of harsh realities of life.

*Trying to Grow* derives its essence from the ‘central autobiographical fact’. Kanga reveals a sense of fun and irreverence towards himself when he recreates the original experience. Brit, the fictional alter-ego of Kanga, is an imaginative invalid who passionately tries to grow. His quest is for an identity which would give his otherwise sterile existence some meaning. Brit and Lennie in *Ice-Candy-Man* are kindred souls since both are caught between the worlds of innocence and corruption. As in Sidhwa’s novel, in *Trying to Grow*, the action is internalized to a large extent. Very little takes place on the physical plane; much of the action is psychological for which Brit’s turbulent mind is the locale. In other words, the growth of Brit’s consciousness becomes central to the narrative.

*Trying to Grow* celebrates the social life of westernized Parsecs. The Parsee predilection for westernized life, Kanga seems to suggest, is absurd since it is out of tune with the realities of the times. His observation that Parsees are ‘reluctant Indians’ captures the spirit of the westernized Zoroastrian community.

In the cosy world of the kotwals, there is no room for religious faith. Brit notes:

"*We Parsees do not take our religion too seriously; those who do are considered downright dangerous and a little mad*."


As for some westernized Parsees, for the Kotwals too, religion is only a ‘comforting emotion’ which neither sustains nor stimulates.

He creates a mythical world of his own in which the fairy tales and fantasies whet his appetite. He lives like a toy prince in a toy world, far removed from the adult world of pains and pleasures. On the other hand, his neighbours like Jeroo are sceptical. Brit observes:

*I wasn’t male. Not to them. The magic mirror of their minds had invented a formula: osteo = sexlessness.*

His grim realisation which shatters his complacent world constitutes the second stage in Brit’s evolution of consciousness.

When Brit assures his father that he is happy, though it is only a half-truth, Sam cautions him:

*I don’t want you to escape from what you are. It’s no use pretending, if you are pretending that everything’s all right.*

*Because it isn’t.*

Thus Sam is instrumental in Brit’s realisation of his limitations. Brit envisages the travails of growing up in crippling circumstances. A brave boy who learns to smile in adversity. One of the singular triumphs of Kanga is that he does not sentimentalise the condition of his protagonist. The crisis in Brit’s life is born of the conflict between the over-indulgence of the Kotwals and the indifference of the neighbours. His struggle for growth, emotionally and psychologically, is part of his quest for identity in which he realises his creative potential.

The perception of Madame Manekshaw is far shaprer than that of the Kotwals. She tells him one day:

*You can look at a scene from a thousand different windows and you’ll see something new everytime.*

At this point commences Brit’s journey to selfhood which is essentially inward. Madame Manekshaw tells Brit what education means:
It’s what you learn that counts, not what you study.

The didactic undercurrent in her observations exposes the inadequacy of formal education. It is she who teaches Brit the virtue of compassion. Thus Defarge ceases to be a caricature who evokes mirth and laughter. His realisation that human nature is dualistic is between the two poles of consciousness Good and Evil.

The issue of mixed marriage which the endangered community is facing today is dealt with in *Trying to Grow*, though peripherally. Dolly, Brit’s sister, resolves to marry a Muslim. Like most conservative Parsees, the Kotwals view mised marriage as taboo. Brit’s tone, on the other hand, is detached:

> When life came to solid things like marriage, everyone, even Sera and Sam forgot how modern they were.

Sera regards Dolly’s gesture as a ‘shameful act of betrayal’ since Muslims are, at least in her view, the traditional enemies of the Parsees. Referring to the problem of marriage of girl-child in the Parsee community, Novy Kapadia writes:

> So Doly as a growing girl, represents the typical Parsi girl’s dilemma; should she be westernized or be traditional? Her value system, life style and cultural life, are typically western but the Parsi moral code curtails total freedom. Inevitably, she has hazy ideas about romantic love and the freedom of choice in the selecting a life partner. Kanga stresses that this dilemma has steemed from the upbringing in the schizophrenic Parsi milieu.¹

Dolly, though an ‘emancipated’ girl is compelled to marry a Muslim since she fails to find a suitable boy in the Parsee community. The predicament of modern Parsee girls like Dolly is largely due to the near absence of eligible young men in the Parsee community. This new found truth disturbs Brit.
Brit’s quest for an identity is given an impetus by the tempestuous advent of Cyrus, the son of Defarge’s cousin. Though both are lovers of literature, their approaches to life are different. If Cyrus rejects romanticism, Brit’s perceptions of reality are shaped by his imaginary encounter with the milieu. His revolt against his mother’s over-protective attitude is an existential imperative. The fear and apprehension which lurk in his mind are the result of his alienation from themself. Hence he makes an earnest effort to establish nexus with the adult world. Kanga’s success lies in fruitfully internalizing the archetypal conflict between Good and Evil, the two warring principles in Brit’s consciousness.

The homosexual adventures of Brit are construed as the out-come of perversion by the Kotwals. An important conviction of Kanga which he has managed to come to terms with in London is his homosexuality. *Trying to Grow*, his first creative effort records the comic – painful phenomenon of this discovery. Homosexuality, though an abnormal proclivity in India, is commonplace in the West. Kanga remarks:

> If you go to a party, you meet half a dozen gay people.\(^2\)

For Kanga it is ‘very rewarding to be considered ordinary,’ de-spite his disability which is a source of embarassment in India.

Creative writing enables Brit to come in contact with the adult world of pains and pleasures. The publication of his short story and the success which it brings, offer him new avenues in life. He is optimistic:

> But I got something bigger from that story. I didn’t feel alone any more. How could I? I had just talked to fifty thousand people.

His ennui, which is the result of his loneliness, is superceded by enthusiasm. He confesses:

> Yes, I’ve lived inside a crystal paper weight and now I want to know the real world, other people, people who are not like me.
His initial success as a creative writer strengthens his will to learn and ‘grow’ Brit’s growth as an individual is due to his conviction (and Kanga’s as well) that he is ordinary, though his parents do not accept it.

The dramatic and brutal death of Sam, a failed quester, exposes Brit to stark realities of life. He admits:

\[ I \text{ felt as if and my life, I’d been bundled up against the wind, and now one by one my woolies were being taken from me. } \]

Brit’s encounter with his drunken servant is his first confrontation with evil, though at a symbolic level. After the ‘brave’ act, he broods:

\[ \text{Like Hitler or some one, who felt so awful about them-selves, so weak, so powerless, the only way they could feel a right was by making someone else feel that way.} \]

His realization that he is no longer a boy with osteo but a man, an individual fighting on the side of Good against Evil like a true Parsee, brings the day in shadow to an end.

Tragically enough, Brit acquires an identity of his own after Sera’s death. Speaking of his options, he remarks:

\[ \text{I want to be what I really am, no more act, no more reaching for things I’m too short to reach.} \]

His eventual acceptance of his image in the mirror is a mature acceptance of his own limitation. He accepts with humility what he hither to shun. He says:

\[ \text{There are somethings we just can’t believe. I liked the way I looked.} \]

He learns that what cannot be cured must be endured. Like Joyce’s Stephen, he steps into the adult world brimming with hope. His success as a creative writer, however mild it may seem, is symptomatic of his arrival, although there is virtually very little physical growth. The meaningful but
failed relationships in the narrative not only toughen Brit but also provide succour to face life alone, without the crutches like Amy and Ruby.

Brit’s survival is due to his ability to laugh at himself, a de-fence mechanism which Kanga employed to keep himself whole. Sub hash Chandra argues that Brit proves to others, and more importantly to himself that he is capable of rolling the scorned rock and yet be happy. Brit establishes that happiness is a matter of determination. One can be if one wants to be happy.

*Trying to Grow* ends on a note of affirmation, at a point where Brit comes to a definite decision, to become a creative writer, on his own. Brit’s conscious shift from the plane of self-absorption to one of self-actualisation is a vivid illustration of his “growth”. His realisation of his creative potential becomes the culminating point of the process of his initiation.

Kanga’s singular achievement in *Trying to Grow* is to blend the autobiographical facts with the elements of fictionality so subtly that it is well nigh impossible to distinguish between Kanga, the creator and Brit, his alter-ego. According to Charanjit Kaur, Brit is a ‘symbolic pseudonym’ for Kanga. Written with compelling honesty, the narrative, besides dramatizing Brit’s efforts to escape from a milieu of intellectual aridity and to dis-cover his true self, offers a rich slice of Parsee life. *Trying to Grow* is a significant work since it tells us much about the social life of the westernized Zoroastrian community in the postcolonial period.

Firdaus Kanga’s candid novel, *Trying to Grow*, is set in a middle, upper middle class Bombay Parsi milieu. The attitude to sex and marriage are described through the lifestyles of four Parsi girls, Dolly, Tina, Ruby and Amy. The emancipation of the girls, the lack of societal censure at the unmarried state, confused ideas about love and marriage and sheer eccentricity get reflected in the behaviour, motivations, relationships and views of the girls.
The author aptly shows that certain mental fixations about sex and marriage in the Parsi milieu leave a deep imprint on the growing girl child. The most eccentric case is that of the deaf Tina, fiercely protected by her mother Jeroo who has a morbid fear of the sexual appetite of all men. Jeroo feels that when a man is with a woman he only wants sex. Thus she prevents Tina from mixing with boys of her age and developing a healthy attitude towards them. Tina is allowed to go out only with the crippled narrator of the novel, Daryus Kotwal known as ‘Brit’ because of his brittle bones, perhaps because he is considered “safe”. Jeroo is “terrified Tina would end up in a molester’s arms.” Jeroo’s attempts at protecting her daughter are farcical, absurd and laughable. However, it is also a subtle parody on the paranoid mentality of the widow Jeroo. “Jeroo tried to accompany Tina to every movie so that she could clap a hand on her eyes each time someone kissed. Furthermore, Tina wasn’t allowed to read perverted writers, which meant Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy and E.M. Forster but excluded harold Robbins, since Jeroo hadn’t heard of him.”

Jeroo had a siege mentality about men and sex. So, as a mother, Jeroo tried to ensure that her daughter, Tina, like good Parsi girls, “didn’t discover the facts of life till they got married.” Sadly for Jeroo, her eccentric treatment of her daughter does not work. “She [doesn’t] know that Tina could have beat Masters and Johnson at a sex quiz.” The author cleverly shows that as Tina was not permitted a normal and healthy adolescent life, she develops fantasies about love, romance and charming boyfriends. Before her eighteenth birthday, she elopes with a Hindu boy, Rohit, who “lives in a boarding – house across the street form her window”, and was “handsome as a Hindi filmstar, white – toothed and curly-haired.” Jeroo’s eccentric behaviour and mental paranoia about sex ends in disaster as she is completely estranged from her daughter. Tina is not heard of in the novel again.
Dolly, the elder sister of the osteo child narrator ‘Brit’, also grows up. But she is sent to a very “propah Parsi school which specialised in producing goody-goody girls.” So Dolly grows up with confused ideas. She does not imbibe the self-righteous morality of her ‘propah’ school. The constant refer-ences to love marriages and romance at home fire Dolly’s erotic teenage imagination. She reads Playgirl, talk about enjoy-ing sex and has a crush on the baby-faced Pervez Modi in her first year at college. Yet such a lifestyle and freedom of choice are only illusory. The Kotwal families are quite traditional and have many inhibitions. They prevent Dolly from becoming an airhostess. Later in life, Dolly faces the paradox of many of Parsi girl. Opportunities for socialising within the community are limited and Dolly has an aversion to meeting boys arranged by her parents. The attempted arranged marriage with Dinsu is a fiasco. It also parodies the typical Bombay Parsi situation, of the protected and pampered son being unable to interact with the more sophisticated Parsi girl of his age. So, Dolly as a growing girl, represents the typical Parsi girl’s dilemma: should she be westernized or traditional? Her value system, life-style and cultural life are typically Western but the Parsi moral code Curtails total freedom. Inevitably, she has hazy ideas about ro-mantic love and the freedom of choice in selecting a life part-ner. Kanga stresses that this dilemma has stemmed from her up-bringing in the schizophrenic Parsi milieu. Later in the novel, Dolly as an eligible young woman is unable to find a partner within the Parsi community. Finally she marries Salim, a Muslim doctor, and settles in New York. The fate of Dolly is that of the emancipated Parsi girl, compelled to marry outside the community, due to the near absence of emancipated Parsi young men.

The search for a suitable bridegroom for Dolly reveals all the contradictions and divisions within the contemporary Parsi society as regards mating and compatiblity. It is the old-fash-ioned and conventional
Defarge, a neighbour of the Kotwal family, who initiates the idea of searching for a suitable bridge-groom within the community. Whilst knitting a “chunky red cardigan” Defarge chides Sera (Mrs. Kotwal) for not making all-out efforts to get Dolly married. Defarge considers it a shame and says, “Your daughter is twenty-four, five feet-six, graduate, earning, and you are not getting her married.” Sera instead of being aroused, indignant or piqued replies complacently. She says, “She [Dolly] refuses to let me arrange any boys for her to see. Anyway it doesn’t worry me. Love marriages are a tradition in our family like in all good Parsee families.” This difference in perception to marriage represents a major contradiction within the Parsi society. Sera are depicted as a typical Parsi hybrid conditioned by her Westernised upbringing, reading Woman’s Woman magazines and watching Hollywood movies. The dependence on the Westernised value system of love marriage which Sera propounds as an integral aspect of a ‘good’ Parsi family explains why the average age for Parsi marriages is one of the highest in the world, 28 years for females and 31 years for males. Defarge belongs to the old order, still basking in the euphoria of past glories and proud of her ethnic Parsi identity. Hence her hankering to arrange a suitable match for Dolly to ensure that the latter does not remain a spinster. Ketay UO Gould, demographer and Professor at the University of Illinois, in heri’s search on the declining Parsi population has noted that two percent of the community never married.

The other two girls in the novel remain unmarried. Both Amy and Ruby have a ‘crush’ and raging love affairs with Cyrus, a tall, handsome Parsi boy who opts for a career in a law firm in Delhi, rather than settling in Bombay. Again, the upbringing and socialising of both these girls has been very Western. Their value systems and desires are based on their image of being romantic lovers. Towards the end of the novel, Ruby when asked by the unsophisiticated Jerry “to go out with him” hopes for a romantic
relationship. Amy’s hopes also fluctuate from wanting an intense love relationship with Curys to an ambivalent relationship with the osteo ‘Brit’. It is this trend of generational drift and defiance of prescribed attitudes towards marriage and boy-girl relationships that is aptly reflected in Firdaus Kanga’s *Trying to Grow*. The theme of marriage though occurring only as ‘sub-text’ is a major topic of discussion in the novel.

Apart from being a story about the crippled Brit, *Trying to Grow* can be said to be about several other things. In the initial pages of the novel, Wagh Baba’s mysterious behaviour arouses some curiosity in the reader. The Parsi way of life is unveiled somewhat poignantly almost throughout the novel. The city of Bombay which is known for the hybrid existence of Parsis is very effectively depicted in the novel. Kanga’s novel is sometimes described as a treatise on sex where the protagonist him-self is referred to as a ‘sex maniac.’ The abundant use or humour is another characteristic of the novel which will not escape the attention of the readers. This article is an attempt to have a close look at the novel and show how it depicts Parsi life and traditions which ultimately contribute to make the novel a unique literary creation.

The Parsis are known for their superstitious beliefs and we get a reference to this on the same page of the novel. The old man is found warding off the Evil Spirit that’s always ready to pounce on Parsis when they are not looking. This is in reaction to Brit’s father’s remark that his child is being taken to a witch doctor. The old man was one who believed in prayers and he wanted to know from the child’s father whether there was no Parsi prayer for children like the one he was carrying with him.

Parsis celebrate their New Year’s Day with traditional gaiety and enthusiasm. Everyone would celebrate it with parents’ brothers, sisters and other kinds of relatives. The local fire temple would be crowded with the worshippers of stylish clothes so that they would be seen in the ‘Righi
Place.’ In this context Brit’s remarks appears to be interesting: “We Parsis don’t wake our religion too seriously; those who do are considered down right dangerous and a little mad.”

In naming their children Parsis had their own likes and dislikes. The novel has all kinds of names which are short and easy like Brit, Sera, Sam, Dolly, Tina and so on.

"We delight in stretching, snipping and squashing given names out of all recognition, with a view to making them all off the tongue easily and, perhaps even sound English. So boys who are named Fardoon become Freedy. Nowroji become Neville, Adi become Eddy, and everyone are delighted with his new name and what he hopes is his new image”.

Parsis had their own ways when it came to marriage. Everyone in Bombay retired at the age of fifty-eight to take a new job with some private firm that paid half the salary. Sam was forty-five years old when Brit was born.

"Young Parsee men have this inbuilt resistance to get married, when they’re about thirty-five they suddenly panic at the thought of a lonely old age (the Parsec Old People’s home being a cross between a loony house and the Luby-anka) and get married".

Sam had fallen in love at this age. He was also good at tricks of smuggling out money: “One night, he turned from a tryst with the black money-changer, his pockets pregnant with dollar notes. We had to hide them in our luggage.” He had his own tricks to hide them. Brit was capable of keeping a note in his powder box. The young Parsi plucked out the plastic cap on the powder box, rolled up ten – dollar notes and buried the bun die deep in the white stuff.

Love marriages, we find, were the tradition in all good Parsi families. Sam’s family also was not averse to such an arrangement When Defarge
remarked that Sera’s daughter was twenty-four, graduate, and earning and still not married. Sera expressed her helplessnes.

‘What do I do?’ said Sera complecently.

‘She refuses to let me arrange any boys for her to see. Anyway, it doesn’t worry me. Love marriages are a tradition in our family.’

Adoption was forbidden to the Parsis and this issue is also discussed in the novel. Sam was almost sure that life would be tough for Brit and that he would not be able to go out and compete with young men bursting with energy. But he thought that it would not be difficult for Brit to find a rich wife. Sera wanted him to be a bechalor. Or course, Brit was not very happy with this statement:

I wanted to shoot back, certainly not I mean, what guy of fourteen is a confirmed bachelor, unless, of course, he is still stuck in that all – girls – are – asses phase. I answered non-chalantly. ‘I guess so.’

The Parsis have unique way of celebrating their birthday. They have their raj birthday to be followed by the actual birth-day five days later. In the novel it was Sera who made this statement when it was pointed out that Tina was going to her birthday: “All of us had two birthdays: there was one that we celebrated on the date we were bom, and the other. Which stepped back one day every leap year, was by the calendar we’d carried across from Persia.”

In most of the works by Parsi writers, we find reference to Fire temples and in this novel also we get such references:

The next day, we had the unthamna in the hall of the squatdomed fire-temple that guarded the Parsee colony across the street like a white Buddha, which was sad be-cause most of Sam’s colleagues from the bank had to stand outside. They weren’t Parsee. Their presence would have defiled the fire temple.
Thus Sam’s colleagues had to wait listening to the prayers that wafted through the arched doors.

The theme of marriage is a major concern in the novel where we have four Parsi girls – Tina, Dolly, Ruby and Amy. Tina eloped with the Hindu boy next door and Dolly was married to Salim, a Muslim doctor in New York. Ruby and Amy were frustrated in their love affairs with Cyrus, the tall, hand-some Parsi boy who opted for a legal career in Delhi instead of settling in Bombay. Interfaith marriage continues to be a problem in the Parsi community and Kanga effectively discusses this issue in the novel. The only attempt to ‘arrange’ a marriage became a failure. The Parsi community has within it contradictions and this is brought out well by the novelist where he discusses the search for a bridegroom for Dolly. Sera, a typical Parsi hybrid, were conditioned by her western upbringing and Defarge belonged to the old order living in the euphoria of past glories. She was proud of her ethnic Parsi identity. The determination of the younger generation of Parsis to go ahead with their plans is something that will not be missed in the novel. Dolly’s decision to marry a Muslim is to be seen in this light. In a sense one might say that Kanga’s concept of a mixed marriage is that of tolerance and acceptance. Undoubtedly one can say that *Trying to Grow* is a brilliant novel which will specially be remembered for the depiction of Parsi life and essential Parsi spirit.

Coming back to Kanga, the point in question is not so much on occupation with the truth-claims of *Trying to Grow*, or even with the extent to which Kanga figures in it – biographically – out an investigation of how *Trying to Grow* is a quest of the discovery of the Self and also of the growth of an artist. The paradigms by which this journey is negotiated are, roughly, Marginally, Disability, Homosexuality, Search for a vocation, and Humour which makes the journey bearable not only for the Self but also for others. It would be helpful to regard this work as a fragment, or a part, of a larger
attempt at autobiographisation, which is connected to Kanga’s second novel *Heaven on Wheels* (1991), which comprises of Kanga’s adventures in England.

The autobiographical fiction is also unique in being, among other things, composed of dialogues and reflections on those dialogues. While, on the one hand, this profuse use of dialogues lends the work the air of fictionality, on the other hand, it conveys the sense of immediacy, which projects an impression of veracity. In addition to this, not only does it generate interest, as the events are enacted and not merely recollected, but also, the reaction “then” and the reflection on it “now” is a marker of the growth of the Self. Kanga’s work offers situations in which people are shown to be interacting. It is not surprising therefore, that we find ourselves smiling indulgently at Jeroo, or sympathising with Madame Manekshaw, or scoffing at Defarge, Moreover, in reporting from memory, conversations peppered with contemporary allusions and (parsi words, Kanga manages to retain the flavour of the times and of his own age. Brit, aged four, is very different from Brit at fourteen, and the meticulous manner in which the growth is observed and shown is remarkable. A four-year-old Brit, having returned from his visit to Wagh Baba questions his irate mother, ‘Lust!’, I interrupted, ‘Is that some kind of disease?’ and at fourteen, to his mother’s inquiry of his future as a bachelor boy, Brit casually remarks, “I guess so”, while thinking, “I wanted to shoot back, Certainly not I mean what guy of fourteen is a confirmed bachelor, unless of course, he is still stuck in that all – girls – are – asses phase.”

Applied to Brit’s situation, this homosexual episode in his life enables him to establish his presence and desirability in his own estimate and on his own terms. This provides the spring-board for his relationship with Amy, which turns from rivlary over Cyrus to desire for each other. This is,
however, not to say that forging a relationship with Amy is a cakewalk for Brit.

The point is that Amy is charmed, so charmed that she is glad Brit has osteo. It is Amy who instills the sense of inherent beauty into Brit in the solitary bathroom conversation that they have in Amy’s house, when she says:

‘And you always will, till you realize how beautiful you are.’

‘I’ll never be beautiful.’

‘Your are – more sensual and adorable than Cyrus.’

And it is their love-making which proves to be the final nail on the coffin of Brit’s complex. A peculiar twist in the work, however, shows that Brit’s exorcisation of the demon within is incomplete when he finds himself face-to-face with Amy’s insecurity when she tells him about her reasons for breaking – off with Cyrus: “Oh, Brit it was awful never being able to trust him; but it’s different with you, isn’t it? I mean, I never ever have to worry.” For a moment it seems as if the demon had come alive again, and it is this which prevents the autobiography from becoming a fictional fairy tale. Brit Kotwal’s life is not a tale of wish-fulfillment, and Kanga makes sure that it never seems to be one.

*Trying to Grow* functions as a metaphor for the autobiography, as every human being in it is striving for growth. And true grown, as Kanga will have it, comes with the knowledge of one’s limitations, its acceptance and the accompanying pain. Love, as Kanga portrays it, is also a process of growth; a process which is based not on the formula of “I loved you because I needed you,” but as Brit puts it, “If I can do without Amy, why should I.”

In *Trying to Grow*, Kanga lays open the ache and the anguish of a handicapped who tries his utmost to seek adjustment with people around him and his environment and live like a nonnal healthy man, but as he grows he realizes that all around him there is a poignant sense of alienation.
Firdaus Kanga in his novel *Trying to Grow* reveals the Parsis’s attempt to adapt to the realities of the postcolonial India, but most of them experience a social and psychological alienation. They cannot forget their Persian glory and their colonial privileges. They are too sophisticated and they think of them-selves as too cultured to mingle with the down – to – earth Indians. Brit gives a vivid picture of Bombay. “Wherever you go before you say urchin you are surrounded by fifty five grey kids- their clothes, their hair, even the look in their eyes is grey... I couldn’t stand them because I always thought I’d catch mumps or measles or may be (sweat of sweats) TB from them.” The Parsis belong more to the Western world of “Kraft Cheese ... Dior clothes ... Caviare and champagne—all impoted of course. They don’t enjoy anything In-dian.” The despise the stinking heat of the day, the dirty and dusty streets of the red light area with its pathetic “whores” and the lusty men with “tongues hanging out,”loitering on the streets of Bombay.

Sam suffers from a dichotomy between the reality of his Indianness and the illusion of his anglicized self. He truly shocked when Sera not only condones but also repeats Brick’s abusive slang “Oh, bloody rot and poppy cock!” Very casually, saying that “Every English solder in Colaba used to say it. In the good old days when they were here.” Although he is critical about the conservativeness of the Indan maITiage and man-woman relationship, his Indianness comes to the fore in reprimanding his wife. He says, “If I were a Hindu husband I would have thrashed you just now.” Kanga indirectly points at the male dominance and the conservative Indian marriage system in which the woman must follow the man’s dictates.

Sam and Sera’s relationship, judged by Indian standards, seems to be very different. There is a tremendous amount of sharing, patience and a healthy humour between them. They are a perfect foil to each other. Brit write that when he was born Sam felt that it was very unnatural that Sera
was not shattered by the doctor’s declaration that he’ll never walk, he’ll be toothless and have brittle bones. But Sera’s stoic reply was:

   Sam that was awful. He’s our son, he’s boy like any other, only his body has problems. He’ll cope with them more easily than you think; they’ll just be a way of life for him.

Such courage in the face of tragedy is what is called the British cool. When she gets the news of Sam’s death in America, she still retains her reserves, telling Brit, “Don’t worry, we’ll manage. I’m here to take care of you.” With a brave smile, she declares “I’m prepared.” Her courage is commendable. A typical Indian woman would have broken down helplessly. Sera’s composure seems to be the result of her Western upbringing and culture. Though Sera appears cold and unfeeling, there is a lot of warmth and understanding in her. She is the anchor of the family, protecting them whenever they need and giving them as much freedom. She is a glorious combination of the sensitive Indian and a practical level-headed Britisher.

   The Parsi diaspora is visualized at a variance in the different characters of the novel. Madame Manekshaw distrusts anything Parsi, though at the age of seventeen she has married a shabby fifty-one-year-old Parsi millionaire, to escape from a life of squalor and struggle. Unlike Sera and Sam, she hates the Catholic schools with their “shuffling priests and cruel discipline” and pities the Parsis and their obsession of the West.

   According to Kanga, the younger generation has undergone a sea change in their approach to life. They are prepared to break away from the cloying moribund shackles of a narrow-minded community to seek fresh pastures. They are very much different from their ancestors.

   Like Firdaus Kanga in Trying to Grow many Parsi novelists like boman Desai in The Memory of Elephants, Dina Mehta in And Some Take a Lover, Bapsi Sidhwa in An American Brat, and Farrukh Dhondy in Bombay
Duck deal with the diasporic fate and the conflicting interests and loyalties of the Parsis. Like Sera and Sam, Shaila Bhave in Bharati Mukherjee’s “The Management of Brief” is torn between her Indian heritage and the Canadian identity.

Firdaus Kanga’s *Trying to Grow* is a moving novel where the novelist recreates the struggle of Daryus Kotwal with extraordinary honesty and precision. The novel which has attracted great critical attention has been described as one which celebrates courage, faith, idealism, the vitality and resilience of Indian family life, the endearing idiosyncratic style of the Parsis of Bombay and the city of Bombay itself. The novel has been evaluated as a delightfully unexpected portrait of the writer as a young trapeze artist, flinging himself out energetically. There will be no two opinions if it is stated that the novel ultimately celebrates the pain and embarrassment of the protagonist who makes an all out effort to assert human dignity.

Brit makes his first appearance on the opening page of the novel as an eight-year-old boy who looked just four-year-old or even three. The novel is narrated in first person by the protagonist himself and in the beginning we find that he was being taken to ‘a witch doctor’ by his father. The doctor had forgotten to say that he was going to be a dwarf and he had forgotten to grow. In fact there was a view that Parsi prayers would help children recover from such physical problems and Sam, his father, had tried it for six months: “The priest told me to say them at three every morning. All they did was give me inosomnia-listening for the stroke of three.” The old man who was told about it considered it shameful for educated English-speaking people going to a ‘mumbo-jumbo Baba.’ His apprehension was that some of them could be swindlers who were after money.

The Baba was known for his mysterious ways; women were his weakness: “True to his name, Wagh Baba was stretched out on a tiger skin.
He was stark naked. A woman in white with heavy coils of black hair falling over her sari was rubbing a perfumed ointment into his right thigh.”

Wagh Baba, the miracle man who had laid a spell on Bombay’s citizens was one day arrested together with his beautiful accomplice Ma Shanti Devi on charges of fraud, cheating and indecent assault. Police raided his ashram in Chembur, after receiving complaints from the outraged parent of a seventeen – year – old girl who had been assaulted by him on the pretest of being treated:

The Baba apparently claimed that he could diagnose women’s diseases by feeling the shape of their breasts.

*The father of the girl, one Ramdas Patil, broke down as he told this reporter that his innocent daughter, who suffered from asthma, had allowed Wagh Baba to fondle her breasts. The Baba told her that her breasts were lemon – shaped and so she was to avoid all citrus fruits.*

There was no record of any miracle being performed by Wagh Baba, although every devotee claimed he had heard of many cures. It was more to of desperation than strong faith in his magical powers that prompted Sam to take Brit to him in the hope of an early cure. He always felt that it was not wrong of him to trust the heartless Wagh Baba who was fond of going around feeling “apple- and mango- and lemon – shaped boobs.” A couple of years earlier, someone in his office had advised him to feed Brit powdered pearls: “A lot of people take them as medicine, and in some shops you see bottles of the gleaming white powder sitting below the glass counter, humble as aspirin. I was awfully proud to be the only kid in the building who drank pulverised pearls stirred into his milk. Unfortunately the month I started gazzling them I broke two ribs.”

Of course, there was the silver lining. The doctor did not forget to tell her that his disease would bum itself out by the time he was in his late teens.
At the same time he was sure that Brit was never going to talk. The way Sera reacted to the doctor’s remarks was almost a riddle for Brit. She put up a brave face and told Sam that the boy was like any other and only his body had problems was something incredible for Brit: “The Sera’s behaviour was unnatural is undeniable. But are the responses we expect the only natural ones? Could it be that Sera really had the courage to meet the disaster that had slipped into her life? Or was it one of those blockades that we impose on our minds to shat unpleasant facts is sunk like ships bringing sustenance to an enemy?” Without knowing that she was describing the telling features of osteo, she told Sam that their son had a strong chin, sharp nose and a fact that was a perfect triangle!

Though Brit himself was a crippled child, he was scared of the other handicapped people: “I was scared of the way handicapped people looked. You know the hesitant gait and robot – stiff movements of the blind, the lolling heads and strangulated speech of the spastics. Whenever I saw them I wondered if I seemed as ugly and pathetic. I’d shudder and turn my mind away.” The callous observations which other made very often turned out to be unbearable for him. Jeroo his cousin who was gentle, soft-spoken, beautiful and frigid once said that men wanted sex and only sex. She was immediately apologetic and told Sera that she did not have people like Brit in her mind:


Brit had the sexual lust and desire of any growing boy. At once point Dolly had openly declared that Brit was a sex maniac!

The protagonist himself had admitted that he was a sexual maniac: “After my final exams at Campion I had a half-year of holidays, because the
college term didn’t start till then. That’s when I became a sex maniac, making Dolly’s word come true.” He jerked off any time he felt like it-listening to the BBC news, while solving a bridge puzzle, in the middle of a scale he was practising and so on. Tina and Ruby were both budding before him and watching their growing feet and breasts and bottoms filled him with’ giddy delight.’ Later Brit got enough opportunities to have sex with Amy, his girlfriend. Kanga’s “obsession with sex can be easily understood, but in the context of the work, the sexual jousts between the narrator and Amy lack the psychological support.”

The news of Madame Manekshaw’s death, which followed the killing of her husband by her, disturbed Brit considerably. The news was conveyed to him by AlooManekshaw, Mr. Manekshaw’s sister, on telephone. Both the funerals were slated for the same time. His immediate instinct was to say “Thank you.” But he did not stop there: “I knew I wanted to break open and get rid of the awful smush churning inside me. I knew I couldn’t do that once I told Sera the news. I went into my bathroom locked the door and got ready to start. I waited and waited. Have you ever cried after you’ve had a cry? It’s like trying to get an orgasm five minutes after you’ve just had one-all you get is dry heaves.”

Slowly a stage came when he felt that he was absolutely healthy with his fine bones. But humiliation from the outside world continued to make him desperate. When he went for a movie he heard a little boy asking his father why the ‘uncle’ was so small. He made a fitting retort by asking what he was doing in a movie for adults only. Also, trying to grow meant leaving behind a lot of old habits like lying on his bed and getting powdered. Sera’s to leave Amy was taken more than as an insult by Brit:

“And it would be so easy for me to agree with you and let Amy go,” and I think I’m having a heart attack. Because there are things you don’t say to your mother or school teacher or boss even if you
are having your nails pulled our slowly. And I was about to say them now. “But, Sera, I’ve got to grow and get my heart broken if it must. You know that. You could have kept me safe in a soft bed all my life. But you didn’t. You let me go around and break my bones and become as much like other people as was possible. And you took the pain everytime I broke my legs.”

Sera could take this only as made notions. But Brit insisted on living like everyone else and feeling the things they did. He asked her if she had done it all those years why she should give up at that point of time. He had a strong conviction that people lived inside themselves and weren’t their bodies only.

Sera did not live longer and she was literally crashing to death: “I saw her mouth fill with blood, the level rising slowly till it reached her teeth. Twice she gagged, tried to draw a breath and failed. Then she flung her head back and threw open her eyes. They were not the slightest bit afraid.” When her body was taken away to the well of death, Brit couldn’t go along as it was very steep: “I was glad to be left with only Amy for company. Because I was crying like a rain cloud, thinking of my mother’s dark brave eyes in a vulture’s beak.” The unexpected visit of Dolly was the next important event in his life and she also complained that he had stolen ‘Cyrus’s girl.

Son a day came when he had enough money – Dolly’s, Sera’s, Sam’s and his own. He made it a habit to write at ten every morning. After lunch, he would count the pages he had written which went as high as one hundred. Soon we hear him telling Cyrus that Amy and he were finished. On the penultimate page of the novel, we are told that something strange began to happen in Brit’s life. Sentences, paragraphs, pages began pouring into his head-fluent and clear and correct.

*I shivered with pleasure and went to the window, more out of habit than for a last glimpse of Amy. She must have walked away*
really fast. The causeway snaked, dry and deserted, into the distance. 
But I knew if I could see to the end of the road, I’d catch the moon in 
the whit’e dome of the museum and the copperpod and the flame trees 
shouting colour to the serene sky.

He wondered if he could do without Amy why he should. He saw her arms 
going around Defarge’s plump back. He watched himself sitting on the 
polished floor with his legs stretched out and blinked. He felt that there were 
things which couldn’t be believed. The novel comes to a close with Brit’s 
remark that he liked the way he looked. Jasbir Jain writes: “Natural 
surroundings, the flow of streams, the direction of winds affect creative 
imagination as well as the sense of identity. A sense of a place, the 
architectures which the imagination encounters, and the openness towards 
one’s surroundings, there impart a sense of belonging and reduce the sense 
of being isolated.”

To sum up, *Trying to Grow* can be looked at as a tale of the sensual 
and the adorable. Set in a Bombay Parsi middle class milieu, the novel 
unevils the apprehensions and desires of an osteo child Daryus Brit Kotwal. 
We find the growth of Brit from a child to a youngman, his struggles and 
dilemmas. The novel with its subtle humour mainly highlights the assertion 
of human dignity of the handicapped and his indomitable will to survive 
adversities. At the same time, the novelist does not forget to make us aware 
of the attitude of the society to the crippled persons which is very often 
humiliating and not becoming of a civilized group. What is significant is 
that the story is narrated without excessive sentimentality. The novel is also 
notable for its unique description of the sexual urges of a growing 
youngman, his desires, passions and lust. Also, the ethos of the middleclass 
society is effectively delineated where we get vivid pictures of families 
which suffer from all kinds of problems. The theme of marriage also gets 
sufficient focus thorough four important women characters who play a
crucial role in the novel. The contradictions and divisions within the Parsi community come to the fore in the course of the development of the plot. In this respect, the novel can be read along with Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*. As Savita Goel says: “The rich culture, customs and traditions of the marginalised Parsi community are foregrounded and scenes describing the Parsi death rites and funeral ceremonies give the reader a glimpse into the Parsi would view.”

On the whole, the novel stands out as a wonderful piece of a creation with its main focus on the efforts of a crippled young man to fight against the odds and his unchallengable desire to be one among the normal human beings around him. Certainly, *Trying to Grow* remains as a many-splendoured work with its serious theme and moving story.

*Trying to Grow* is unique among all the novels written in English in India. For sheer wit and humour, it is perhaps quite unparralled. It is authentically and unmistakably a ‘Parsi novel’ firmly placed in Bombay. In this brief note, the focus is only on the very individualistic brilliant satire and humour which manifests itself from the first page to the last. The novel is generously punctuated with references to English literature, to dozens of British writers, Western classical music, Hollywood films, actors and actresses in fact to many Western things. Bombay is evoked in all its glory, and vainglory surveyed from the Hangind Gardens down to Colaba. The entire narration is by a handicapped young man who is ‘trying to grow.’

The introduction is given as it is necessary to put the entire narrative style, the tone and the attitude of the narrator who is ‘trying to grow.’ The novel is divided into two parts: “The Brave Act” and “Trying to Grow.” The two parts are related by a statement like “So the brave act went on. Or maybe she was trying to grow. Without Sam.” There are a number of references to the title *Trying to Grow* within the novel itself making it a kind of self-reflexive novel. For example, “All I had to do was think; He wanted
to hug me before he left and I didn’t let him. Because I was trying to grow. Trying-not grown enough.” Another example: “Trying to grow meant leaving behind a lot of old habits like lying on my bed and getting powdered and I never could get myself dressed in the bathroom.”

Nothing seems to be outside the scope of Kanga’s ‘Critical Eye.’ Everything under the sun is held up to ridicule one way or the other. There is sarcasm, satire, tongue – in – cheek irreverent blasphemy and sexual innuendoes in his hilariously humoures vision of the Bombay world. Just a few examples should suffice. One of the well – known comic devices is parody. There are so many examples of parody in the novel that unless the reader is familiar with the original, the parody loses its fun. For example, “The she’d cry, ‘Look at me!’ and giving the Guide’s three fingered salute, she’d begin a robust death-dance stamping to the tune of ‘John Brown’s Baby’s Got a Cold.”It makes funny reading when one remembers the original song “John Browll’s body lies a moulding in the grave and his soul goes marching on!”
References


