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# Dimensions of Familial Care in Firdaus Kanga's Trying to Grow

**Anshika Mishra [1] and Ms Nitika Gulati [2]**

[1] Student, Department of English, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College for Women, University of Delhi.
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shyama Prasad Mukherji College for Women, University of Delhi.

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**ABSTRACT**

*Firdaus Kanga's Trying to Grow presents a sensitive and insightful exploration of disability, identity, and familial relationships within the socio-cultural framework of Indian society. The novel portrays the life of Brit Kotwal, a physically disabled Parsi boy, whose experiences reveal the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of familial care. This study examines how family functions simultaneously as a source of support, protection, restriction, and emotional conflict in the narrative. Kanga highlights the complexities of caregiving through the attitudes of parents, relatives, and society toward disability, emphasizing both compassion and control. The novel also reflects the tension between dependence and the desire for individuality experienced by disabled individuals within family structures. Through humor, irony, and autobiographical elements, Kanga challenges stereotypical perceptions of disability and exposes the limitations of socially conditioned care. The study further explores how familial care influences self-esteem, emotional development, and personal freedom in the protagonist's life. By analyzing the representation of care, affection, overprotection, and emotional neglect, the paper argues that Trying to Grow redefines disability discourse through a humanistic and socially critical perspective. The novel ultimately advocates dignity, emotional acceptance, and autonomy for differently-abled individuals within family and society.*



***Corresponding Author:***
**Anshika Mishra**
**Email:** anshika78272004@gmail.com

## 1. Introduction

Firdaus Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow* presents a semi- autobiographical account of his life. The novel explores themes of stereotypes, resilience, and intimate familial care and societal relationships. This chapter argues that while the Kotwal family's care appears progressive and gender-neutral, it remains deeply structured by the idea of normalcy, hence producing both empowerment and internalised ableism in Brit. The novel traces the protagonist Brit's journey

from childhood to adulthood, beginning with descriptions of multiple characters and elements, focusing specifically on Brit's self-discovery by the end.

**Parental Care and the Idea of Normalcy**

The novel opens with a pivotal scene in which Sam brings Brit to Wagh Baba, a decision taken in the hope of improving Brit's condition. This initial setting establishes a significant backdrop of cultural understanding of disability as a problem and disabled people as deviant beings. The idea of 'normalcy' is central in Disability Studies. Thomas Rosemarie Garland uses the term 'normate' to describe someone who is able-bodied, hence 'normal', and fits into dominant standards of the body. The term 'normate' holds power because it becomes the standard against which all bodies are measured. As Disabled bodies do not fit into the definition of 'normal' and do not conform to the social construction of 'normalcy', they are regarded as deviant beings (Garland 8). The concept of normalcy sees disability as a problem that needs to be cured; however, as Davis says, "the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (24).

Unlike many conventional representations of disability in which caregiving is placed entirely upon women. *Trying to Grow* presents a relatively gender-neutral division of care within the Kotwal household. This is in contrast to what Renu Addlakha argues, within Indian families, responsibility for caregiving and nurturing is assigned solely to women because care is culturally associated with feminine selflessness. However, Brit does not emerge as an exclusive burden for Sera. The narrative indicates that Sera's inheritance from her paternal family secures her financial autonomy within the Kotwal household. Sera's financial inheritance enables her to participate in Brit's care as an equal rather than a subordinate wife.

In the narrative, Sera's acceptance of Brit and his disability highlights her understanding and compassion. In contrast, Sam's desire to cure Brit's disability, while still accepting him, reflects a different perspective on how love and support can coexist with the wish for improvement. Sam tries all the methods yet finds no cure. In contrast, Sera tries to make Brit feel equally included in the family, and she asks him to help her with the tasks: 'Come darling! Won't you help Mummy make little dollies' (10). In a conversation with Defarge, Sera mentions that Brit has never become a burden to her. To this, Defarge instantly replies that: 'it's been a long time since Brit has broken a leg' (134), therefore, no long hospital bills to pay. Sera, instead of agreeing with what Defarge thinks, cares more about Brit's condition and prays that he may never break his leg in the future as well. This particular scene in the narrative reflects how Sera negotiates with others to create a space for her son in society.

Despite negotiating the space for Brit in society, Sera does the opposite in her own house. In the very same chapter, Brit asks Sera to go out to meet Cyrus, and she doesn't allow him to go. In contrast to this, Sam takes Brit's side and persuades Sera to let him go. Sam says: 'We must let him go, darling. We are so scared for him we are shutting out his air and light.... Books and bridge aren't people' (135). This reflects that when one parent becomes overly possessive and protective, the other one becomes more liberal. In Brit's case, Sera becomes a mother who carves out a space for him in society, while Sam makes sure to create an independent space within the family.

Even though Sera treats Brit as an individual with choices, beliefs and opinions, challenging the idea of normalcy, she fails to adhere to it. Sera's stereotypes come from the dialogue when she says to Brit that Amy is with him, not because she wants him, but because of his wealth:

'And break your heart she will, when she leaves you. She's not going to marry you- she wants a handsome wealthy man who can take her to the beach, and the discotheque, chauffeur her round in a car, carry her over the threshold.' (248)

It reflects her belief that a disabled male body can never be perceived as romantic; therefore, she cautions Brit. Despite Sera's apparent impartiality in parenting, which suggests a lack of gender bias, her underlying thought processes reveal a gender bias towards Amy. This contradiction reveals the complexities of her attitudes, suggesting that even when outward behaviours seem equitable, deep- seated biases can still affect interactions.

The narrative reflects how Sam's parenting is supportive yet influenced by the idea of normalcy. Brit describes how Sam massages his legs with almond oil, gives him powdered pearls to drink, and takes him to Wagh Baba. These actions demonstrate that, despite how Sam and Sera may behave, their care always stems from a place of hope for either improving or curing Brit's disability.

## 2. Sibling Dynamics and Gendered Care

Dolly is introduced to Brit for the first time in the hospital when he is born. Dolly gives him a nickname, Brit, which is short for brittle. It is significant in the narrative how initially Brit becomes so dependent on others for his wants. He starts taking advantage of Dolly's secret to let Dolly do his tasks. In one of the scenes, Brit forces Dolly to take him to some event. Although Dolly desperately wants to attend her college event, she is forced to take Brit to the fair. Later, Brit finds Dolly crying as she has to kill her desires to fulfil his. He goes to the washroom, comes back and feigns that he is ill and wants to rest so that Dolly can attend her event. This episode becomes the turning point in the siblings' relationship. Initially, Brit and Dolly's relationship was based on care and teasing, but later, the understanding between them also grew. This episode is followed by a philosophical conversation between Brit and Madame Manekshaw about his realisation:

'I don't think I love her back that much.'

'Makes you feel guilty?'

'Ashamed.'

'Of how you treated her? She shouldn't have let you do that.'

'She did; without ever loving me any less.' (67)

Another instance in the novel is when Dolly tells Brit about the Muslim boy whom she loves and wants to marry. Brit takes a stand for Dolly and approaches Sam about Dolly's inter- caste marriage. The sibling dynamic shifts as it is not only Dolly supporting Brit, but he also does the same for her. Dolly worries about who would take care of Brit after her marriage, as he calls her a 'second mother'. This instance reveals the gendered expectations embedded within the familial structures. As Upali Chakravarti highlights in her work "Burden of Caring: Families of Disabled in Urban India," the duty of caring is closely associated with women of the household because of the belief that women are naturally selfless and nurturing (132). Dolly's anxiety about leaving Brit after marriage reveals how deeply caregiving has become tied to her identity.

## 3. Tina and the Double Marginalisation of Disabled Girls

Sera and Sam, throughout the narrative, are represented as a counter to Jeroo's character in terms of parenting. Tina gets lost, and Jeroo refuses to go to the police:

'I don't want to find Tina,' Whispered Jeroo. 'She is not mine to find; she is not mine to love. What is not is not.' (111)

To this, Brit says:

'I mean, if something like this that happened to Dolly, Sam would've died.' (111)

When Tina disappears, everyone comes to the conclusion that she flew away with a boy named Rohit. Unlike Dolly, Tina never gathers the courage to tell her mother about her relationship. Jeroo's response may be read as an outcome of single-parent exhaustion compounded by the social burden of raising a disabled child.

The type of parenting and care that Brit receives is very different from how Tina is being treated by Jeroo. Tina is not allowed to watch or read 'Adult' movies and novels. She isn't allowed to meet Brit and Ruby. In contrast to this, the familial care for Brit becomes conducive to his growth. Sera and Sam acknowledge Brit's opinions and choices. They support Brit's career choices regardless of whether he wants to become a lawyer or a writer. Rimjhim Bhattacharjee also talks about this difference between Brit and Tina. While Brit can move towards independence because of his class and gender, Tina's life takes a very different turn and ends in exploitation and disappearance (Bhattacharjee 100–101). This contrast shows how disability is not experienced in the same way, and for women like Tina, gender further limits agency and support (Bhattacharjee 101–102).

Cyrus also compares how Sam and Sera's parenting is different from his own parents'. Cyrus says:

'You dummy. Oh! I know you consider yourself quite unenviable'

'I don't. other people do.'

'I don't. You know why? Because you've got Sera and Sam and such a lot of noise and giggles and fights.' (151–152)

In the narrative, Brit reveals that his family excludes Tina when they visit to meet Dolly's prospective groom and his family. This exclusion suggests underlying stereotypical dynamics and ableist notions. Brit says, "even Sera had to admit that two handicapped children in one family was a bit too much". (80)

## 4. Internalised Ableism and Brit's Search for Selfhood

Brit is also aware of his disability; he thinks Ruby doesn't deserve a kiss from him. Later, he also says he doesn't want someone like Tina. This reveals how hierarchy within disability works. Tina, being a girl and disabled, becomes doubly marginalised, ending up blurred in 'Brit's narrative'. Brit always wishes to get a body like Cyrus. All these perceptions are somewhere Brit inherited from the parenting and care he has received so far. His descriptions highlight his desire to become the ableist that Sera and Sam always wish he were. Brit even mentions when Cyrus comes to his house:

'Sera tucked her hair behind her ears, tilted her head and smiled wistfully at Cyrus. I wondered if she was thinking how grand it would be if he were her son.' (149)

Amy makes Brit question himself if he loves her or just needs her:

'And I push-push-push; that's all you want me for- to push-push you to Apollo and'-

'I thought you liked it, being with me without the servant along.'

'Only because you love me; not because you want someone to get the cash from the bank and bread from the bakery.'

'You just want someone now that they're all up in heaven.'

'Dolly isn't.'

Wish she was -no, I don't, maybe I do. You want someone, so you won't be alone. You don't want me; Cyrus would have done just as well.' (270)

Brit is aware of the protective and possessive parenting, yet later, he wants to experience life on his own. He expresses his desire to Ruby: "I have lived inside a crystal paperweight, and now I want to know the real world, other people who are not like me" (186).

Once Sam dies, it changes something in Sera. Brit explains how Sera previously protected her but later allowed her to go on a trip alone with Jerry. Sera started going out more frequently, leaving Brit alone. In the novel, when Sera informs Brit about his father's death, she says: 'I'm here to take care of you.... I' m prepared' (194). However, she becomes less restrictive towards Brit and allows him to do tasks on his own, making him self- sufficient. This suggests Sam's death has left a deep impact on her, which made her realise that she cannot always be there for Brit, hence he should learn things on his own.

In addition to familial relationships, Brit offers a perspective on how society views disability and disabled individuals. In one of the instances when Brit and Amy were on the beach together, people started discussing about them. People started questioning why Amy is with Brit and whether there is anything wrong with the girl. Some people call Brit God's favourite child; some say he is punished. At last, Brit replies to them and says: 'I don't like looking at blind and lame people either. But... people live inside themselves; they aren't their bodies only.... And no, I am not rich, and this girl has nothing wrong with her. We are just happy to be together' (254). Brit's response to all those people does reflect the strength and independence that Sera wanted him to achieve.

At the end of the narrative, Brit realises that he never loved Amy. This moment reflects a profound internal awakening; Brit acknowledges that his feelings for Amy were rooted not in love but in a dependency on her. This realisation is further complicated by the influence of Sera's opinion about Amy when she warns Brit, 'she (Amy) wants a handsome, wealthy man' (248). Shilpaa Anand also writes how, in the novel, "caregiving has been described as a form of unwanted cloistering or a form of claustrophobic protectionism that curtails informal decision-making power" (105). This external viewpoint may serve as a catalyst for Brit's decision, making him critique his own choice. Brit's departure signifies a reclaiming of his individuality and an acceptance of his life on his own terms. He realises his strength and accepts his disability for the first time as it is:

'I want to be what I really am, no more acts, no more reaching for things I'm too short to reach.' (279)

## 4. Conclusion

This final statement marks Brit's rejection of internalised ableism. The withdrawal of caregiving structures leads Brit to confront his identity outside the protective framework of familial support. Ironically, it is only in the absence of care that he begins to recognise his own strength. Once Sam and Sera are deceased, and Dolly is no longer there, the absence of a caregiver makes Brit accept his disability as part of who he is.

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