



Kanga, Firdaus (b. 1959)

by Niladri R. Chatterjee

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While an explicit gay presence in Indian literature can be detected as early as 1924, in "Chocolate," a Hindi short story by Pandey Bechan Sharma, Firdaus Kanga is the first Indian author, writing in any language, to produce a novel with a gay protagonist. He is not only a pioneer in Indian gay fiction, but he has also explored the intersection of two kinds of marginality: that based on being a member of a sexual minority and that based on being a disabled person.

Born in Bombay (as it was then called) in 1959, Kanga has had the incurable condition of osteogenesis imperfecta since birth. The condition is caused by a mutation in genes due to which the bone-forming collagen tissue is not synthesized properly. This results in extremely brittle bones and stunted growth. He stopped growing when he attained a height of four feet.

Kanga belongs to the Parsi community, which fled from Persia centuries ago but is now a dramatically dwindling community in India. The Parsis of Mumbai are known for their deep Anglophilia and for their tendency to regard themselves as "reluctant Indians."

Denied a physically active life accessible to an able-bodied man, Kanga built around himself a universe of literature, populated by gay writers such as James Baldwin and E.M. Forster and by English female novelists such as Iris Murdoch.

Kanga initially studied law, but gave it up to pursue journalism, a course of study in which he excelled.

Kanga's preferred genre for literary expression is the short story, and his first efforts were tragic stories. Indeed, his breakthrough autobiographical novel *Trying to Grow* (1990) started life as a short story. He entered the story in a competition one of the judges of which was the novelist Amitav Ghosh.

Kanga won the contest and then set about expanding the short story into a novel. *Trying to Grow* charts the life of Darius Kotwal (nicknamed "Brit" because of his condition of brittle-bones, although the name also functions as a marker of Parsi Anglophilia) from the time he is eight to the time he attains adulthood. The novel addresses several binaries, each pair intensifying the other. The principal binaries are Indian/Parsi, able-bodied/disabled, and straight/gay.

Although Brit's sexuality is initially shown to develop along normative lines, his sexual attraction to the handsome Cyrus soon becomes apparent. The novel documents Brit's sexual confusion. He seems torn between his attraction towards Ruby, Tina, and, later, Amy--Cyrus's girlfriend--on the one hand and towards Cyrus on the other. However, the greater force of Brit's homosexual attraction is signaled in a scene where he caresses Amy's hair, pretending it is Cyrus's. Brit tries to convince himself of his supposed love for Amy, but his real attraction to her is only because her body has been the site of sexual pleasure for Cyrus. He subsequently tells Amy that he is "into boys."

Originally published in India, *Trying to Grow* garnered international attention when it was issued in a British

edition by Bloomsbury.

Trying to Grow has since been made into a British film entitled *Sixth Happiness* (1997, directed by Waris Hussein), for which Kanga wrote the screenplay and in which he plays the role of Brit Kotwal.

In 1991 Kanga published *Heaven on Wheels*, an account of his travels around England, his adopted cultural and literary homeland. He had always intended to vacation in London. The publisher Bloomsbury's decision to publish *Trying to Grow* gave him another reason to take the longed-for London holiday.

Although *Heaven on Wheels* is ostensibly a travelogue, Kanga's homosexuality pervades the narrative. For instance, at the office of his publisher he drops "hints about [his] homosexuality" by "being enthusiastic about gay writing, Edmund White and Alan Hollinghurst and Paul Bailey." On meeting Bailey, Kanga is entertained with anecdotes about various writers, among them Christopher Isherwood.

While in England Kanga watches his first gay film--Harvey Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy* (1988, directed by Paul Bogard)--which he thinks is "as schmaltzy as a Parsee wedding," poses like Truman Capote for a photograph, and finally buys a copy of the book he has been looking for since he was sixteen: Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948). He also pays tribute to Oscar Wilde while passing through Reading.

Heaven on Wheels witnesses to literature's crucial role in shaping gay identity, even when that identity is formed at a geo-cultural location far removed from the one where that literature is produced.

In 1992 Kanga narrated Pratibha Parmar's television docudrama on disability and homosexuality entitled *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*. Also in 1992 he wrote and staged a play called *A Kind of Immigrant*. Not much is known about the play apart from the fact that it was once performed in London. In another of Parmar's documentaries, *People First: Taboo* (1993), he engages Hinduism's attitude towards disability, disputing the idea often foisted on disabled people that their suffering is the result of actions in a past life.

In 1997, Kanga moved to England permanently. He has subsequently lived in a home for disabled people in Islington, London. His health has not permitted him to do much writing since then, although in 2005 he wrote a short piece on homosexuality in India for the BBC website.

In 1997 Kanga's work was included in the canon-shaping *Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997*, edited by Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West.

Firdaus Kanga occupies a unique place in gay literature because of his claim to the dual marginality of being gay and being disabled. His nationality also makes him an important figure in the fields of postcolonial queer literature and Indian diaspora literature.

While his literary output is small, consisting of not much more than two books and a few articles and reviews (in his review of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* [1993] he identified a gay subplot missed or ignored by most Indian reviewers), he can be seen as a pioneer in the field of Indian gay fiction and one of the most important writers to address the intersection of two forms of marginality.

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About the Author

Niladri R. Chatterjee, who was born in Kolkata, India, has published on Mulk Raj Anand, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, and Christopher Isherwood, among others. He has held a Fulbright Pre-Doctoral Fellowship and the British Council's Charles Wallace Fellowship. He is co-editor of a volume of Indian short stories entitled *The Muffled Heart: Stories of the Disempowered Male*.