



Research Paper

Between Exclusion and Inclusion: Representation of Disability In Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*

A. Shahul Hameed

Assistant Professor of English The New College Chennai - 600014

Corresponding Author: A. Shahul Hameed

Received 25 January, 2018; Accepted 09 February, 2018 © The Author (S) 2018. Published With Open Access At www.Questjournals.Org

Abstract: A close look at the general tendencies of representations in the Post-Independence Indian fiction in English is likely to reveal that 'disabled' people rarely find a delineating space in representations. Even the infrequent appearances that the disabled make in Indian fiction in English are most often found to be emblematic of the stigmatic stature they enjoy in the society, where they are portrayed as people to be feared, pitied or sometimes unusually revered. The aim of this paper is to attest that *Trying to Grow* by Firdaus Kanga presents the extent to which social stigmas attached to disability affect a person, in spite of his best efforts to face them boldly. Brit, the disabled hero, is presented as an uncompromising crusader for securing a more decent. Even while encountering the sympathetic attitude of the society that rejects of a cripple's possibilities, Brit tries to be different. However, his efforts are found to be powerless to establish a different identity in the face of the all-consuming social stigmas and long-drawn prejudices against the disabled. His resistance, therefore ends in desperation.

Keywords: alienation, disability, Firdaus Kanga, resistance, stigma, surrender, *Trying to Grow*.

A close look at the general tendencies of representations in the Post-Independence Indian fiction in English is likely to reveal that 'disabled' people rarely find a delineating space in representations. Even the rare appearances that the disabled make in Indian fiction in English are most often emblematic of the stigmatic stature they enjoy in the society, where they are portrayed as people to be feared, pitied or sometimes extraordinarily revered. As a critic attests while discussing the representation of disability in literature, "physical beauty is equated to goodness of the soul, while disability to evil. The conflict between normality and deformity is presented as the archetypical conflict between good and evil, where the evil crippled characters are hell bent on destroying the good ones, and eventually getting eliminated themselves. Such disabled and deformed stereotypes abound in literature" (Banik, 199). Disability appears to be still looked at as a curse and thus, the scarce space allocated to them in literary representations here emanates from this attitude. However, there are a number of recent attempts in fiction to give better visibility to the disabled by making them receive even the protagonist's role; these works include Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* and Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*. Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*, for instance, can be read as a typical example of fictional representation of disability as it captures some of the finest aspects of survival of disabled people in India. Besides, the author himself, as a person suffering from a bone disease that bound him to the limited mobility of his wheelchair, stands testimony to the attitude meted out to people of disability in the Indian context. *Trying to Grow* presents the anchorless position of the differently-abled that forces them to a state of seclusion and identity crisis leading to their ultimate surrender, despite their consistent efforts to overcome the stigmatic notions of the society. Their relegation to the margins and the resultant feeling of alienation are sometimes further reinforced by the well-ingrained codes of social behaviour of their respective communities.

Brit, suffering from osteogenesis imperfecta, a brittle bone disease, is the protagonist in Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*. The novel brings out his struggle in the growth between roughly from eight years to early twenties. The novelist discloses the attitude of the society toward disability through the words of the doctor, who attends on Brit's mother, Sera at the time of her labour pain: "I'm afraid I have bad news for you, Sera, 'he said, looking down at his pudgy fingers.' Your boy is born with bones brittle as glass. The ones in his legs are delicate as test tubes; I doubt he'll ever walk. He'll probably be toothless, too; his teeth will break as soon as he bites into anything hard" (28). But Sera appears to be unperturbed by the 'tragedy' befallen on her family when she replied the doctor, "Sam that was awful. He's our son, he's a 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" (29). However, she was trying to grapple with the reality despite knowing the stigma attached to disability not only for having a disabled child around, but also for giving birth to one. The severity of the foreseen difficulties in having an invalid child at home seems to get intensified by Sera's words at the time of Brit's arrival home with his bone fractured: "The holidays are over, I suppose" (75). She takes pity on her disabled child but what disturbed her greatly seems to be the difficulties she needs to undergo as a mother to a disabled boy. Nevertheless, Sera safeguards his son along with the help of other members of the Kotwal family. Brit expresses his observation that all the people misunderstand that the disabled are unfit to do anything when the reality is that they are unable to do only something. He says, "I was perfectly capable of doing all this myself. But you know how it is, when you can't do some things people feel you can't do anything." (52) The fear out of the society's attitude toward the disability may be the reason why Brit, though he himself is differently abled, is scared of the other people of his kind as he pronounces, "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" (38).

Despite the positivism of his mother, and the relatively fair treatment meted out to him at home, owing probably to his family's social and moral ethos, Brit understood that people are not prepared to accept the disabled as they are, and they seek all ways to get the condition cured. For instance, in search of a cure for his disability Brit's father takes him to Wagh Baba, a witch doctor, who is believed to be a holy man having powers to cure disability, though the attempts end in vain. Secondly, his disability gradually makes him alienated. This was reinforced by the marginalized status of the disabled within his Parsi community. Brit tries to address his predicament with composure and courage, first by concealing his inner feelings by being humorous and 'normal'; he faced the challenges with a smiling face. But this does not mean that he was able to overcome the stigmatic conditions imposed on him, rather he appeared to be thrown between inclusion and exclusion. Brit informs Sam, his father, that he does not feel anything atypical though he suffers out of alienation and pretends to be happy. But Sam guesses rightly that his son masks his weeping heart with a smiling face. Sam seems to be sure that Brit's words are not true and tries to bring out from his son's mouth the fact that he suffers in many ways because of his difference and asks as follows: "Or is it just your brave act? Smiling face, weeping heart. Y'know, like that movie we saw last week about the circus clown, how he was always putting on his comic act while he was really having a rotten time" (43).

One of the stigmas that Brit negotiates is regarding the manliness or potency of the disabled. A society that trains its women to be suspicious of men in general seems to consider disabled as less dangerous in terms of their sexual potency. Tina, Jeroo's daughter, is permitted to be alone with Brit owing to this societal assurance of a disabled person's perceived lack of potency. Brit gets disheartened at the revelation of Jeroo's idea about Brit as not at all masculine to be feared. But Brit finds this discriminatory attitude, despite the intentions behind it, as disheartening. His happiness melts away instantly when Jeroo tells him, "You understand, when I say men, I mean men. Not someone like you, Brit" (40). She seems to suggest the perception of disabled male as not even properly male, which for him is just another prejudice nursed by the society in general against the disabled. However, Brit manages the occasion as he does in other similar humiliating experiences. But the agony gets further aggravated when Amy, whom Brit starts loving out of her close relationship with him, mentions that the real reason for her interest in him is not the affection she has towards him but his company serves as an escape for her from a feeling of insecurity that is caused by Cyrus, her boyfriend. "Oh, Brit", she said, "It was awful never being able to trust him; but it's different with you, isn't it? I mean, I never even have to worry. Of course you don't" (269). Brit, being pierced by the words Brit instantly reacts showing his dejection: "Is that why you wanted me, you insecure little bitch?" (269). *Sexuality and Disability in the Indian Context*, a working paper, which is a collation of information and resources based on interviews with people with disabilities and with their parents, teachers, and other care providers reports that people with disabilities can also be sexual beings with sexual fantasies, feelings and aspirations like anyone else. They are unable to express their sexuality fully because of their disability. In *Trying to Grow* it becomes completely unmanageable for Brit to pretend to be unaffected by sex in his adolescent age. It is evidenced that the pain that arises out of sex feelings overwhelms the stigmatic feelings that pester him in the name of deformity as reflected through his whispers: "I wasn't male. Not to them. The magic mirrors of their minds had invented a formula: Osteo = sexlessness." (40) Brit consoles himself as if he attains success in all his attempts by way of convincing the society that he is undisturbed except in sex-related instances. He admits that he is a sex maniac and so he finds it difficult to sleep during nights and goes to a level of cursing his own parents and sister on seeing them sleeping undisturbed as if they do not possess a disabled child, The nights were the worst. Sleeplessness drove my thoughts recklessly round the craziest bends. And the flat was lifeless around me. No one to divert me with whispers: Dolly and Sera and Sam sleeping like an insomniac's envy, as exhausted as their broken child (45)

In an apparent resolve to show the society that he is not different, Brit tries smoking when he attains teenage which he finds a habit with the people of his age. His craving for being treated like any other adolescent person is evident in the following statement as well: "How flimsy the little white stick left in my fingers, I put it in my mouth and sucked like I imagined I would on Raquel Welch's nipple. Suddenly there was a gas chamber in my chest and the taste of burnt chicken in my mouth. For the first time in my life I saw stars" (127). His problems become complicated when he knew that he was becoming lonely despite being surrounded by many. Brit's parents died so early leaving him to struggle alone in the 'loveless' world. Brit is unfortunate to continue living with people who like him very much. Although all others in Campion school did not come forward to supervise Brit because of his disability, it was unbelievable for him to know that Mrs. De Souza, one of the teachers, agreed to invigilate. But his happiness was short lived, as Father Ferra, the principal of the school informed Brit on one of his visits that Mrs. De Souza is with her heavenly father. He became really heartbroken to see people like Mrs. De Souza who cared for him left the world abruptly, adding further challenges to his lonely existence.

In spite of his ardent desire to attain parity with the normal people in the activities he partakes, Brit does not want the society to take pity on his condition; nor does he want others to choose him for a prize considering his disability. Brit expresses his displeasure when it is exposed in the school as if he is lurking around the deep-end of his class, waiting for someone to do worse than him. He claims that this is not true and he questions why he should be given prizes. He explains his problem thus: "I won prizes all the time for everything from moral science to general science. Once I even won a prize for nothing." (57) Father Ferra considers the prize of Brit as a 'shining reward' for his strength of spirit, whereas Brit hates the prize thinking that he does not deserve it. Brit appears to consider his school's resolve to encourage him with prizes and awards even when he does not deserve them, as expressive of the general attitude of the society towards the disabled. It can be understood that this is how the viewpoint of the world goes about the disabled, disregarding what actually it means to them and how they really feel about it.

Another factor that Brit finds humiliating is his parents' over-protective nature, which amounts to treating them as vulnerable. As Jaydipsinh Dodiya puts it, "The protagonist's endeavour in the novel is to find an identity for himself as he is buffeted between the ridicule of his neighbours on the one hand and over-protective love of his parents on the other" (263). It is therefore clear that Brit's parents could not recognise their son's real aspirations. Instead of providing him the desired moral strength to withstand the overwhelming presence of social prejudices, they demean his abilities by showing a blind affection that expresses only hope and sympathy, which according to Brit, will be of no use to achieve his identity. Thus "Brit proves to others, and more importantly to himself, that he is capable of rolling the scorned rock and yet be happy, to the extent it is possible to be happy in this world full of hurts and heartbreaks" (Chandra,141). Even his act of appearing before the Principal of Campion School with a copy of *Tales from Toyland* with the apparent intention of creating an impression in the mind of the principal that he is a voracious reader, can be looked at as part of his penchant for claiming equality with the others.

Throughout the novel one would come across instances of Brit's relentless longing for achieving dignity for the disabled people. He seems to suggest that the basic consideration of a human being is often denied to a disabled person. His understanding of the sexual deprivation encountered by the disabled people make his establish TARSHI, (Talking about reproductive and sexual Health issues) which was founded in 1996 and registered under the societies registration act in 1997. The idea of TARSHI seems to have emanated from the belief that all people have the right to sexual wellbeing and to a self-affirming and enjoyable sexuality. Deprivation of sexuality is in that sense a method adopted by the mainstream society to exclude the disabled from the society, and so it contributes significantly to their feeling of alienation. TARSHI in effect upheld the fact that human relationship is indispensable for every individual.

Trying to Grow shows that the protagonist is not only deprived of his rights as a human being but also is deprived of marriage, which is often considered to be the only legitimate space within which sexuality can be played out. Despite his marriageability, Brit could not succeed in finding a life partner, understandably due to his disability. This compels Brit to spend sleepless nights. Sam's idea of adopting a child for Brit's smooth future also does not click as "Parsis cannot adopt" (94). The sufferings caused by disability get further reinforced by the community:

Life's tough enough for him as it is; I've said that a million times. How on earth do you think he can go out and compete with all those young men bursting with energy? He remembered that it was difficult for him to get married for no girl will be ready to marry him. The alternative was to adopt a child. The fact, however, is that the Parsis cannot adopt. (94)

It is probably owing to the stigmatic notion of disabled people as unqualified for nuptial bliss that Sam warns Brit that it would be very difficult for him to get a girl while others, 'the normals' of his age would get one easily. Brit does not delay to reply, "But I have girls; all my best friends are girls. There's Tina, and there's Ruby in the flat below, and Indu and Usha who want my eyelashes" (44). Knowing the fact that Brit does not

understand the meaning of having a girl in the right context, Sam thinks of introducing sex education to Brit thereafter on his request.

Although Brit takes every step to prove his worth to the society that he is independent, he slips down to the same secluded existence; still he is found to be carrying on tirelessly. There are occasions in the novel where he wonders how he should position himself among others, and create a unique identity. Initially Brit presumes that formal education will function as a solution for all his problems but realizes lately when Madame Manekshaw, his mentor teaches that education is only a means, not an end in itself. Brit's mother, Sera, on the contrary, believed that education will help him in his attempts to emancipate himself from the shackle of alienation. When Brit realises the impossibility of complete escape from his stigmatic position through education he redirects himself to more achievable goals and strikes a balance with the world outside him. He rummages through the literary works in search of a solution for his feeling of alienation. He even tries to write and publish stories; the characters in his stories help him escape the feeling of social isolation and brings him an identity: "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" (155). Brit finds writing as his companion now after the death of all those close relatives, friends and teachers, who were prepared to take pains in making him feel accompanied. Brit's maturity after understanding the society's nature that it cannot accept cripples of any type, becomes evident when he decides to adjust and accept the reality. He says, "I have lived inside a crystal paper-weight and now I want to know the real world, other people who aren't like me" (150). However, the heroic resistance to social stigmas attached to disability that Brit displays in the early part of the novel gradually seem to disappear; towards the end of the novel there comes a change in his attitude; the unpleasant reality of life makes him surrender to the demands of the society around him. He wanted to become what he really was, and resolved to stop pursuing unrealistic dreams. In fact, he seems to have yielded to the oppressive social structure. In other words, confirming the continued existence of the stigma, Brit's aspirations for 'growth' is curtailed in every sense. Thus, through the novel *Trying to Grow* the writer presents the extent to which social stigmas attached to disability affect a person, in spite of his best efforts to face them boldly. Brit is presented as an uncompromising crusader for securing a more decent. Even while encountering the sympathetic attitude of the society that rejects of a cripple's possibilities, Brit tries to be different. However, his efforts are found to be powerless to establish a different identity in the face of the all-consuming social stigma's and long-drawn prejudices against the disabled. His resistance, therefore ends in desperation. As the novel's title suggests, Brit tries to grow in spite of his disadvantages, but he ultimately fails in his mission. Through this novel the novelist thus expresses the deep rootedness of the stigmatic notions associated with disability in Indian society.

WORKS CITED

- [1]. Kanga, Firdaus. *Trying to grow*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1990.
- [2]. Banik Somdev, Representation of Disabled Characters in Literature, International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation studies, Vol.3.Issue. 2.(2016), (198 – 201).
- [3]. Chandra Subhash, Dass, Veena Noble & R.K. Dhawan, Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* in Fiction of the Nineties, New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994.

A. Shahul Hameed "Between Exclusion and Inclusion: Representation of Disability In Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*" *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science*, vol. 06, no. 01, 2018, pp. 60–63.