

DELINEATING THE PROBLEMS OF CAMPUS CULTURE IN KAVERY NAMBISAN'S THE TRUTH (ALMOST) ABOUT BHARAT

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, a considerable development has been made in the field of campus novels. Campuses spread throughout the world and they provide rich and productive raw material for fiction. Campus novels focus on the life within college or university campus. They deal with the life of teachers, students, vice-chancellor and other people connected with the institution. David

Lodge is one of the most popular contemporary writers of Campus novel from Britain. In India also, many writers have written works focusing on the life within college or university campus.

Kavery Nambisan's The Truth (Almost) about Bharat deals with the changing attitudes, behaviour, life-styles of students of medical college situated in Delhi. The central character of the novel, Bharat gives the description of campus life and culture. He along with his friends, Shanks and Rishi are fighting for the rights of poor campus mess workers who are demanding hike in their salaries but the higher authorities continue to ignore their demands. As a result, the situation turns violent and trio is suspended from the college.

Keywords: *Campus, culture, mess, workers, students, personality, attitudes, behaviour.*

A Campus novel has gained widespread popularity in the recent years. It is also known as „ Academic novel“ whose main action is set in and around the college or university community. Campus novel is called as academic novel since it focuses on the academy. Campus novel often exploits the college or university setting and address serious themes like power, sex, race, exile, banishment, etc. prevailing in higher education these days. Elaine Showalter, the well known critic of campus novel has regarded campus novels as “reflection of reality.” David Lodge, one of the practitioners of Campus novel has defined it as follows

In English Campus Novel” is a term used to designate a work of fiction whose action takes place mainly in a college or university, and which is mainly concerned with the lives of university professors and junior teachers-„faculty“ as they are collectively known in America, dons“ or „academic staff“ in England. (qtd. in Shridevi)

The word „campus“ has been derived from the latin word which means “field” and was used to describe the large field of the college of New Jersey. The term was used in place of university by the Americans from the beginning of the nineteenth century and was later

adopted by Britishers also. Now, the term is used for any seat of learning like University and educational institutions. Chris Baldick in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1990) defines the genre of campus novel as:

Campus Novel is a novel, usually comic or satiric, in which the action is set within the enclosed world of university (or similar seat of learning) and highlights the follies of academic life. Many novels have presented nostalgic evocations of college days, but the campus novel in the usual modern sense dated from the 1950s: Mc Carthy's *The Groves of Academy* (1952) and Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* (1954) began significant tradition in modern fiction including John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* (1966), David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975) and Robert Davis' *The Rebel Angels* (1982). (30)

Elain Showalter in her book *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and its Discontents* (2005) has made an interesting study of the campus novels and also expresses her passion for the academic novel. It is her favourite genre because of the narcissistic pleasure she derives from it. She points out that the campus novel which mainly concerns the teaching fraternity is called "Professorromane." The campus novel incorporates the elements of humor and satire but there is also the element of pain in it. As Showalter writes, "Many academic novels are wildly funny and lines from them have sustained me in hard times . . . yet strangely enough, what appeals to me most in academic fiction is its seriousness, even sadness. Perhaps we professors turn to satire because academic life has so much pain so many lives wasted or destroyed" (3).

A Campus novel focuses on the life of teachers, students, vice chancellor, etc. It also focuses on the drawbacks of the campus, the struggle of students and academicians, the illegal activities that goes on within campus, etc. The beginning of modern campus novel dates back to the mid-twentieth century with the appearance in Great Britain of C. P. Snow's *The Masters* (1951) and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), and in the United States, of Mary McCarthy's *The Groves of Academe* (1951). Some of the most outstanding campus novels are *Pnin* (1957) by Nabokov, *Eating People is Wrong* (1959) by Malcolm Bradbury, *Changing Places* (1975), *Small World* (1984), *Nice Work* (1988), *Thinks...* (2001) by David Lodge, and *Disgrace* (1999) by J.M. Coetzee.

In India, the trend of Campus novels started with the success of Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (2004), a novel based on the student life of three IIT scholars. *The Long Long Days* (1960) by P.M. Niyyanandan, *The Truth (Almost) About Bharat* (1991) by Kavary Nambisan, *The Awakening: A Novella in Rhyme* (1993), by Rita Joshi, *Corridors of Knowledge* (2008) by M.K. Naik, *The Farewell Party* (1971) by M.V. Rama Sarma, *Campus-A Novel* (2002) by K.L. Kamal, *Atom and the Serpent* (1982) by Prema Nandakumar, *Miracles Happen* (1985) by D.R. Sharma, *The Drunk Tantra* (1994) by Ranga Rao, *The Higher Education of Geetika Mehendiratta* (1993) by Anuradha Marwah Roy, *Goodbye to Elsa* (1974) by Saros Cowasjee, *The Narrator- A Novel* (1995) by Makrand Paranjape, *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat and *University Memoirs* (2013) by Shubha Tiwari are some of the examples of campus novels from India.

Varsity novel is one of the sub genres of campus novel. Varsity novels are set in and around college or university campus but here the main focus is on students rather than faculty members. In Indian context, Kavary Nambisan's *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* can be cited as an example of varsity novel as it focuses on the life of students rather than faculty. Another sub-genre of campus novel is Campus Murder Mystery or Campus

Detective novel, where campus provide a setting for detective kind of fiction like Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night* (1935) and Colin Dexter's *The Silent World of Nicholas Quinn*. The present paper focuses on the study of Kavery Nambisan's *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* as a campus novel.

Kavery Nambisan is a popular novelist born in Coorg, Karnataka. She is a doctor by profession and practices in rural India. Her literary works are greatly influenced by her medical profession. She studied medicine from St. John's Medical College, Bangalore and then studied surgery at the University of Liverpool, England before moving to Lonavala, Mumbai to start a free medical centre for migrant labourers. She works as a surgeon as well as medical advisor at the Tata Coffee Hospital in Kodagu, Karnataka, and is the Chief Medical Officer for Tata Coffee. She has created several programmes for child immunisation and family planning for the rural communities. She is vocal in her critiques of urban centred health planning.

She began her writing career by writing for children's magazines. She also contributed to *Femina* and *Eve's Weekly*. She has authored several novels like *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* (1991), *The Scent of Pepper* (1996) *Mango-coloured Fish* (1998) *On Wings of Butterflies* (2002), *The Hills of Angheri* (2005), *The Story that Must Not Be Told* which was shortlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2012 as well as the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2008. She has also contributed fiction to the journal published by the Sahitya Akademi (India's National Academy of Letters).

Nambisan's first novel *The Truth (Almost) about Bharat* was published in 1991 and reissued by the publisher in 2002. It is a campus novel as it focuses on life of students, teachers and other people associated with the campus. The first part has realistically portrayed the life within the campus like students' lifestyle, their changing attitudes and behaviours, discussions among them, college faculty, life of students in hostel, dilapidated condition of mess and so on.

In the novel, Engineering and Medical colleges are on the same campus and students from the both colleges share the same hostel and mess and Board of Directors. Nambisan who had been a medical student herself has firsthand experience of life of students in the medical college. In fact, in the novel, she is bringing out her own experiences which she gained during her stay at the medical college.

The novel centers around the character named Bharat also called as Vishwanath in the novel. He is popular as Tarzan among his college friends. He is a young boy of nineteen and a half years. He is a medical student and has only six months remaining to complete his medical degree. He is one of the topmost students of the college. The first part of the novel titled "Mess" depicts the events that take place in the medical college. The students of the campus have joined hands to sit on strike to voice the injustice meted out to the poor mess workers who are getting meager wages from the campus authorities. In the novel, the campus mess plays a very important role in the life of the students. Bharat, describes the importance of college mess, "Most important events begin in the great big Mess Hall. Here we line-maros, challenge each other's superiority in Sexademics and occasionally talk of noble causes like the plight of the mess staff" (8).

Nambisan through the central character, Bharat has exploited the authorities who pay no attention towards the plight of low earner mess workers. She has realistically depicted

how the institutions which are considered as the seats of learning and worship sometimes become the source of injustice inflicted on the people who are connected to the institution. According to Bharat, the college canteen is in worse condition but the college authorities are not concerned about improving the condition of the mess. He describes the pathetic condition of the campus mess, "It's a great big hall, our Mess, about two miles long with huge glass-paned windows, six ceiling fans that creak away for nine months in the year, cheap steel tables and steel chairs that give you a pain in the ass. By the Fifth Year you get used to it" (3). Nambisan attacks those privately owned higher institutions who are only concerned with the beautification of the campus so that more students can enter the institution and they can charge huge amount of fees from them but on the other side, they turn blind eye to the other issues which are equally important for the harmonious functioning of the whole campus.

The novel, *The Truth (Almost)* about Bharat also portrays the life of college students. Bharat's, childhood friend Shanks is also popular among the college students for his well-built muscular body. He is the son of M.P (Member of Parliament) but he is popular in the campus for his personality. In the novel, he has been compared with famous personalities like Anil Kapoor, Vinod Khanna, Killer Khan, Sylvester Stallone and Schwarzeneger. During College years, the students are very much conscious about their dressing and dress up according to the latest fashion as in the case of Shanks. He has a weakness for underpants and it is his topic of discussion with his friends. He is always in search of new fashion. He is not only interested in fashion but in girls too. Both Viswanath and Shanks are among the topmost students of Medical college, but it is serious and humorous also that the final year college students are more interested in gossiping and discussing about fashion instead of thinking about their future career plans. Time that they should spend on studies is wasted in searching about latest fashion. Fashion has spoiled the lives of the youngsters and it is a matter of concern for college authorities and nation also as progress and development depends on these young people. Besides fashion, the topic of discussion among Bharat, Shanks and Rishi is about marriage, love and sex which again is taking them away from their studies and future goals. Shanks has pre-marital relations with a number of girls and he takes pride in this. Shanks and Rishis watch Blue movies also and they regard it a normal thing. They regard it abnormal if one does not have girl friends or watch Blue movies. Here Nambisan tries to bring out the mentality of college students which is working in the negative direction. Such mindset of students is a serious concern for higher educational institutions and proper provisions and guidance and counseling programmes should be framed to make them stay away from these evils and keep them on the right track. Showalter in her book *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and its Discontents* has rightly said "The best academic novels comment on contemporary issues, satirize professorial stereotypes and educational trends, and convey the pain of intellectuals called upon to measure themselves against each other and against their internalized expectations of brilliance" (4).

Rishi is an engineering student who is more interested in computer virusus. He is a better listener than talker. Most of the times, he is found holding cigarette in his hand. He is sure that he will die of Beurger's or lung cancer, but he does not make any effort on his part to shun it.

During college years, students easily fall prey to practices like drug addiction, smoking, alcoholism, etc which can spoil the health and career of students. Bharat and Shanks are

also victim of alcoholism and they regard it as a means to purify their spirits. So, it is a serious problem for higher education authorities and steps need to be taken to curb this menace.

In the novel, the higher authorities who turn deaf ear to the needs of the mess workers incite the college students to join hands to fight for the rights of poor mess workers who are demanding to raise their wages from “measly three hundred a month” (4). A college mess worker named Srini informs Shanks and his partners about the longer working hours and also of the pathetic condition of his family. Due to long working hours, they become tired and sometimes become lazy while preparing the eatables which in turn affect the health of students which should be the primary concern of the higher institutions. Nambisan here is again attacking the higher educational institutions who charges huge fees from students and deprive poor people connected with the campus of their share. Besides, it also affects the students who pay huge money as fees but remain deprived of proper facilities because of the hypocritical nature of the private institutions. As the character named Hansmukh finds “a cockroach in his cutlet. He had

just bitten into the cutlet when he saw the shiny, varnish-brown, two-inch-long beauty lying peacefully inside the cutlet with all its arms, legs, whiskers and wings intact” (7).

The novel also focuses on the students’ fear of examination. The students tremble in fear at approaching examination. Shanks tells Bharat that he is scared of examinations and much is left to be prepared for the examination. Rishi is also nervous of examination as Bharat says, “You can bet your last rupee that two days before the exams he’ll begin to wheeze. His chest gets so bad, it sounds like a bleedingmilk boiler when you put your steth to it ...Every time when the exam are over, Rishi’s wheezing stops” (97-98).

Nambisan in the novel also discusses about the anti-social elements that create disturbance in the campus environment. Vidyasagar in the novel first gets elected as college secretary and then he starts exploiting the fellow students by his rule. His hypocritical nature is revealed when Bharat says, “Vidya is the most unpopular guy on the campus, that’s why he’s been elected College Sec (Secretary) for the third running year. I am sure the sweet bastard will become Health Minister one day and succeed gloriously in keeping things botched” (7).When Bharat suggests Shanks that Vidya will speak to the Board of Directors on the behalf of mess workers, Shanks rejects the idea by saying, “Vidya will say yes-yes, then he’ll lick the Board’s but and kick the Mess boys” (6).

Nambisan has graphically described the hostel life of the college students also. They do not care about the cleanliness in the hostel. The setting of their rooms is topsy-turvy. Shank’s room in the hostel is described as: “You’ve got to step over Kolhapuris, Cherry Blossom, dirty socks, table and old mags (magazines) to reach the bed which is the only place where you can sit, if you move aside Maha cola bottles, toothpaste, Kohinoors and other essentials” (19). Keeping rooms clean is considered abnormality among students. But there is contrast also. The College secretary, Vidyasagar’s room is neat and clean. He is evil minded character who rents his room at five rupees per hours to the students whose parents are desirous to see their rooms and the moment they leave Vidyasagar knocks at the students and threaten them to give him money otherwise the interest will get double in a week.

It is Rishi who informs Bharat and Shanks that college mess workers have been fighting for their rights and want increase in their salaries but every time their demands go unnoticed by the campus"s Board of Directors. As a result, Bharat, Rishi and Shanks decide to wage a war with Board of Directors to provide justice to the poor mess workers and start demonstrations with the help of other college students. They launch a signature campaign and in the Annual Day Function, they present the petition signed by the college students to the Dean and Board of Directors that demands the hike in the income of mess workers. But the petition is rejected by the Board of Directors. This infuriates Bharat and he snatches mike and starts speaking in defence of poorly paid mess workers. Rishi too joins him and to the surprise of everyone present in the Annual Day Function he declares that if mess workers needs are not considered by the Board, then they will go on strike. The students of the college also join Bharat, Rishi and Shanks who have taken the initiative to provide justice to the poor workers. As a result, the college is closed for a week and they are suspended from the college until further notice. But the matter does not end here and turns to hunger strike. The students vigorously join the strike for a noble cause. According to Bharat, it is:

Also, a rare opportunity to spice our mundane College lives. College life is grim if you really look at it. First Year"s okay, you sail through on euphoria. Second Year on, the grind starts – especially for us medics. Every day of every week of every year there"s something depressing to get used to: formalin fumes burning the eyes, merciless, monotonous Monday tests burning the brain, foul-smelling cadaver mouths and the combined smell of antiseptic, urine, pus, body odour and death that makes you retch in your sleep until you get used to everything and stop caring about smell and suffering and death. That"s the worst part. . . The Mess boys" dilemma came like a whiff of oxygen. . . (12-13).

Students became seriously involved in the demonstration. They are determined to bring justice for the poor mess workers who feed them every day. Every day, they assemble near the college mess hall with their peaceful demonstrations. During the demonstration, students shouts slogans like:

Pathar dil walon, o suno hamari baat

Jo khana humko khilaten hain, mat todo unke haath

Agar aap na samjh saken, aao Mess ke andar

Hum dikhaten hain tumko tum manav ho ya bandar. (12)

The above lines shows that the condition of mess is really worse but the administration is not paying heed to the demands of mess workers. The situation worsens, when the peaceful hunger strike turns violent and the students in rage start pelting stones at the campus building and vehicles of the officials of the college. The situation becomes critical when the stone thrown by Bharat hits the Shafruddin, the gate keeper of the college. But important point to stress here is that the institution which works on the idea of equality sometimes become the source of discrimination. Shafruddin belongs to poor class. So, when he gets injured, Dr. Aloknath, one of the faculty members refuses to let Shafruddin in his car who needs immediate treatment. He regards it humiliation to make poor Shafruddin sit beside him in his car, Rover 2000. Shafruddin is very popular among the students and after hitting of stone, his situation becomes critical and gets shifted to

Internal Care Unit. (I.C.U). After the incident, Bharat starts getting nightmares like seeing Shafu is about to identify him as the culprit:

Shafu with a bandaged head lying on blood-drenched sheets; students lined up before him and CP asking, "Can you pick out the guilty one, Shafu? Can you tell us who threw the stone and tried to kill you? Point him out, just point him out". Shafu's gaze moving along the row of students- index finger rising to point... (31)

After being suspended from the college, they decide to enjoy their freedom. Rishi who influences Bharat and Shanks to join hunger strike finally joins the college by apologizing to the authorities. Shanks too join him due to political influence. But Bharat does not want to apologise to the college authorities. So, he decides to go on journey on his bike. But he knows very well that he has to return home and apologize to the authorities so that he can continue his studies.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it can be said that Nambisan's *The Truth (Almost)* about Bharat is a campus novel in the true sense of the term as it deals with the life of students- their thought-process, likes, dislikes, desires, attitudes, mentality, etc. She has skillfully incorporated all those elements which make it worthy of a campus novel. She has realistically portrayed the problems of students as well as of administration of higher education. During college years, students easily fall prey to practices like drug addiction, smoking, alcoholism, etc which can spoil the health and career of students. Such mindset of students is a serious concern for higher educational institutions and proper provisions and guidance and counseling programmes should be framed to make them stay away from these evils and keep them on the right track.