

3-30-2003

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Recommended Citation

Hawley, J. C. (2003). Firdaus Kanga. In J. C. Sanga (ed.), *South Asian Novelists in English: An A to Z Guide* (pp. 118-121). Greenwood Press.

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Firdaus Kanga (1961–)

John C. Hawley

BIOGRAPHY

Firdaus Kanga was born in Bombay with *osteogenesis imperfecta* (brittle bone disease), a condition that prevented his bones from growing beyond a certain point. Also this condition meant that his bones had the potential of breaking easily. As a result, he spent most of his early years bedridden, not attending school, leaving his home only occasionally to attend the cinema with his family. It was not until he was nineteen that he obtained his first wheelchair. Kanga's family expected him to become a solicitor, but he did not find his experiences in law school satisfying. On the other hand, he did study journalism and, in 1987, was awarded a prize in a British Council short-story competition. After receiving a degree in history from the University of Bombay, he moved to England in 1989 and it was there that his publishing career began with the appearance of *Trying to Grow* in 1990 and a travelogue, *Heaven on Wheels*, the next year. He is now working on a second novel, which is set in India.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

In an interview with Nandini Lal for the *Hindustan Times*, novelist Bapsi Sidhwa was asked whether she had "mothered this whole Parsi brood in fiction." Her response suggests one of the major themes that informs Kanga's work: "Firdaus Kanga met me in London," she says, "and very sweetly said he didn't think Parsis could be worth writing about, and with humor, till [her novel] *Crow Eaters*." Whether this was his motivation, in his fiction and other prose Kanga has been very interested in portraying the Parsi community, whether in Bombay or in London. *Trying to Grow*, for example, is a broadly autobiographical novel set in Bombay, told through the eyes of young Daryus Kotwal, son of Sam and Sera and brother of Dolly. Older than Daryus, Dolly serves as his best friend and his nurse, often sacrificing her own happiness to assure her brother's. Not surprisingly, given the fact that the narrator is restricted to a wheelchair, the setting for the story is limited to a one-square-mile area of the city. Most of the action is interior, in fact, and even when Daryus (nicknamed "Brit" not because of his family's admitted Anglophilia but because of his defective bones) is wheeled off the grounds to the cinema or the seaside, the narrator is busy analyzing his position in society and his potential for love. Brit's relationship with his father is somewhat strained; the father tries to disguise his disappointment in his son's prospects but finally commits suicide when his

daughter marries and leaves home and he is left with his crippled son. Brit is close to his mother, who accepts her son's disability with grace, and to Tina, his deaf cousin.

As with any *bildungsroman*, the principal focus of the plot is the young man's attempt to break free of his necessarily protective parents and to carve out an independent life. In the process, he discovers his own awakening sexuality in encounters with a neighbor, Cyrus, and also with Cyrus's girlfriend, Amy. Cyrus appears to be everything that Brit can never be, and Brit's infatuation is immediate and intense. But the relatively idyllic world of childhood soon passes. Dolly moves to America and marries; Brit's father accompanies her and walks into oncoming traffic; Tina is sold into prostitution; Brit's mother dies; Cyrus and Amy decide on marriage—all potentially melodramatic but recounted simply. The author seems to be clearing the decks for his narrator because at this point in the novel Brit sees himself as free to move to England. He does so, and his life, in a sense, begins anew.

Kanga's next book, *Heaven on Wheels*, is something of a travelogue that records his early impressions of the Great Britain to which "Brit" moved. In short, he is very favorably impressed by what he sees, offering frequent comparisons with India that portray his mother country as backward and insensitive, especially to the needs of the disabled. His Parsi friends in India ask him to send them favorite foods that had become less obtainable after independence: "And I thought how ironic it was that this is what the Empire had meant to its most loyal subjects—something to salivate over." He utilizes the points in his itinerary to make sociological or political observations, many of them relating to his own situation as a gay disabled immigrant from a former colony.

Trying to Grow has been translated into four languages and forms the basis for the screenplay that Kanga wrote for the film *Sixth Happiness* (1998). The film, directed by Waris Hussein and produced by Tatiana Kennedy, was made in Britain and financed by the BBC, the British Film Institute, and the Arts Council of Great Britain. Between these two major efforts, Kanga wrote and presented "Double the Trouble, Half the Fun," a program on gays and lesbians with disabilities, and "Taboo," which were produced on Channel Four in Britain. He also wrote the play *A Kind of Immigrant*, which was produced by the Graeae Theatre Company, the leading theater group of the disabled in England. He has subsequently produced a Channel Four travelogue on the Côte d'Azur and the possibilities of travel for the disabled.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Salman Rushdie, in the introduction to his and Elizabeth West's anthology of recent Indian writing—*Mirrorwork: Fifty Years of Indian Writing: 1947–1997* (1997)—remarks that in his various writings Firdaus Kanga has "transcended physical affliction with high style and genuine comic brio" (xvi). Coming to much the same conclusion, Uma Mahadevan-Dasgupta, writing in the *Indian Express*, observes that Kanga "writes luminously and affectionately of his city [Bombay], remembering it even in his travels . . . delightfully . . . and with a touch of irony."

Trying to Grow drew a good bit of critical attention, most of it echoing the characterization made by G. G., in a review in the *West Coast Review of Books*, who noted that it offers "a formidably unique version of life lived beyond the pale" (25). Maria Couto, writing for the *Times Literary Supplement*, notes that the narrative is "remarkable for its unselfconscious detailing of what it is like to be four foot nothing, to move only with the aid of a wheelchair, and to have a soul which yearns and a body bursting with irrepressible sexuality" (257). She admires his ear for the spoken word, his frequent reflec-

tions on “the moral rights and duties of individuals within the tightly knit system of the Indian family” (257), and his wit, warmth and humor. Some reviewers were not as impressed. G. R. Taneja, from the University of Delhi, writes in *World Literature Today* that the novel is “one of the most delightful to be published in the 1980s [*sic*],” in prose that has “extraordinary charm, fluency, and wit and exhibits remarkable control,” but the novel “lacks a substantial center.” It misses the opportunity to stretch the boundaries of the form of the novel, and has “poorly conceived” fictive elements (768).

Heaven on Wheels met with a good deal of criticism, especially in India, for its Anglophilia—the very tendency lampooned in *Trying to Grow* and described as the Parsi disease. The book sold quite well, nonetheless, but was strangely criticized for being too focused on the viewpoint of a disabled person. Ian Buruma, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, notes that Kanga is a “true-blue Thatcherite” full of “unusual views and eccentric associations,” a “cultural as well as a political conservative” (8). In this travelogue throughout Britain, the novelist finds the English kinder than the Indians back home. But Buruma complains that Kanga’s “juxtaposition of Western enterprise and Eastern inertia, or European freedoms and Oriental bondage, of Thatcherite individualism and Indian/socialist collectivism, is too neat” (8). The portrayal of non-Western immigrants in the book is quite good, writes Buruma, but especially good is the portrayal of Kanga himself—“intensely personal without becoming sentimental” (8).

The most enthusiastic reviews have resulted from Kanga’s screenplay *Sixth Happiness*, which was based on his first novel, and from his acting in the lead role. The film won the Audience Award at the London Film Festival. *Variety*, however, notes that the script “downplay[s] melodramatic potential and pathos in favor of a quirky, humorously anecdotal approach. Unfortunately, [it] seldom carr[ies] it off. Kanga’s adaptation remains literary in feel, saddling east with stilted dialogue.” The same journal observed that the decision to have “thirtysomething” Kanga play himself from age eight onward demanded an immediate suspension of disbelief and seemed awkward. Responding to the film’s subtext, *Gay Times* suggests that “it’s about looking at ourselves in the mirror and seeing not the distorted reflection of the fairground, but a picture of how beautiful we really are.” As Kanga remarks in a review of Roland Joffe’s film *City of Joy* that he wrote for the *Times Literary Supplement*, “Indians watching a film about India will catch the complexities of what they see with one hand; anyone else will need a long course in metaphysics and history, not to mention tropical diseases.” Thus, the Indian reviews of his own film offered a more generous response. Jay Palit concluded that “the film shows the uniquely rich heritage and culture of the Parsee community, compared to the Bollywood practice of using it as comic relief.”

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