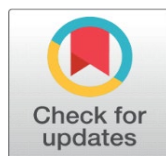


# UNCUFFING HANDICAPS AND FLOURISHING: MAPPING THE TRAUMA AND THE TRIUMPH OF AN INDIVIDUAL AND A COMMUNITY IN FIRDAUS KANGA'S TRYING TO GROW

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## ABSTRACT

Firdaus Kanga's *Trying to Grow* encapsulates the story of an individual and a community living an embattled existence but showing enough grit, tenacity and resilience to take adversity head on and survive. The Parsees like the osteogenesis imperfecta stricken Daryus Kotwal, affectionately called Brit by his sister Dolly, because of his brittle bones, are slowly dying out with their population dipping to less than a lac. Both Daryus and his community are handicapped in more ways than one and are desperately in search of a panacea for their woes.

**Keywords:** Uncuffing Handicaps, Trauma, Daryus Kotwal

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Parsees living in India are descendants of a group of Persian refugees who emigrated to India after the conquest of Persia by the Arabians. Though they have mingled with the Indian ethos as sugar dissolves in milk, a feeling of uncertainty and uprootedness plague their consciousness. The strange love hate relationship that they shared with their adopted land shaped and influenced their personalities. Their hopelessly anglophile character could possibly be an offshoot of their being cultural hybrids. Cyrus in the novel says "Anglophilia; the Parsee disease"<sup>1</sup> This handicap deprives them of the pleasure of identifying completely with the land of their living. Sera in the novel is said to have "Betty Grable legs" (15) and Sam according to Brit,

was "A George Peck look alike" (15). They even prefer anglicized names like Dolly to Daulatbanu and Brit to Darius. Sera believes that the champion school with foreign teacher would be better than the local ones. She says "They are foreigners so they are good" (40). Even Brit once snobbishly tells Cyrus that he never listened to Indian Classical stuff. He admits that Parsees are "reluctant Indians" (27)

In spite of being reluctant Indians, they are inextricably wedded to the Indian ethos, in a much more intense fashion than they themselves would like to believe. Sam, in this novel, though savouring foreign things is glad that he is an Indian. He says, "thank God, India is non-aligned...imagine being perpetually prepared for the third world war". (11) Like a typical Indian mother, the anglophile Sera is averse to Dolly marrying into a different religion. She is displeased at her affair with a Muslim boy. Brit realises that "when life comes to solid things like marriage, everyone, even Sam and Sera forgot how modern they were" (88) Nilufer Bharucha believes that, "The Indian based Parsee in spite of increasing tolerance of minorities and otherness in India decides that for the time being at least the country of refuge is home."<sup>2</sup>

If any part of India was a 'home' for the Parsees, it was Bombay. The cosmopolitan culture of this city gave them enough space to seamlessly jell with the inhabitants of the city. The warmth and the opportunities that the city offered encouraged them in their attempt to outgrow their anxieties and alienation.

The Parsees crippling belief that the purity of their race would be lost if they were to marry outside it has taken the race to near extinction. Moreover, the western ideas and ways of life has seen the birth rate going down and the age limit for marriage shooting up. People like Defarge who belong to the older generation are worried when at twenty-four Dolly is unmarried. However, anglicized Sera does not agree "love marriages are a tradition in our family" she says and adds, "like in all good Parsee families". The younger generation, however, has managed to find a way out of his senseless orthodoxy.

In the novel too Dolly has no qualms about marrying Salim, the Muslim doctor. She protests strongly against Sera's idea that "the Muslims are the traditional, nay, the historical enemies of the Parsees. And to give yourself to one of them is a shameful act of betrayal, nay high treason" (139). Even Tina, Brit's cousin elopes with a Hindu boy. The inevitability of mixed marriages like that of Dolly has led to a clamour for adopting a broader world view from a section of Parsees. They want that a child born of a Parsee mother and a non-Parsee father to be treated as one of the community.

The Parsees are a moribund community who have got so rooted in Bombay that leaving the place is unthinkable for most of them. Cyrus, in the novel, is no exception. When Brit asks him why he doesn't go to New Delhi to live with his parents, he answers:

"What sensible man would leave Bombay? You know what New Delhi's like? Its monstrous if you aren't minister or a diplomat or a judge, you are a ghost. Hell! You can be anyone in Bombay, as long as you have got brains and bluster, you've got it made. And then New Delhi's got the muddy Jamuna Bombay's got the sea". (110)

Sam feels so secure inside the city that he declares that he is going to cross the Causeway with his eyes shut. However, they learn to outgrow the city, when necessary. Cyrus, for example, sacrifices his desire to be in Bombay for something he held more precious – Brit's happiness. Sam allows his daughter to get married in the United States.

Superstitions like the one Sam inadvertently involved himself in while taking his "Oesto" son to Wagh Baba or Jeroo or even Brit's chanting the mantras have been

prevalent in the Parsi society. However, they are not fanatical about their religion. Brit says

“We Parsees don’t take our religion too seriously, those who do are considered downright dangerous and a little mad.”

Brit is also shown to outgrow his mantra chanting ways soon enough.

Trying to Grow is as much the story of Brit as the story of his community’s attempt to progress. According to Pallavi Gupta, “Trying to Grow is a quest of the discovery of the self and also of the growth of an artist. The prodigies which this journey is negotiated are, roughly, marginality, disability, homosexuality, search for vocation and humour which makes the journey bearable not only for the self but also for others.”<sup>3</sup>

Daryus Kotwal was born handicapped. The Doctors promised on his birth that he would not be able to walk and that he could be toothless also. From then on Daryus struggled to live a normal life fluctuating between his success in forgetting his handicap and being cruelly reminded of it by one incident or another.

Christened ‘Brit’ by his elder sister Dolly because of his brittle bones, by the time he was five he had a fracture eleven times. His parents tried to treat him with everything that offered them hope – from pulverized pearls to applying warm salt on his matchstick legs as prescribed by one Wagh Baba, who hated wearing clothes! Brit endures all that, learns and grows with each passing experience to ultimately attain the realisation that he is Oesto Brit and he has to be like this forever!

Though Sera, his mother stressed that except for his physical defects, Brit is a normal child, she and her husband were painfully aware that their son is far from being normal. Though they are supportive enough to try and create an atmosphere of normalcy at home, their over caring and overprotective behaviour exposes their anxiety for their crippled child. Sam once tells Brit:

“Then you’re going to need girls, you’re going to get really frusty when you can’t have them.” (37)

Sera does not allow topics like sex before Brit. She prevents Jeroo from talking about the overwhelming desire for sex by men. At this Jeroo remarks:

“I forgot about your son. You understand, when I say men, I mean-men. Not someone like your Brit” (33)

Sam wants to know whether Brit was really happy in his crippled body or was it as he says “Smiling face, weeping heart”. (36) Brit knows that people like Sam “meant it kindly” (37), but these reactions awaken in him realization of his crippled state, a realization which he was fighting to forget. These statements induce in him a feeling of “terror, worse than facing a murderer with a blood-stained knife.” (37) He learned that

“Bone deep fear stays of the pain. As if that murderer had dipped his knife into my blood again without bothering to finish me off” (37)

Gradually he learns to fight his way out of such emotional quagmires. The reaction of the people when Amy once kisses Brit in public depresses her. But Brit had grown enough now to ask her to believe “that people live inside themselves, they aren’t their bodies only.” The way he handles the curious man in the theatre who impolitely queries him about the handicap also shows his intellectual growth.

Brit was an avid reader right from his childhood and also a studious person. His scholarship played an important role in his attempts to grow. He realizes early in his life that he will have to compensate for his physical disability by making an abundant use of his grey cells. Right from the time he was in school he had a retentive memory

and intelligence which he developed and which helped him boost his confidence. Later when his parents died and Dolly is married away in the USA, Brit survives and grows with the help of his intelligence and self-confidence. He grew into a successful writer and was able to eke out a comfortable living writing fiction.

Brit's career as a writer too is a witness to his growth. Initially he wanted to be a writer, but after coming into contact with the handsome Cyrus who was studying law, Brit's mind wavers. He could not possess Cyrus's body for which he gradually develops a lust. Therefore, he wants to make do with the profession Cyrus had chosen for himself. It was as if he were paying a tribute to Cyrus and his being a handsome young man. Brit, however, outgrows this phase too. He soon realises that he has it in him to make big as a writer and therefore finally decides to do justice to his talent as a writer and eventually succeeds.

Brit's sexual life too grows from getting an "hard on just watching the half apples of her (Tina's) breasts as the sun tore through her thin dress." (81) and his craving for Cyrus's muscular body, his admiring the "Shamelessly Sexy" (82) Ruby, to the most mature sexual relationship of his life-with Amy. Brit admires Cyrus's biceps, tanned tummy – flat and sinewy. His wide chest and the bend of his waist arouse lust in Brit. He justifies his passion thus "It might sound lust, but lust is as much part of love as cream of milk. A square inch of Cyrus was enough for me..."(118) Novy Kapadia says: "Cyrus's body is a wish fulfilment for Brit. Feeling and looking at his friends body gives him a kind of solace."4 So Cyrus centric he becomes that when he drinks champagne with Amy at a restaurant he keeps seeing Cyrus's face where Amy was and he says: "I kept stroking her hair which were heaven because I was doing it to Cyrus and I knew wasn't (224)

At the restaurant he tells Amy, "Cyrus and I came here once. We had a wonderful time, a gorgeous time. I have never had a time like that before or after. Or after, Amy." (224) He believes that Amy had left Cyrus because she was impressed by his intellectual genius. But he realises the truth when Amy tells him at the restaurant that it was her insecurity about Cyrus's fidelity that made her ditch him, and in Brit's case she would not have to worry about that. This shocking realisation makes Brit aware that his brittle bones are not something that can be wished away. Amy after the fight comes back to him and asks him if they could try for a life together to which Brit says "No, Amy, I have got to be alone, I have to be Oseto Brit and not mind." (233) He asserts, reflecting his mature best: "I want to be what I really am, no more acts, no more reaching for things. I am too short to reach" (233)

Other characters in the novel like Sera and Sam too are trying to grow as witnessed in the way in which deal with their Oesto-stricken son. They grow enough to realise that Brit can't be kept in a golden cage forever and hence, they allow him to test the waters of life and encourage him in negotiating the tough business of trying to grow. While Sara is apprehensive of letting Brit go with Cyrus at night, Sam asks to let him go. He had grown enough to know that Brit will have to live with the disease. He says: "We live with that like we live with each other" (115). He further tells her:

"We must let him go, darling we're so sacred for him. We're shutting out his air and light, school, friend, picnics. He's hardly had any of those. Think what we got out of it all when we were his age." (115)

The way he handles Sera's outburst on catching Brit and Cyrus in a questionable position discussing Brit's sexual feelings further show that he has grown enough to leave Brit alone in his attempt to grow and let him decide his sexual preference. He says: "Noone is a pervert anymore. You can slice up half a dozen women and you're only socially maladjusted." (148)

Tina too tries to spread her wings and fly out of the stifling atmosphere that her mother had created around her. Tina like Brit is not fortunate to have her attempts to grow receive support at home and hence unlike Brit her attempts meet a ghastly end.

Dolly and Cyrus too are involved in an attempt to grow. One of the most mature characters in the novel, Dolly, right from her childhood tries to grow out of the shackles which the orthodoxy of his community has imposed upon her. Her marriage with the Muslim Salim is the culmination of it.

Cyrus too outgrows his emotional attachment for Bombay for something more concrete – Brit's life and growth. The novel therefore presents characters who like the community from which they come from identify their handicaps and attempt to grow.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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