

Exploring the Representation of Non-Normate Bodies in Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow*: A Critical Disability Studies Analysis

Ali Derakhshani

Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Literature and Humanities
University of Guilan
5th Kilometer of Persian Gulf Highway, Rasht, Iran
Email: ali.derakhshani077@gmail.com

Alireza Farahbakhsh

Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Literature and Humanities
University of Guilan
5th Kilometer of Persian Gulf Highway, Rasht, Iran
Email: farahbakhsh2000@yahoo.com
* Corresponding Author

Maryam Danaye Tous

Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Literature and Humanities
University of Guilan
5th Kilometer of Persian Gulf Highway, Rasht, Iran
Email: maryam.dana@gmail.com

Abstract:

The present article focuses its attention on the representation of physical disability in Firdaus Kanga's coming-of-age novel *Trying to Grow*. To this end, the analysis draws upon the theoretical framework of critical disability studies and the scholarly work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson. The study explores how the novel sheds light on the stigmatization and marginalization of individuals with non-normate bodies in a cultural milieu which is saturated with ableist beliefs and practices. The article also argues that disability is not a homogeneous phenomenon. Applying an intersectional lens, this research illustrates how disability intermingles with other markers of identity such as class, gender, and ethnicity, generating distinct realities of disablement. The analysis further holds that *Trying to Grow* departs from conventional patterns of disability representation by resisting reductive literary tropes that have traditionally framed disabled characters. By giving narrative agency to its non-normate protagonist, the novel questions dominant conceptions of disability and presents it instead as a complex embodied experience. The article also positions *Trying to Grow* as a representative work of disability fiction—a subgenre of literature that tries to claim narrative voice and space for disabled people.

Keywords: Critical Disability Studies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Firdaus Kanga, India, Non-Normate, Ableism, Intersectionality, Stigmatization.

Introduction

Critical disability studies has solidified itself in recent decades as an indispensable approach for analyzing and challenging the stigmatization and marginalization of disabled people in different spheres of life. Informed by the disability rights movement of the 1970s, the proponents of this field critique the medical model for its pathologization of disability. As Rhoda Olkin puts it, the medical model conceptualizes disability as “a defect in or failure of a bodily system and as such . . . inherently abnormal and pathological” (1999, 26). Meanwhile, critical disability studies refuses to acknowledge disability as a purely medical problem in need of correction and instead argues for a broader understanding that takes into account the various social, cultural, and political factors contributing to the experiences of disabled people. In this regard, it identifies and exposes the social norms and structures that brand certain bodies as abnormal and tries to dismantle the ableist hierarchies that present able-bodiedness as an ideal. To this end, the field of critical disability studies implements the social model of disability as one of its analytical tools to help examine the concept of disability. This model posits that “disability is not the outcome of bodily pathology but is socially produced by systematic patterns of exclusion that are built into the social fabric” (Ghosh 2016, 4). In other words, instead of situating disability within the individual, the social model highlights how societal attitudes and practices disable individuals with impairments. According to the social model, a distinction needs to be made between impairment and disability, with the former denoting physical or mental differences and the latter socially imposed restrictions. At the same time, critical disability studies extends the social model by emphasizing that the quest for “social justice and diversity continues but on another plane of development—one that is not simply social, economic and political, but also psychological, cultural, discursive and carnal” (Meekosha and Shuttleworth 2009, 50). Therefore, it is accurately observed that social model alone cannot adequately capture the complex nature of disability. The field also distinguishes itself from earlier academic engagements with disability by adopting the framework of intersectionality. Unlike approaches that treat disability as an isolated category, critical disability studies asserts that the experience of disability is intricately entangled with other aspects of identity, such as race, gender, ethnicity, and class. Accordingly, by rejecting the notion that disability is a monolithic construct that can be fully examined on its own (Ben-Moshe and Magaña 2014, 105), critical disability studies advances a more comprehensive discourse on disability.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson is a leading figure in the realm of critical disability studies. Her seminal book *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997) represents one of the earliest instances of a comprehensive cultural and literary examination of physical disability. In this foundational work, Garland-Thomson tries to depathologize disability by arguing against the assumptions of the medical model. As she explains, her goal is to “move disability from the realm of medicine into that of political minorities, to recast it from a form of pathology to a form of ethnicity” (1997, 6). Accordingly, she maintains that the significance assigned to bodies deviating from preconceived norms “reside[s] not in inherent physical flaws, but in social relationships in which one group is legitimated by possessing valued

physical characteristics” (1997, 7). This perspective underscores that disability does not stem from individual inadequacy but rather from societal oppression and discrimination. Moreover, Garland-Thomson aligns herself with the cultural model of disability when she asserts that disability is a “culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to . . . the fictions of race and gender” (2002, 5). Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper explain that while the social model pays attention to only one factor—that is, the social prejudice against people with impairments—in its conceptualization of disability, the cultural model takes into account a diverse range of cultural factors (2013, 23). Thus, Garland-Thomson’s theory integrates the social model of disability with the cultural model, resulting in a more comprehensive perspective. This approach resonates well with Anne Waldschmidt’s contention that the cultural model should be developed as a necessary complement to the social model (2018, 72).

Furthermore, in her work, Garland-Thomson employs an intersectional approach, illustrating “how the discourses of disability, race, [and] gender . . . intermingle to create figures of otherness from the raw materials of bodily variation” (1997, 6). In doing so, she underscores the importance of analyzing disability in conjunction with other social categories, highlighting the interconnected influence of these factors on how an individual is perceived within a society. She also introduces the term ‘normate,’ describing it as “a shared, socially maintained and determined conception of a normal individual” (1997, 31). In other words, the normate designates the prototypical figure of normalcy, a hegemonic cultural construct that represents all the societal standards to which individuals are expected to conform. Despite encompassing only a minority of actual people, the normate position holds such significant power and influence that people constantly try to align themselves with its description. As Garland-Thomson explains, those who come closest to embodying the normate “can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them” (1997, 8). In a social context where normalcy operates as a dominant ideology, disabled individuals can seldom approximate the normate subject position, as it represents an idealized able-bodied and able-minded figure. Consequently, they become non-normate and are perpetually devalued within the ableist hierarchy of society unless they pursue medical intervention to ‘fix’ themselves. The concept of the normate, however, must be understood as culturally and historically contingent, rather than universal and fixed. What constitutes a normate body then is not consistent across different societies and historical periods.

The Indian author, Firdaus Kanga, was born in 1960 into a Parsi family in Bombay with a genetic disorder called osteogenesis imperfecta, commonly known as ‘brittle bone disease.’ This condition prevented his bones from growing normally and made them prone to fractures, leading Kanga to spend much of his early life bedridden and rendering him unable to attend school (Hawley 2003, 118). Due to this medical condition, Kanga also had short stature and relied on a wheelchair for mobility, as he was unable to walk. In 1989, Kanga moved to England and, within a year, published his debut novel *Trying to Grow*. This semi-autobiographical work offers an intimate coming-of-age narrative told from the perspective of Daryus Kotwal, nicknamed Brit, whose story reflects Kanga’s own experience of growing up with a visible physical impairment.

Ableist Assumptions and Non-Normate Identities

When considering societal perceptions of disability, a commonly held belief is that disability is a tragic condition, marked by loss and suffering. As Garland-Thomson observes in *Extraordinary Bodies*, nondisabled individuals often view disability as “life’s ultimate misfortune” (1997, 84). This perspective reflects the assumptions of the medical model which equates disability with deficiency and dysfunctionality. By framing disability as an inherent flaw, the medical model perpetuates the idea that disabled individuals are destined to lead tragic lives unless their impairments are cured or corrected. Accordingly, when the non-normate narrator of the novel is born with osteogenesis imperfecta, the attending doctor, “looking more Saint Bernardish than ever,” somberly informs the mother, “I’m afraid I have bad news for you, Sera . . . Your boy is born with bones brittle as glass” (Kanga 2008, 28)¹. When Sera acts unbothered, the doctor becomes disoriented by her reaction, as it departs from the usual script in which parents are expected to become distraught upon learning that their child is disabled. In fact, the doctor is so conditioned by ableist ideologies that he interprets Sera’s apparent composure as an early sign of madness (28). The father, on the other hand, is so disheartened by the news that, when the narrator’s sister, Dolly, asks about her baby brother, he responds with nothing more than a “thumbs-down” gesture (29). Like most parents, Sam was anticipating a healthy, kicking child, not one entering the world crying in agony with a fractured femur (28). Garland-Thomson explains that “[t]he promise of a newborn is that it will become a normate—that it will carry out an expected future enabled by normate embodiment” (2017, 136). Thus, Sam is consumed by bitterness and grief, as his outlook, shaped by ableist assumptions, leads him to perceive disability as an unlivable condition, leaving him deeply pessimistic about his son’s future. Sam’s reaction is so mournful that young Dolly initially assumes that her baby brother was born dead (29). Moreover, upon hearing Sam’s lamentations about the pain and suffering that Brit must endure throughout his life, Dolly remarks, “[M]aybe Brit will die before he suffers all this” (31), echoing the disablist belief that death is preferable to disability. This instance illustrates how Sam’s negative perception of Brit’s disability also impacts how young Dolly perceives her brother’s condition. As Garland-Thomson notes, parents play a pivotal role in perpetuating stigmatization across generations (1997, 32). Furthermore, although Sera appears outwardly composed, her demeanor is merely a façade, as she masks her true feelings by “putting on a brave act” (29). When Dolly suggests naming her brother ‘Brit’ for his brittle bones, Sam’s retort—“You don’t call a mongol kid Mong”—is countered by Sera, who insists, “Being a mongol is different . . . [Brit’s] disease is nothing to feel embarrassed about” (30). Thus, in her attempt to deflect shame from her son, Sera “arranges somatic diversity into a hierarchy of value,” in which certain forms of difference are deemed more socially acceptable than others (Garland-Thomson 1997, 20). While Sera believes there is nothing shameful about Brit’s condition, her response implies that other types of impairment, such as Down syndrome, can be viewed as deplorable.

In India’s deeply ableist society, where standards such as beauty, fitness, and normalcy serve as benchmarks for human worth, non-normate individuals, as Neelaksh Pithauria and Susmita Singh

emphasize, endure profound neglect, being “shamed, stigmatized, rejected, and pushed to the margins of almost every social, economic, political, and even personal aspect of human life” (2022, 251). The disability rights activist Malini Chib also asserts, “In India, if you are disabled, you are simply not welcome” (qtd. in Deo 2022, 4). Aware that Brit lacks the social advantages associated with a normate body, Sam is consumed by concerns about his son’s future. He frequently compares Brit to healthy, energetic, and good-looking boys, only to find him deficient in comparison (44, 93). Having been acculturated in an ableist environment, Sam perceives fundamental aspects of life, such as securing a job or forming relationships, as out of reach for Brit as long as he inhabits a non-normate body. Thus, he considers the only viable path for his son’s integration into society to lie in fixing his ‘problem.’ Consequently, despite being an educated man, Sam resorts to various unverified practices to restore Brit to normalcy. These include subjecting Brit to the questionable treatments of the miracle worker Wagh Baba and the electro healer Ruty Regina.

The conceptualization of disability as deficiency and dysfunction often leads parents to become excessively protective towards their disabled children. This reaction, though seemingly caused by care, arises from the erroneous belief that disability is synonymous with incompetence and vulnerability. Able-bodied parents may therefore perceive their disabled children as perpetually incapable and presume them to be unable to function properly without parental supervision. Garland-Thomson notes that such attitudes turn disabled individuals into “objects of care,” and portray them as pathetic (1997, 26). This dynamic is evident in an altercation between Brit and his mother, when she attempts to restrict his autonomy by preventing him from going out to meet his friend Cyrus. When Brit expresses frustration over being treated unequally compared to his nondisabled sister, Sera dismisses him by asserting that “Dolly’s different,” further justifying her action with the statement, “You’re delicate, you’ve got to be careful,” a response that underscores her perception of Brit as fragile and in need of constant protection (134-135). By doing so, Sera denies Brit the freedom his able-bodied sister enjoys, instilling a sense of inferiority in him. Akshata Jaiprakash maintains that disabled people live tough lives because their disability is often misconstrued as inability and their abilities are questioned (2023, 109). Willie V. Bryan also draws attention to the prevalent assumption among the normates that a disabled person’s impairment overrides or nullifies all other qualities. He describes this inclination to treat disability as an all-encompassing characteristic as the “spread phenomenon” (1996, 162). As Garland-Thomson indicates in *Extraordinary Bodies*, perceiving disabled individuals as weak and helpless, regardless of their actual abilities or intelligence, can lead to their infantilization (1997, 26). Speaking to disabled people in a patronizing manner, making unsolicited decisions for them, or assuming that they are unable to perform everyday tasks are among the most common examples of infantilization. Brit recounts his experience of being infantilized by his family when he says:

I took a bath by myself every day but whenever we had to go somewhere important Sam washed me. It was safer. As for dressing, no one would believe it, but till I was fourteen I came out of my bath naked and lay down on a bath mat . . . Then Sera or Dolly would sprinkle me with talc all over, cooing,

‘Now lift your arms. Turn on your stomach.’ Then they’d tuck me into my clothes and brush my hair with a baby-blue baby’s hairbrush. 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).

Moreover, treating disabled individuals as if they are incapable of fulfilling basic tasks can cause them to internalize such misguided beliefs, reinforcing feelings of inadequacy and dependence. Thus, for much of the novel, Brit is preoccupied with the fear of how he will continue to live and function if, one day, he is left to face the world alone. Like other members of society, disabled individuals are also acculturated to the dominant societal norms and values, leading them to absorb cultural stereotypes about disability. This internalization of ableist norms has two major consequences. The first of these is that non-normate individuals begin to see themselves as inferior and unworthy. In the case of the novel, Brit repeatedly measures himself against the idealized traits of the normate, and perceiving his body as deficient in comparison, he continually devalues himself. He describes himself as “four-foot-short” (97), “osteowarped” (141), and “four feet nothing” (170), signaling how, like many others, he has internalized ableist ideals about physical form and appearance. The second consequence of internalizing ableist ideologies is that, as Garland-Thomson suggests, disabled individuals begin to avoid and stereotype one another in an attempt to appear more normal in comparison (1997, 15). For example, Brit reveals his internalized ableism when he reflects:

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 (38).

In “Ways of Staring,” Garland-Thomson describes “visual anonymity” (2006, 178) as a form of capital that disabled people, particularly those with visible impairments, are deprived of due to their continuous subjection to hypervisibility in both domestic and public spaces. Within the home, disabled individuals are often subjected to heightened surveillance by family members who, driven by paternalistic impulses, perceive them as helpless and incapable of independent functioning. In *Trying to Grow*, the narrator relates:

Sera had a thing about not leaving me alone if she could help it. What if there were a fire? How would I get into the lift on my own? She used to ask Defarge to keep an eye on me (97).

Thus, the familial gaze, while often couched in the rhetoric of care, can become a mechanism of control. In public spaces, hypervisibility can take on a more overt and intrusive form as disabled individuals become subjected to the collective stare of society. In “Dares to Stares,” Garland-Thomson describes staring as a “visual practice that materializes the disabled in social relations” (2005, 32). This observation is also echoed in Brit’s statement, “When anyone stares I become Osteo

Brit again” (221), demonstrating how staring can construct disability as a marked abnormality. In extreme cases, this dynamic may result in what David Hevey calls “enfreakment,” whereby the non-normate body is treated as an object of curiosity and discomfort (qtd. in Garland-Thomson 1997, 17). This objectification is vividly portrayed in a scene from the novel, where more than half a dozen people pause to stare at Brit and his partner, Amy, questioning why a normal and sane person would choose to be with someone like Brit. The narrator recounts, “They were discussing us, as if we were the clouds or the sea or the rocks” (253). Consequently, the hypervisibility experienced by individuals with non-normate bodies, both in private and public domains, underscores how ableist ideologies permeate different spheres of life, shaping interactions and limiting opportunities for self-representation.

As Jagdish Chander explains, in the Indian cultural context, attitudes toward disability continue to be deeply intertwined with the karmic framework, which attributes an individual’s present circumstances, including physical or mental impairments, to the moral consequences of actions performed in past lives (2013, 71). This belief system posits a cycle of life and rebirth, in which an individual’s suffering or privilege is determined by their accumulated karma. Within this framework, disability is frequently interpreted as a form of punishment or penance for perceived transgressions in a prior existence. In the novel, when Brit gets into a heated argument with another man, the man invokes the law of karma, saying to Brit, “You have learned no lessons from your birth” (224). As Garland-Thomson contends, this belief in a just universe assigns responsibility to individuals for their status within the ability/disability system (2017, 138), thereby perpetuating the stigmatization and marginalization of disabled individuals. So, when a group of urchins teases Brit, a passerby says to them, “You mustn’t laugh . . . or the next time you are born, you will be unfortunate as him” (253). From the perspective of critical disability studies, the karmic framework operates as an ideological tool that legitimizes the social ostracization of disabled people. By naturalizing disability as the consequence of metaphysical forces, it obscures the sociocultural dimensions of disability.

Intersectionality and the Non-Normate Experience

Analyzing the intersection of disability with class, ethnicity, and gender illuminates how these interconnected markers of identity shape the lives of disabled people. As Garland-Thomson maintains, neglecting these relations risks reinforcing a reductive view of disability (1997, 9). Regarding the intersection of class and disability, it is irrefutable that access to resources, opportunities, and social capital varies substantially between rich and poor disabled individuals. Jane Buckingham highlights this disparity, noting that “those with disabilities who were wealthy historically did not suffer the extremes of stigmatization experienced by those who were poor and homeless” (2018, 202). This distinction reveals how Brit’s upper-middle-class status makes his experience of disability diverge sharply from that of his financially disadvantaged peers. For instance, Brit’s economic privilege facilitates his access to alternative educational opportunities which help him bypass systemic barriers that are often found in mainstream educational institutions. This enables Brit to benefit from the

cultural capital education provides. His ability to purchase different books and educational materials grants him greater exposure to diverse perspectives, which help enhance his agency and sense of self-worth. By contrast, low-income disabled people are often excluded from formal education due to financial constraints and the lack of inclusive educational policies. Their inability to attend school perpetuates cycles of marginalization as education is a key vehicle for upward mobility and social inclusion. In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson foregrounds this matter by asserting that “[t]oday, disabled people . . . tend to be ghettoized by poverty and lack of education, those stigmatic situations that so frequently coincide with and reinforce marginalization based on physical traits” (1997, 35). Brit’s economic standing further mitigates the challenges imposed by his impairment as it enables him to afford high-quality wheelchairs (127). In contrast to individuals with limited financial resources, Brit’s possession of such mobility aids ensures greater comfort, functionality, and independence in navigating both public and private spaces. Brit’s class-based advantage is also reflected in his ability to hire a personal attendant, whom he calls a “slave” (210)—a privilege far beyond the reach of economically deprived disabled people. This disparity emphasizes the role of class in shaping the lived experiences of disability, demonstrating how economic capital can open up possibilities that are unattainable for those without it. Brit’s wealth also allows him to renovate his kitchen after his parents’ death to accommodate his short stature, enabling him to cook for himself (272). This adjustment, made possible by his financial security, displays how money can influence the ways disabled individuals are able to modify their environments to meet their specific needs and thus reduce the daily frictions of living in a world designed for normate bodies. Nevertheless, while class-based advantage can mitigate some of the material challenges faced by individuals with non-normate bodies, it cannot dismantle the systemic biases that devalue disabled lives.

Living with a disability in a patriarchal society like India presents unique challenges for disabled women shaped by the intersection of gender and disability. According to Leanne Dowse and colleagues, “In India . . . the patriarchal nature of society which extends to all levels, including public institutions, marginalizes disabled women, resulting in their invisibility, silence, and negated identity or existence” (2016, 330). In such societies, women are often viewed through the lens of gendered stereotypes which associate femininity with ideals of beauty, physical perfection, and reproductive potential. These cultural expectations are inherently ableist as they marginalize women whose bodies deviate from these standards. As Garland-Thomson asserts, “The relative privileges of normative femininity are often denied to disabled women” (2002, 17). In India, cultural narratives often celebrate the ‘perfect woman’ as one who is beautiful and physically able to fulfill domestic responsibilities. Disabled women are excluded from this ideal due to societal perceptions of their bodies as ‘imperfect’ or ‘incomplete.’ Such views are so deeply entrenched within cultural consciousness that even a disabled individual like Brit reproduces the same ableist rhetoric. This is evident when he reflects on his deaf cousin, Tina, stating, “But I knew I didn’t really want Tina . . . I didn’t want a deaf girlfriend” (96). As such, non-normate women are often deemed ‘unmarriageable’ because their disability is seen as a social and financial liability. Even within marriage, they may

experience neglect, abuse, or exploitation, as their value is perceived to be lower than that of able-bodied women. As Garland-Thomson explains, “Cultural stereotypes imagine disabled women as asexual, unfit to reproduce, overly dependent, unattractive—as generally removed from the sphere of true womanhood and feminine beauty” (2002, 17). This view is also reflected in the novel when Ruby, a mutual friend of Brit and Tina, expresses concern about Tina’s prospects of finding a partner, saying to Brit, “We’ve got to do something for poor Tina. If she loses Rohit, she’ll probably never find anyone else. You know how it is for handicapped people” (104). Moreover, while disabled women encounter types of violence similar to those faced by other women, they are also subjected to unique forms of violence “that are particular to their situation of social disadvantage, cultural devaluation, and increased dependency” (Dowse et al. 2016, 325). For instance, they are at a greater risk of physical and emotional abuse within their families, as their disability is often used as a justification for control or mistreatment. This reality is exemplified in the novel through the overprotectiveness of Tina’s mother, Jeroo, who restricts her daughter’s autonomy under the pretext of her supposed vulnerability and helplessness. Brit observes, “It was a pity Tina was stopped from going out with anyone but us” (39), highlighting how Jeroo’s excessive control limits Tina’s opportunities to build relationships and develop independence. In *Rethinking Disability in India*, Ghai also stresses how disabled women are disproportionately targeted for sexual abuse due to perceptions of their inability to resist and report violence (2015, 160). As Renu Addlakha points out, “[T]he expulsion from traditional gender roles has not protected [disabled women] from the threat of male violence” (2013, 17). Thus, in the novel, we read that Wagh Baba, the faith healer, is arrested for assaulting an underage girl who had sought his services (24). Additionally, in a tragic turn of events, Tina is sold into prostitution by her so-called boyfriend, Rohit, who is revealed to be a human trafficker, and she is never heard from again. In patriarchal societies like India, where women are already commodified and objectified, disabled women are further devalued and considered expendable. Reflecting on her daughter’s fate, Jeroo remarks, “I must remember that my daughter was deaf and dumb . . . And, after I had gone, her life would have been a perfect misery. No money, no love; she would have felt like she is feeling now. So, nothing matters” (110-111). By framing her daughter’s life as inherently hopeless, Tina’s mother reinforces the ableist belief that disability is synonymous with dependency and suffering, perpetuating the notion that disabled individuals cannot lead meaningful and fulfilling lives.

The experience of being a disabled man in an androcentric society like India is fundamentally informed by the friction between cultural standards of masculinity and the realities of impairment. In Indian society, where gender roles are rigidly established, the disabled male body is frequently seen as inadequate within the framework of hegemonic masculinity. As Leslie Swartz and colleagues describe, hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant norms and ideals of manhood which privilege traits such as physical strength, dominance, and autonomy (2021, 89). Disability, however, is culturally conceptualized as a condition of deficiency and incapacity, directly at odds with these ideals. When viewed through an ableist lens, the term ‘disabled man’ becomes oxymoronic, as prevailing norms

often equate true masculinity with the absence of disability. This is articulated in the novel when Jeroo tells Brit, “You understand, when I say men, I mean—men. Not someone like you, Brit” (40). Her statement reflects the entrenched belief that masculinity is inherently tied to able-bodiedness, a false conviction that excludes disabled men from conventional definitions of manhood. The narrator himself observes, “I wasn’t male. Not to them” (40). Furthermore, as Garland-Thomson notes in *Extraordinary Bodies*, the non-normate status of disability feminizes disabled men (1997, 9). Disability, which is socially constructed as weakness, dependency, and passivity, is culturally aligned with traits traditionally associated with femininity. This creates a perception of disabled men as less masculine, leading to their symbolic and social placement as more feminine. This dynamic is also illustrated in the novel when Brit’s friend Cyrus compares him to women, remarking, “Talking to you is like talking to a very intelligent woman . . . You know you don’t think or talk like most men do” (140). Cyrus’s comment reveals how Brit’s non-normate identity disrupts conventional notions of masculinity, aligning him instead with traits culturally coded as feminine.

Moreover, disabled men face challenges in forming romantic relationships due to societal perceptions of them as asexual, unattractive, or unfit for partnership. In the words of Nilika Mehrotra and Shubhangi Vaidya, non-normate men are “put in the category of the ‘non-marriageable’ in society” (2013, 154). In the novel, this conception is mirrored in the attitude of Brit’s mother, Sera, who discourages his relationship with Amy by saying:

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. Can you do any of these things? (248)

This reaction is further influenced by their ethnic identity as Indian Parsees—a community deeply obsessed with preserving the perceived superiority of its genetic lineage (Luhmann 1996, 147). In another instance, Sera dismisses her husband’s assertion that “it’s not right making Brit believe . . . that romantic love is out for him,” by responding, “It is out . . . Do you know that osteo can be inherited?” (94). This emphasis on the heritability of Brit’s condition illustrates how disability can become a focal point for cultural anxieties surrounding purity and lineage. For the Indian Parsee community, which is not only numerically small, but also socially insular, the notion of preserving an unblemished genetic legacy is deeply tied to collective identity. In this context, Brit’s disability becomes a threat to the prized genetic pool of the community. Such fears of genetic corruption stem from the Parsee community’s historical emphasis on its unique heritage which is often expressed through declarations of superiority over other ethnic groups. Sera’s reaction reflects the ingrained cultural imperative to uphold this idealized identity even if it costs her son’s emotional well-being and autonomy. Furthermore, when non-normate men internalize hegemonic ideals, they begin to stigmatize themselves, resulting in chronic feelings of inadequacy, shame, and self-doubt. This struggle is evident in Brit’s longing for a normate body, as he repeatedly fixates on Cyrus’s “sturdy white tooth,” “smooth straight nose,” and “muscled thighs,” viewing Cyrus’s normate physique as a standard against which

he measures his own perceived deficiencies (125-126). Brit's frustration with his non-normate body is further articulated when he openly shares his insecurities with Cyrus, telling him:

You're tall, I'm four feet nothing, you've got muscles in your thighs when I've got matchsticks, you have a voice like hot chocolate . . . and osteo makes me squawk. You've got a swimmer's chest; I've got a pigeon-chest. Girls love your body; they don't look at mine except to shudder (170-171).

In his statement, Brit displays the shame described by Garland-Thomson, whereby the image of the normate evokes feelings of inferiority in those who perceive themselves as deviating from this idealized, phantom majority figure (2017, 135). Thus, the intersection of disability and masculinity in India illustrates how patriarchal and ableist ideologies work in tandem to render disabled men invisible and marginalized.

Disrupting Disabling Narratives through Non-Normate Perspectives

In *Extraordinary Bodies*, Garland-Thomson claims that "main characters almost never have physical disabilities" (1997, 9). She further adds, "[T]he disabled body is almost always a freakish spectacle presented by [a] mediating narrative voice" (1997, 10). Departing from these conventions, Kanga adopts a character with a non-normate body as the protagonist and first-person narrator of his novel. Through this choice Kanga disrupts the dominant practice of relegating disabled figures to the margins of narrative. By centering Brit as the protagonist, Kanga not only undermines literary ableism, but also compels readers to confront and reconsider their own assumptions regarding disability. He also challenges representations that silence disabled voices by granting Brit narrative authority. Additionally, Brit's role as protagonist provides a perfect opportunity to explore disability in its full complexity, presenting it as one aspect of a multifaceted identity rather than an all-encompassing stigmatic trait. Kanga also defies stereotypical portrayals that reduce disabled characters to passive objects of pity or curiosity.

The novel also offers readers the opportunity to stare at Brit in ways that foster recognition and challenge preconceptions. As a work of disability fiction, *Trying to Grow* allows us to stare uninhibitedly at non-normate bodies and, as Garland-Thomson puts it, invites us to "draw close to their strangeness and see something of ourselves waiting there" (2009, 82). In this respect, Kanga provides his implied able-bodied readers with an authentic representation of disability, one that emphasizes the shared humanity of his non-normate protagonist. As Garland-Thomson asserts in "Disability and Representation," true disability fiction "forces the [reader] to reconfigure assumptions about what constitutes the attractive, the desirable, and the livable life" (2005, 526). Moreover, Kanga avoids the sentimentalism often used in literary depictions of disability which is intended to arouse sympathy from readers. His narrative subverts stereotypical representations that portray disabled people as frail and helpless. Instead, Kanga presents a protagonist who persistently rejects pity, deploying humor as a subversive tool to undermine the reductive narrative of victimhood often

imposed on disabled individuals. In such instances, Brit resists the common conception of disabled people as pitiable and demonstrates a dynamic selfhood that refuses to be diminished to an emblem of suffering. Brit's rejection of pity extends beyond himself as he also reproaches other non-normate individuals who perform the role of the tragic victim. This is manifest in his reaction to a boy on crutches whom he describes disparagingly as having "a disgustingly martyred expression on his face" (46).

Furthermore, as an exemplary work of disability fiction, Kanga's novel challenges the ideology of normalcy—a set of beliefs equating worth and social acceptance with conformity to able-bodied standards—by highlighting the harms produced by rigid definitions of normality, including exclusion, shame, and discrimination. The pervasive nature of this ideology is reflected in Sam's persistent refusal to accept Brit as he is, as seen when he expresses:

I can't quite believe Brit is the way he is. I keep thinking, I know it sounds stupid, but I keep thinking that one day the real Brit will jump out of his body; a Brit who's six feet tall with long legs that he swings in long strides (112).

Sam's words underline the damaging belief that Brit's non-normate body is inadequate, a perspective that Kanga critiques throughout the novel. As such, Brit opposes the ideology of normalcy by embracing his disability as an intrinsic and valuable aspect of his identity. This resistance is evident when he confronts his father's entrenched ableism, exclaiming, "I'm right to myself . . . And it's awful of you to go on thinking I'm not . . . As if [I] had no business being alive" (145). Through this powerful moment, Kanga captures Brit's determination to assert his self-worth and dignity, while dismantling the harmful narratives that devalue non-normate existence. Nevertheless, Kanga does not reduce Brit's journey to a simplistic story of unwavering defiance against ableism. Instead, he enriches Brit's characterization by highlighting the internal conflicts that arise from living in an ableist society. While Brit often affirms his own value, as seen in his confrontation with Sam, the novel does not idealize him as impervious to societal pressures. Rather, it reveals the inner struggles of Brit as someone acculturated in the same ableist environment as other characters. At times, he grapples with feelings of inadequacy and the desire for a normate body. This tension becomes apparent when Brit laments, "Don't tell me beauty is bone deep and all that crap because it isn't true. I want to be straight and tall because I've got just one life and I'll go through it without anyone ever wanting me" (171). Such moments foreground both the profound psychological toll of societal rejection and the internalized ableism from which Brit cannot easily escape. Yet, Kanga juxtaposes these moments of self-doubt with instances of self-acceptance, as when Brit remarks, "I liked being different from most people. It tickled me" (28), or asserts, "But you can be in a wheelchair and still have a good time" (91). Through this multifaceted portrayal, Kanga emphasizes the complexity of Brit's identity, illustrating that resisting ableism is neither linear nor absolute. By presenting Brit's fluctuating relationship with his disability, the novel not only challenges reductive depictions of disabled people, but also offers a nuanced account of how cultural narratives influence personal identity.

Furthermore, Kanga's *Trying to Grow* subverts the conventions of the Bildungsroman, a genre traditionally characterized by its reinforcement of normalcy and emphasis on societal integration. According to Kylee-Anne Hingston, "[T]he Bildungsroman plot establishes social stability by taking a single character through a normalizing educative process" (2019, 145). Typically, Bildungsroman narratives predicate the protagonist's maturation on eventual conformity to social norms, emphasizing the resolution of conflicts between individuality and the expectations of the collective. In contrast, *Trying to Grow* resists such conventions by centering a protagonist whose non-normate identity inherently defies the very norms the genre often upholds. As Jess Waggoner states, "[N]ormalcy can be challenged at the generic level of the Bildung when expectations for unhindered mobility and normate bodies are displaced" (2014, 60). Brit's maturation is not about assimilating into an ableist society by effacing his differences. Rather, it is about cultivating the confidence to accept and assert his non-normate identity in a world that perpetually stigmatizes him. Instead of depicting Brit's development as a linear progression toward social integration, Kanga presents it as an ongoing negotiation with internalized ableism, familial expectations, and societal prejudice. Brit does not become 'normal' in the orthodox sense. His maturation entails embracing his non-normate body as a legitimate aspect of his identity, while actively confronting the oppressive and discriminatory dogmas that attempt to ostracize him. This subversion is further accentuated by Brit's refusal to tether his self-worth to societal standards, as manifested in his humor and defiance, even when he wrestles with moments of uncertainty and internal conflict. By destabilizing the conventional plot of the Bildungsroman, *Trying to Grow* recasts the genre into a medium for disability discourse. The novel foregrounds the unique tribulations and triumphs of a disabled protagonist and breaks with the reductive narrative of 'overcoming' disability in favor of a more nuanced exploration of what it means to grow, as a disabled person, within the confines of an ableist society. In doing so, Kanga not only critiques the normative impulses endemic to the genre, but also redefines the very notion of growth, offering a counter-narrative that privileges self-acceptance and resistance over conformity.

In *Trying to Grow*, Brit's changing perception of his body reflects a profound shift in his sense of self. This is represented through Brit's contrasting reactions to his reflection in the mirror, which marks his journey from self-loathing toward self-acceptance. Brit's initial aversion to mirrors signals a deep-seated rejection of his body, shaped by both internalized ableism and societal stigmatization. He explains, "My aversion to mirrors meant that the only time I looked at myself was when I was brushing my hair, and then I took care not to look below my eyelashes" (231). This avoidance highlights Brit's discomfort with his own appearance as he wrestles with feelings of inadequacy. However, as the novel unfolds, Brit's attitude toward his body changes, culminating in a more confident conception of himself. At the end of the novel, when Brit sees his reflection again in the mirror of an elevator, the narrative concludes with a statement of acceptance and pride: "I blinked again. There are some things we just can't believe. I liked the way I looked" (280). This moment marks the climax of Brit's journey toward self-acceptance, as he no longer views his body through the lens of shame and insufficiency. Additionally, Brit's acceptance of his appearance is not just an

act of self-affirmation, but a radical resistance to societal pressures that demand conformity to able-bodied ideals. Kanga's novel, therefore, portrays Brit's maturation not as a journey of assimilation, but as a path toward embracing one's non-normate identity, challenging and subverting the concept of normalcy.

Kanga's *Trying to Grow* also dismantles the cultural myth that equates bodily normativity with a fulfilling and successful life, while associating non-normate bodies with limitation and failure. As Garland-Thomson observes, "A certain kind of body, modern acculturation tells us, will produce a certain kind of life" (2017, 140). However, Kanga's narrative disrupts this assumption by contrasting Brit's life trajectory with that of his normate father. Despite his normative identity, Brit's father ultimately succumbs to despair, unable to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges of his life, which culminates in his suicide. As Brit reflects, "And he'd fought, sure as Sera had fought but without her brave act to keep him safe . . . I mean, there's only so much you can go through" (195). In stark contrast, Brit displays remarkable resilience and resourcefulness despite enduring systemic ableism throughout his life. By the conclusion of the novel, Brit has secured a career as a writer and entered a romantic relationship with Amy, defying the ableist assumptions of figures like his father who had dismissed the possibility of him achieving professional success or forming intimate relationships (44). Kanga's portrayal of Brit affirms Garland-Thomson's claim that "[t]he variant forms and functions we count as disabilities and abilities do not predict or determine, in any coherent or meaningful way, quality of life, human value, happiness, merit, achievement, virtue, contribution, or potential" (2017, 141). Through this juxtaposition, *Trying to Grow* exposes the fallacy of conflating physical normativity with personal fulfillment, demonstrating that the quality and value of one's life are shaped not by bodily conformity to normative ideals but by individual resilience.

Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of physical disability in Firdaus Kanga's novel *Trying to Grow* through the theoretical framework of critical disability studies, drawing extensively on the key insights of Garland-Thomson. By exploring the novel's depiction of pervasive ableist ideologies, the analysis has demonstrated how societal misconceptions and cultural biases actively mold the realities of disabled individuals, often imposing far greater burdens on them than the physical limitations caused by their impairments. Furthermore, the article has stressed the substantial significance of intersectionality in critical engagements with disability. This framework helps illustrate how disability converges with other axes of identity to generate layered and context-specific experiences of stigmatization. In this regard, the present work has elucidated how the differences in class, ethnicity, and gender can cause significant disparities in the life trajectories of disabled people. The study has also identified *Trying to Grow* as a prime work of disability fiction, a literary subgenre that pays attention to the lived realities of disabled subjects and destabilizes the reductive tropes dominating their representations. By giving its disabled protagonist a distinct voice and agency, the novel rejects formulaic stereotypes and contributes to a more authentic portrayal of disability in literature.

Endnotes:

1. Kanga, Firdaus. *Trying to Grow*. India: Penguin Books, 2008. Further references are to this edition and given between parentheses after quotations in the text.

References:

- Addlakha, Renu. "Introduction." *Disability Studies in India: Global Discourses, Local Realities*. Ed. Renu Addlakha. New Delhi: Routledge, 2013. 1-31.
- Ben-Moshe, Liat, and Sandy Magaña. "An Introduction to Race, Gender, and Disability: Intersectionality, Disability Studies, and Families of Color." *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 2, no. 2 (Fall 2014): 105-114.
- Bryan, Willie V. *In Search of Freedom: How Persons with Disabilities Have Been Disenfranchised From the Mainstream of American Society*. Springfield: Charles C Thomas, 1996.
- Buckingham, Jane. "Disability and Work in South Asia and the United Kingdom." *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*. Ed. Michael Rembis et al. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 197-212.
- Chander, Jagdish. "Disability Rights and the Emergence of Disability Studies." *Disability Studies in India: Global Discourses, Local Realities*. Ed. Renu Addlakha. New Delhi: Routledge, 2013. 61-77.
- Deo, Tejaswini Nandkumar. "Quest for Accessibility and Inclusion in Disabled Women's Autobiographies in India." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 7, no. 3 (May-June 2022): 1-6.
- Dowse, Leanne, et al. "Violence against Disabled Women in the Global South: Working Locally, Acting Globally." *Disability in the Global South: The Critical Handbook*. Ed. Shaun Grech and Karen Soldatic. Switzerland: Springer, 2016. 323-336.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Dares to Stares: Disabled Women Performance Artists and the Dynamics of Staring." *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*. Ed. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. 30-41.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Disability and Representation." *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (March 2005): 522-527.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Eugenic World Building and Disability: The Strange World of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 38, no. 2 (2017): 133-145.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory." *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 1-32.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Ways of Staring." *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 2 (2006): 173-192.
- Ghai, Anita. *Rethinking Disability in India*. New Delhi: Routledge, 2015.
- Ghosh, Nandini. "Introduction: Interrogating Disability in India." *Interrogating Disability in India: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Nandini Ghosh. India: Springer, 2016. 1-21.
- Hawley, John C. "Firdaus Kanga." *South Asian Novelists in English: An A-to-Z Guide*. Ed. Jaina C. Sanga. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2003. 118-121.
- Hingston, Kylee-Anne. *Articulating Bodies: The Narrative Form of Disability and Illness in Victorian Fiction*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019.
- Jaiprakash, Akshata. "Notions of Normalcy and Changing Definitions: Defeating Stereotypes and Creating Acceptance of Disability." *Understanding Disability: Interdisciplinary Critical Approaches*. Ed. Ranu Uniyal and Fatima Rizvi. Singapore: Springer, 2023. 109-118.
- Junior, Nyasha, and Jeremy Schipper. "Disability Studies and the Bible." *New Meanings for Ancient Texts: Recent Approaches to Biblical Criticisms and Their Applications*. Ed. Steven L. McKenzie and John Kaltner. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013. 21-37.
- Kanga, Firdaus. *Trying to Grow*. India: Penguin Books, 2008.

- Luhrmann, Tanya M. *The Good Parsi: The Fate of a Colonial Elite in a Postcolonial Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Meekosha, Helen, and Russell Shuttleworth. "What's so 'Critical' about Critical Disability Studies?" *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 15, no. 1 (2009): 47-75.
- Mehrotra, Nilika, and Shubhangi Vaidya. "Exploring Constructs of Intellectual Disability and Personhood in Haryana and Delhi." *Disability Studies in India: Global Discourses, Local Realities*. Ed. Renu Addlakha. New Delhi: Routledge, 2013. 145-168.
- Olkin, Rhoda. *What Psychotherapists Should Know About Disability*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1999.
- Pithauria, Neelaksh, and Susmita Singh. "Interactive Effect of Caste and Disability: An Analysis." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (July-August 2022): 250-257.
- Swartz, Leslie, et al. "Physical Disability and Masculinity: Hegemony and Exclusion." *Physical Disability and Sexuality: Stories from South Africa*. Ed. Xanthe Hunt et al. Cham: Springer, 2021. 87-103.
- Waggoner, Jess. "Crippling the Bildungsroman: Reading Disabled Intercorporealities in Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 38, no. 1 (2014): 56-72.
- Waldschmidt, Anne. "Disability–Culture–Society: Strengths and Weaknesses of a Cultural Model of Dis/ability." *Alter* 12, no. 2 (2018): 67-80.