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Reflections of Indian Society and Campus Culture in Kavery Nambisan's *The Truth (Almost) About Bharat*

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Abstract:

Campus novels portray not only the meanderings inside academy but also present an elaborate account of the idea of the nation simultaneously. The present paper delineates the life of students during their college days along with reflection of Bharat, the country through the journey of the protagonist in Kavery Nambisan's debut novel *The Truth (Almost) About Bharat* (1991). There are several issues that disclose the inside happenings of an educational institution like the routine and habits of students, the students who join hands in voicing their concerns for the infringement within the campus in the form of unfair treatment done to the mess workers, etc. The vision of Bharat, the hero of the novel who is on his journey around the nation he speaks about the degeneration of humanity by revealing the dark image of the ghetto culture of the country. Therefore, the paper is divided into two sections that meditate upon these issues.

Keywords: campus, exploitation, injustice, culture, college.

The corpus of Academic or Campus Novels travelled to India around 1960s that centres round academic themes examining the demeanor of professors, faculty, students and academics within the enclosed perimeters of any higher educational institution either from the perspective of a teacher or narrated from the viewpoint of a student who gives a panoramic account of the experiences of a campus life. The genre does not always restrict its motifs in portraying the enigmatic and traumatic lives of academicians rather Modern Campus Novels cross the boundaries in order to delineate the life in and around the campus digging up the secret wanderings of scholars outside the four walls of the academy like Vishwanath alias Bharat in *The Truth (Almost) About Bharat* who escapes the enclosed life of a campus to discover new truths about Bharat, the country.

The campus life is an amalgamation of various issues that are sometimes hidden behind the veils stuffed with learning and knowledge. It is generally thought that an educational institution is an arena that provides the scholars wings to fly amidst the clouds of learning. But the growing menace in the field of education is adulterating the purity of the 'temples of knowledge'. As for instance, these days the newspapers and TV News Channels are upholstered with the news of the blunders created in the educational institutions in an uncontrolled manner. They are laden with the replica of the crimes committed in schools, colleges, universities, educational institutions or in the very department of education itself. Watching a News Channel or reading a newspaper on a daily basis means witnessing at least two to four such cases per day that forces us to think over the degrading condition of the so called 'domes of wisdom'. There are news such as, a student beaten to death by the teacher, students committing suicide from the fear of bad result, a student brutally raped by the teacher, the cases of sexual harassment/murder/gang rape in school/college/university, the exploitation in the name of ragging, drug addiction or suicides at rise especially in hostels of educational institutions or the recent case of high voltage drama of the toppers of Bihar High School Examination Scam, and so on as the list is endless. These are some of the burning issues along with various others that are usually suppressed by the officials of the said institutions as their coming into limelight will mar the reputation of the institution and the people associated with it. Hence, all these factors have altogether changed the campus culture.

As the educational institutions are considered the 'pillars of a nation' thereby a slight change in their scenario results into major modifications in the concept of a nation. Globalization, liberalization and the growing competition have also veritably changed the culture of a nation. Since the term 'culture' itself is dynamic in nature. Hence, whether it may be the campus culture or the culture of a nation, it is subject to change as both forms an inextricable component in framing the concept of nation or nationalism. The Campus Novels evince the escapades, adventures and exploits of the academicians encountered in the façade of the campus. And the oeuvre of Academic Novels beautifully mingles the two aspects viz., the life in campus and the idea of nation.

The literary output of Kavery Nambisan, a medical practitioner and a novelist, depicts her proficiency as a medic. She hails from Coorg district, Karnataka. Her career as a medic was spent mainly in rural parts of India. She was a student of medicine in St. John's Medical College, Bangalore and University of Liverpool, England. She was a member of the Governing Council of the Association of Rural Surgeons of India from 2004 to 2007. She also dedicatedly worked for Tata Group of Hospitals in the South that won her the Tata Excellence Award in 2001 for her matchless contribution as a surgeon. She is also actively committed towards social service programs like a free medical centre for daily wage migrant labourers.

Kavery Nambisan started her writing career by writing stories for children. Her story "Dr Sad and the Power Lunch" bagged the position of runner-up in the third Outlook-Picador non-fiction contest in 2003, her novel *The Story That Must Not Be Told* (2010) was shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2008 and the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in

2012, she also received recognition as the “Coorg Person of the Year” in 2005. Her other works include *Once Upon a Forest* (1986), *Kitty Kite* (1987), *The Scent of Pepper* (1996), *Mango-coloured Fish* (1998), *On Wings of Butterflies* (2002), *The Hills of Angheri* (2005) and *A Town Like Ours* (2014).

The major characters of Academic Novels being associated with colleges or university sometimes vociferate the injustice meted out to the people connected with the institution as is projected in Kavery Nambisan’s debut novel *The Truth (Almost) About Bharat* (1991). Chitra S avers that in *The Truth (Almost) About Bharat*, “the nation and the narrator runs parallel in their discovery of the polyphonic voices and multi-faceted identities respectively”.

The first section of the paper carves out the life of medics on a medical campus in the novel *The Truth (Almost) About Bharat* (1991). As the title of the first part of the novel, “The Mess” suggests, it generally pertains to the events that take place in the medical college regarding a students’ strike voicing the injustice meted out to the low paid mess workers. It also centralizes varied aspects of a Campus Novel by delineating the changing lifestyle, conduct, behaviour, attitudes and even the priorities of students. The first part of the novel dedicatedly portrays the life in a campus through the mouthpiece of the narrator who graphically narrates almost everything about the campus life – about the campus, colleagues and their behaviour, life in a hostel, habits and routine of students, discussions about the faculty, the mess, Annual College Function, hunger strike, etc.

The students of Medical College and Engineering College “share the hostel and the Mess and the Board of Directors” as Engineering College “happens to be on the same campus as the Medical College” (Nambisan 4). The narrator, Vishwanath gives a description of the dilapidated condition of mess in these words, “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). Mess plays an important role for college students, as Vishwanath says, “Most important events begin in the great big Mess Hall. Here we line-maros dames, challenge each other’s superiority in Sexademics and occasionally talk of noble causes like the plight of the Mess staff” (8).

The novel throws light upon the behaviour and lifestyle of the friends of the protagonist. Shanks, Vishwanath’s childhood friend, is the son of an MP but is popular in the campus because of his own capabilities, has a muscular body, is famous amongst girls as he is “the handsomest creature” who could beat “Anil Kapoor smiles”, “Sylvester Stallone shoulders”, “Schwarzenegger thighs”, “Killer Khan hips” and “Vinod Khanna sex appeal” (5). This comparison of Shanks with the above mentioned heroic personalities reflects upon the personalities famous amongst the college students. He is “the only macho brute” who is very much conscious about his dressing as he “squeeze[s] his assets into tight, tight pants and not look obscene, he’s bursting with common sense. His brain moves faster than the gossip in the Girls’ Hostel” (5). Shanks too have “a weakness for underpants, it’s his area of special interest. He’s always on the lookout for a new style or something” (4) and is also interested in girls. His craze for new fashions of underpants even occupies a place in his conversations

with his friends as he discusses the superiority of Liberty underpants over the Dora-Pocketwalla. Although Shanks and Vishwanath (the narrator) are amongst the top students of the Medical College, it appears quite funny that the topics of discussion of Final Year medics are not about their future plans, their career, rather it's about undergarments. On the other hand, Rishi, an engineering student and "a junior Ramanna" (14) is "a smart-ass – a mathematical genius with a brain like a microchip – but he's a better listener than a talker" and unlike Shanks, Rishi is interested in "PC World", computer viruses and most of the times is found holding a "Charminar" (cigarette) in his hand (4).

Calling nicknames is very often in college life as Vishwanath alias Bharat is known amongst his friends as Tarzan, Vidyasagar, a medical student is mockingly called "Macchad" (mosquito) and the names of Chitambaram Pillai – the Dean of Medical College and Trivikramananda – the Dean of Engineering College has been intentionally reduced to CP and TV respectively as the students think they would "dislocate [their] jaws if [they] tried saying their names all the time" (Nambisan 6, 4-5). The avaricious nature of CP – the Dean of Medical College is also hinted at as the narrator tells that CP offered tea to his parents when they visited but later included the charges in the bill.

The inhumane treatment of the college authorities towards their fellow human beings who feed them incites the students of the college to join hands with the mess workers and fight for their rights who demand to raise their wages who "get a measly three hundred a month" (4). Srini, a mess worker informs Shanks and company about their longer working hours and also shares his plight that he has a family to feed in such a meagre salary, "Father and mother pick kaapi. Sister and brother go to school. Elder brother – he went away, Saar. For Bombay Talkies" (5). Therefore, it has become the order of the day that the management of educational institutions is always in search of opportunities where they can save their money but they establish a huge and beautiful campus to lure more and more candidates. For this reason either the students are bereft from the facilities for which they paid hefty or they are provided the substandard facilities.

The author satirically points out the parasitic nature of medical colleges who charge huge amount of admission fees but fail to provide satisfactory remuneration to the mess workers even when they are forced to work for longer duration due to which they become careless towards their job. As Has Mukh, the poet discovered the dead body of "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). As Elaine Showalter also enumerates that "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).

The college campus too is not free from the 'gunda-raj' of the deceitful, greedy and "the most unpopular guy on the campus" (7) like Vidya who first manage to be elected as College secretary and start exploiting their fellow students under their dictatorial rule. The hypocritical nature of Vidya comes to the fore when it is informed that Vidya "can grease CP

and TV, bum-lick the Profs and work his way up, up, up without contradicting anyone. He's honey-sweet and horrid" and when Vishwanath suggests Shanks to talk to Vidya regarding the problem of mess workers, Shanks rejects the idea saying "Vidya will say yes-yes, then he'll lick the Board's but and kick the Mess boys" (6). And it is quite ironical and apt that guys like Vidya have a bright career. Vishwanath ruefully says, "I am sure the sweet bastard will become Health Minister one day and succeed gloriously in keeping things botched" (7).

The novel graphically portrays the topsy-turviness on the part of the hostlers who keep their room "in a pleasant disarray" (6). Vidya is the only student who is famous amongst the hostlers for he keeps his room clean all the time; "Vidya's is like a deluxe suite at Le Merdien: curtains and pictures on the walls, flowers in pots, table-covers, chair cushions and the room reeking of some crazed-out deodorant" (6). Vidya is evil minded and avaricious. His room is available for rent at five rupees per hour to the students whose parents suddenly appear and are eager to see the hostel and the moment the parents leave in a mood of happiness at seeing the neat and clean hostel life of their sibling "Vidya knocks on the victim's door, smiles his beautiful smile and says, 'Pay up or the interest doubles in a week'. That's why he's called Vidya Macchad. (No self-respecting mosquito would like the comparison)" (6). Vidya is a hypocrite who "wears a benign, flaccid smile on his face and a scowl in his heart" (6). But he was abashed and humiliated by Shanks in front of other students when he tried to be over smart by playing upon Hasmukh who went to Vidya, the College secretary to complain about the negligence of the mess workers who found a cockroach in his cutlet. Vidya "smiled his ghee smile" and insulted Hasmukh by saying that it is "a special cutlet with a piece of cinnamon thrown in just for you" (7). But Vidya stepped upon axe by making this disparaging remark as Shanks, "the God of Death" (7) appeared there to avenge Hasmukh and forced Vidya to eat the cutlet himself who then ran out to vomit it out. And afterwards, Vidya never dared to play any such prank with any student.

When Rishi informs Shanks and Vishwanath that the mess workers have been fighting since one year from the Board of the college to get their salaries increased but to no avail and the trio decide to wage a battle on behalf of the mess workers. Therefore, Vishwanath, Shanks from Medical College and Rishi from Engineering College lead the students' demonstration. They present the copies of signed petition demanding rise in the salaries of the Mess staff to the Dean and the Board of the College during the Annual College Function. When the Board almost rejected the plea, Vishwanath suddenly snatched the mike and argued for the measly paid workers and in a fit of rage Rishi too joined in and shocked one and all present there by declaring that "If the petition is ignored we'll go on strike" (11). And the words fell in the ears of Vishwanath as "dynamite" (11) because he was absolutely against any strike as he didn't want to evade his possibility for a distinction in the Finals. "As soon as Rishi . . . shouted the magic word the mood of the students sparked and exploded" (11). Instead of solving the matter, the Minister for Steel and Mines, the Chief-guest suddenly slipped away, the college was closed for a week and the leaders – Vishwanath, Rishi and Shanks were suspended from the college until further notice. The demonstration does not end here but just converted into a hunger strike. The students joined hands with full vigour for the noble cause as according to the narrator it also provided a chance:

. . . to attack Evil (in the guise of CP, TV and the fat-asses Board). 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. . . (Nambisan 12-13)

Therefore, the demonstrators are enjoying each and every moment of the hunger strike. They gathered in the front of the Mess hall with banners in their hands carrying the slogans such as “DON'T BITE THE HANDS THAT FEED US”, “Pathar dil walon, o suno hamari baat / Jo khana humko khilaten hain, mat todo unke haath / Agar aap na samajh saken, aao Mess ke andar / Hum dikhathen hain tumko tum manav ho ya Bandar” (12). But unfortunately those “Six hours of pure joy. Jokes and wisecracks (uncensored) flowed fast and furious. Mushairas, limericks and couplets. . .” (12) all came to a halt when the peaceful hunger-strike grew violent and the mob started throwing stones at the cars of the officials of the college while some students attacked the building. The “hungama” met a pathetic end when a stone thrown by Vishwanath struck Shafruddin in the head leaving him brutally injured. Shafruddin (Shafu), the chowkidar is favourite of the students who performed all sorts of errands for them without reporting it to the authorities whether it is “buying beedis and booze” or whether it is up to “carrying secret letters to the Girls' Hostel” or “ferreting vital news from certain pleasure dens”, Shafu carried out the commands as if he is a genie (13). Terror struck on the college campus after this incident and it is later revealed in the newspaper that Shafu died due to the serious head injury after identifying Vishwanath Sarangan as the assailant who has been absconding.

After being suspended from the college, the trio freaks out to relieve the tension and enjoy their freedom. Their activities reflect the culture of academics and their life on the campus. Rishi and Shanks drink liquor which indicates the habit of drug-addiction among the academics. But then the narrator recalls the tight schedule of hostel life as if their stay in hostel is like that of inmates:

Hostelites are not always so degenerate. They are a disciplined lot for about two hundred and ninety days in a year. Every morning, the six S's (shit, shag, shave, shower, shine and smile) are solemnly followed like Brahmin rituals and at precisely a quarter to nine a sea of pant-shirted clones marches into the Mess Hall, silently masticates its breakfast of bread, butter, jam, egg and coffee and then proceeds to College in the pursuit of knowledge. (Nambisan 17)

It has also been indicated that the “all-time favourite topics” include talking about “Sex, Marriage and Love” and Shanks immorality also comes to the fore when he says “There's no such thing as True Love, yaar. You can stick around with a dame for a few

months, a year at the most. How can you do the job with the same broad every single night for the rest of your goddamn life? For sixty years? Seventy years?" (19). Not only this, the student life has degenerated to that extent that the term such as "bullu fillum" (18) has entered their vocabulary and they occasionally visit the "Raja of Paharganj – famous quack and sexologist" to watch "a 'bullu fillum' in a seedy joint on a side-street off Paharganj for two rupees a ticket" (18). The people like Raja of Paharganj who try tooth and nail to sell their brands of aphrodisiacs to students and despoil their decency by introducing porn are also responsible for the growing degradation in the academicians/scholars thus profligating the campus culture to a large extent.

Rishi, who was responsible for the hunger strike disaster joined college by apologizing to the authorities; Shanks too had the support of his politically sound parents; while Vishwanath, who neither wants to apologize nor had the support from his parents' side was very much terrified and hence, decides to run-away as he states later:

I, Vishwanath Sarangan a.k.a. Bharat a.k.a. Tarzan left home not because I caught Shanks pawing Neelam, not because I was suspended from College, not because of my mother's intolerable sermons, not even because my parents' marriage was crashing half-way down to hell furious fast – I left because I was afraid Shafu might die and I couldn't face the consequences. (Nambisan 75)

Thus, leaving everything aside – Neelam's relationship with Shanks, Rishi's dejection, hunger strike episode, fate of Shafu, life of a college campus and the boredom of being at home listening to the controversies of the luckless marriage of his parents – Vishwanath went away on a journey riding upon his bike.

The second section of the paper covers the portrayal of the real face of India through the exploits of Vishwanath in the second part of the novel viz., "The Journey". The novel is about "the fear, aspirations, angst, anger and nervousness of the urban middle-class educated youth" revealed in the narrative as well as a critique upon "the elite-based governmental ideas and in the process highlights the pluralistic regional and also individual identities" (Chitra S). As Hobsbawm rightly opines that "the degeneration in the concept of nation indicates a shift from political nationalism which consolidates power and moves to another type which is community based and hence views the nation from below" (qtd. in Chitra S). Thereupon, it is the enmeshed web of the desires, fears, anxiety, ambitions, wishes, yearnings and interests of ordinary people that govern the idea/concept of a nation as Archana Dahiya and Itika Dahiya maintain:

The second part deals with the journey of Bharat . . . in search of something new and adventurous, and his encounters with the dacoits of Chambal having a tender and generous heart for the poor and destitute beings looting only the rich, the corrupt and the blood-suckers; with innocent politicians, "heroic medics and gorgeous women". This story is not only of Bharat, an individual and a citizen of India but also about Bharat, the nation that needs a modification in its socio-politico-economic system. The novel also mirrors the degenerative attitudes and habits of urban middle class

youth as well as their fears, aspirations, angst, anger and nervousness in the present societal and family set-up. (52)

The first person whom Vishwanath came across at a local dhaba in Lalithankapur is the Robinhood like figure – Bhojvi Singh. Although a dacoit he is but people do have a great regard for Bhojvi Singh, an ex-army officer, “a good runner”, who won medals and trophies, participated in the Olympics and “became a Body Guard to the President” (Nambisan 43) is the messiah of the have-nots who admire him for his courage and bravery for he fought against the injustice meted out to him by avenging the death of his sister – who was not only brutally harassed by her husband on the pretext of dowry but thrown as a beast by him before his friends who then gang-raped her before killing her – by murdering all the six culprits. Bhojvi Singh pleaded before the so called protectors of humanity, i.e., Police and other higher officials of the department. But his hopes got shattered as “nothing happened. Even his own brother, the police officer, couldn’t do anything about it” (43). And this is the story behind the dark past of Bhojvi Singh that compelled him to enter into a new world by being a dacoit and looting only the rich and the corrupted people and distributing the looted wealth amongst the needy have-nots became the only *métier* of his life.

The novel brings out a striking contrast between the dacoits like Bhojvi and the police officers. The people like Bhojvi Singh lack confidence in the judicial system’s as well as police officers’ inability to preserve and protect the rights of the weaker section of the society and instead turn up themselves as the protectors of their rights. The police officers who are said-to-be the guardians of the rights of the common men instead of conforming to their functions and duties as per law are bent on licking the boots of the powerful, the corrupt and the rich people for their own selfish interests. It is also highly ironical that the responsibilities of police officials are being discharged by the so-called “dakait”. (Dahiya & Dahiya 54)

The author never misses an opportunity to mock the hypocrisy of people living in the society that form the basis of a nation’s identity as Karan Singh, Bhojvi’s brother who is designated as a successful Police Officer by the virtue of which he could “afford a Maruti van and holidays in Simla and Goa . . . Karan had the future of half-a-dozen ministers squeezed inside the pockets of his tight trousers” (Nambisan 59). The author also locates the patriarchal mindset of society at large by portraying the other side of Bhojvi Singh. He orders to abort the baby of his six-month pregnant niece, an unwed mother despite the fact that aborting the baby at this stage may prove detrimental for the health of a sixteen year old girl. After curing Bhojvi’s insane Ajji suffering from the problem of “lice creeping on her head, body, arms and seven metres of hair” (51), without committing the sin of aborting the foetus, Vishwanath started a new journey.

Vishwanath meets Trilok Padmavathi Shastri, a politician and a present day Arvind Kejriwal working day and night to fight for the upcoming Lok Sabha elections as an independent candidate. His logo “comprised of a woman, a child and a dog with the words: POWER TO THE OPPRESSED below it” (64) and so was his speech that was entirely about giving equal rights to women and treat women, children and animals with respect.

Undoubtedly, his words mesmerized the audience but he was left with no words when a woman college lecturer contradicted him by saying:

‘Shastri Saab, you can fight for the oppressed on maidans, meetings and newspapers. But you cannot step into my home and stop injustice there or in any other home where injustice has bred for generations and has the approval of Time. Can you stop wife-beating, bride-burning, child rape and the trading of women like beasts? Can you abolish starving, homeless children who multiply like mice or skeleton cows or mangy dogs? You can’t do anything, Shastri Saab, why not admit it?’ (Nambisan 66)

Deeply touched by these unanswered questions, TPS uttered just in a single sentence that it will not be possible for him alone to sort out all such problems that are a stain on the society until or unless he will receive favour, support and help from the oppressed section. The author therefore, proves the incapability of such political leaders who find themselves incompetent to mitigate social evils but they gather loads of affection by their sugar-coated words. The author pokes a bitter satire on the absence of idealism in Indian politics through the mouth of the narrator when he says that Shastri is a “. . . sincere chap and sincere chaps don’t win Elections” (66).

The narrator witnesses the plight of child-hawkers – Bheeru alias Amitabh and his brother Babu alias Mithun, the homeless children fighting for their existence either by paying “hafta” (72) to the police officials or by feeding themselves “the left-over pulp after the juice had been squeezed out” as the child whom he encountered in Paharganj was wrestling with his own survival in his own unique way eating not the oranges but “the whole bucket of juiceless orange pulp” (24).

Sadhus or saints clad in orange or white strips form a common sight in India. Such religious minded people who claim that they are blessed by the Almighty with supreme powers and that they can perform magical feasts – are actually bluff masters who satisfy their unscrupulous desires under the guise of saints. They victimize both the soft-hearted innocent people as well as the people of avaricious nature who willingly become their prey. The narrator shares his experience when he came across such deceptive beings, “Two sadhus boarded the train at Hyderabad and sat opposite me. Long matted hair in top knots, ash-smearred chests, brown beads, bright saffron cloth knotted across right shoulder, wooden sandals” (68). They tried to lure Vishwanath by telling him about their holy “yatra to Kanyakumari and the Kumbha Mela in Allahabad” (68) and asked for any offering in cash from him that would shower heavenly blessings upon the narrator. “Their deceptive sadhu-like personality contradicts with the smell of ‘beedis’ emanating from them” Dahiya and Dahiya 54). Not only illiterate or less educated people are duped by the fake personality of such type of ‘jholachaap babas/sadhus’ but even educated people like Vishwanath’s mother are also easy victims as the narrator suddenly recalls one such encounter from his childhood when one such mendicant came at their door, not satisfied with little offerings by his mother grabbed the palm of Vishwanath to predict his future in order to coax the educated lady. It is reflective of their adamant nature and their greediness who would not let their victims go without receiving large amount of alms. Besides these ‘jholachaap babas/sadhus’, there are

‘Modern babas’ like the Swami – rich, educated, who don’t appear on railway stations or bus-stands as they don’t wander on foot but in air-conditioned cars. The narrator meets Dr Franklin Raghunath Rao on his journey who tells him about the pretentiousness of the Swami and sarcastically makes fun of the stupidity of Indian women. Swami lives in California and his ashram is run by his female disciples/sadhuis. He is a hypocrite and materialistic who sits on a “red and gold throne” (Nambisan 85) and enjoys a luxurious life. His foolish disciples blindly follow his instructions as the one Ahalya, an MBBS MD and her sister Radha, an architect trained in California who gave up their careers as per the orders of the Swami. Moreover, the insanity of superstitious Indian women is also depicted. There is a mad rush amongst barren women who throng to seek the blessings of the Swami in the form of a flower or a fruit, touch it to their eyes and walk away “with beatific expression of joy” (85) with a belief that the Swami possesses the divine power which can make them fertile. Dr. Frank also informs the narrator that “they fight to be the favourite devotees of the swami like teenagers fight over pop idols” (85).

After loafing about in Mysore, Vishwanath finally lands at Dr Franklin’s clinic suffering from Malaria. Not being able to pay for the medicines, Vishwanath then requests Dr Frank to lend him a helping hand by appointing him till he recovers from his debts. The narrator shares every single experience during his stay at Dr Frank’s place – the amiable behaviour of Dr Franklin and his third wife Rubaiyna who also assists her husband by attending to the patients, the sweet and caring nature of Dr Frank towards his wife that contradicts with his own parents’ incompatibility, his stay at Venkatesh’s house in the absence of FRR who takes leave to meet his parents and his second wife plus his thrilling and refreshing experience with some patients he encountered. Vishwanath’s stay at Dr Frank’s place introduced him with the multifarious aspects of society thus portraying diverse issues of a nation. He notices the struggle for survival faced by Venkatesh, the ward-boy of Dr FRR by assisting his parents by ironing clothes. “His parents were dhobis and they lived upstairs in a rut-put building garlanded with washed clothes” (89). Venkatesh narrates some events from the life of Dr FRR that include – his family, his college life and about his three marriages in three different religions. Indiramma, the first wife stays at Mandya and “looks after the doctor’s parents”; Annie, the second wife is a college lecturer in Bangalore takes care of the older children and “leads protest marches, morchas and bundhs. She is famous for fighting child labour, dowry, pollution and what not”; and Rubaiyna is the third one who stays with the doctor (Nambisan 88, 89). Dr Franklin Raghunath Rao is a kind and affectionate fellow who taught the narrator “. . . to treat the patient, not just the problem. . .” (86). He treats his patients free of cost charging only for the medicines. When the narrator asks his permission to leave and discusses his future plans with the doctor, Dr Frank too shares his experience that again hints at campus politics even in admissions as the doctor ruefully says, “Y’know – I’d set my heart on being a surgeon, had the marks for it but they denied me a P.G. seat because I wasn’t the type to open the car door for the Professor or buy vegetables for his wife or wear the same type of tie and shoes that the Professor wears” (95).

After Mysore, Vishwanath, lost in the thoughts of his parents, Shanks and Rishi, headed towards “NATURE’S GRACEFUL KODAGU DISTRICT” (100). “His brief stay at

Kodagu enroute Kerala was exotic in itself clustered with bamboo groves, coffee estates, and pepper creepers” (Chitra S). The narrator enjoys the peaceful and calm atmosphere of Kodagu:

I stopped to rest my delicate parts. Yes, Kodagu was graceful. Shady bamboo groves and tall green trees flanked the road. The air was fresh and cool and the blue mountain peaks in the distance looked as though they had been beheaded by the mist. Birds sang different tunes, with cricket crooners pitching in with their veedo-veedo-veedo hum. Two wild fowls and a rabbit scurried past as a bunch of partridges by the roadside sunned their grey backs.

Beyond the bamboo groves were the coffee estates. Pepper creeper – giant, green-leafed, wrapped around tree trunks like women’s frilly petticoats. (Nambisan 100-101)

“The narrator freak out with a group of hockey players but his stay ends on a distressed note with one of the hockey player hanging himself in the basket ball pole the next day” (Chitra S). His search seems to end after coming into contact with Rajee as he fell in love with her. Getting into love reveals another facet of a student’s life and the narrator too feels the pleasant touch of being in love with Rajee, a fish vendor living on the coastal Kerala, “the world’s greatest listener” (Nambisan 114) who patiently listens to each and every word as the narrator pours out his heart and narrates various episodes from his life. As Vishwanath utters:

I didn’t feel depressed, confused, puzzled or unhappy. I’d been searching and searching for God knows how long and now I’d found what I’d been looking for. Oh I was the luckiest blinking guy on earth. So what if my fingers were numb and my pants wet and my stomach empty as a cave. So what if I’d suffered a setback in College and been betrayed by my friends and was worried for my parents and scared to death about Shafu. I was in love and that negated all my other worries. (120)

The narrator feels a new joy running through his veins when Rajee first patiently listens giving him suggestions about what may be right for him convinces and encourages him. But he feels disheartened when the girl informs him that she is already married and is living happily with her child and husband (who works at Riyadh) when the narrator proposes her.

Shanks join the narrator in Kerala and both return to Delhi. When Vishwanath reaches home he is surprised to find his mother missing as the latter has gone to her brother in Agra who was worried due to the son’s disappearance and the indifferent attitude of her husband. The narrator was taken aback when he noticed the caring outlook of “his father’s unexpressed resentment on his uninformed absence . . . Now the mellowed narrator after his odyssey journeys with his father to Agra to reconcile with his mother and later with the College authorities” (Chitra S). Like, Dr Franklin Raghunath Rao and his three wives from three religions, the parents of the narrator also illuminate the blend of North/South culture in India. While his mother typically entrenched in Northern culture and lifestyle his father on the other hand, loves to wear dhoti and enjoys his Southey habits despite the unwillingness of his wife. And this North/South clash between them results in an unhealthy and incompatible

relationship, almost reaches the point of breakdown of their marriage and heartbreak but ends in a happy reunion.

The narrator too is frustrated and bewildered with so many ideologies, spiritualism and materialism he came face to face with. Although he lives a comfortable life but he feels emotionally attached with – the lowly paid Mess workers, the roadside juice vendor surviving on a bucketful of crushed pulp oranges, the fate of Bhojvi Singh, the powerlessness of Shastri, the struggle of Dr Frank and the plight of homeless Amitabh and Mithun – and feels helpless. Chitra S believes that this wounded culture of India (Bharat) “may be the rationale behind his detesting the name ‘Bharat’”. As he argues with his paternal grandmother Ajji who occasionally sermonizes on “Duty to the Nation, Sacrifice, Honesty and Hardwork . . . she talks of the Freedom Struggle and the greatness of our leaders” (Nambisan 55) and feels proud of the narrator’s name. She used to say that he must serve his country but the narrator feels enraged when Ajji says “You must live up to your name Bharat”. But he repudiates by saying “How can I live up to a name? . . . The name hasn’t achieved anything. The country hasn’t achieved anything” (55). He further states that:

I am not anti-Bharat, Bharat was the founder of the Kuru dynasty, Bharat was the loyal brother of Rama, and Bharat is the name of our bleeding country. The name has a goddamn virtuous halo around it which makes people say, ‘Oh Bharat!’ It is better to have meaningless names than names with meanings that blow your brains with their righteousness. (Nambisan 62-63)

Chitra S rightly asserts:

It is not the name Bharat that he critiques but the virtuous attributes internalized with that name. Even the gentle Keralite Rajee resolutely [suggests him to] cling to his name [when she says] “You can change your name but you cannot change your dharma” (TTAB 117). The narrator exasperated with the nation and name epitomized as dharma strongly resents her idea using derogatory words demeaning the nation opposes his ideas. This confrontation reveals the conflict that persists in the conception of nation among the youth.

The sarcasm embedded in the narrative is that reality contradicts the concept of a nation that is always “portrayed as a singular entity” as “It accentuates upon plurality and delegitimizes the sanctity attached to the concept of nation. The multi-coloured sometimes fanciful experience of the narrator is reminiscent of the nation and its assorted identities” (Chitra S). Therefore, after witnessing so many truths about Bharat, the nation, the narrator feels a new kind of transformation in his viewpoint as he says, “Every evening when I walked away, I felt myself changed irrevocably. I didn’t know how or why or for what. A part of my mind was cleaning itself out, neatly arranging thoughts and answers to questions and mapping out an unseen chart for my future” (Nambisan 114). Hence, Vishwanath alias Bharat, the narrator witnesses a medley of experiences that mocks at the idea of nation being a unified identity and this enigma of life and its contradictory values are well painted on the canvas of the narrative through – the benevolent ‘dakait’, the magnanimous and dedicated doctor with three

wives, the outcastes Amitabh and Mithun paying 'hafta' to the police officer, the hedonistic Swami, the sincere but hapless political aspirant or the patient and nationalistic Rajee living away from husband but enjoying the company of her child and the peacefulness of Kerala – all depict the discrepancies present in the post 1990s Indian society that challenge the preconceived notions about Bharat, the nation.

Thus, Kavery Nambisan unmaskes the hidden incongruities encapsulated in the cultural scenario that relies upon the authoritative echelon of the sovereignty of the dominant classes over the subordinate thereby bringing massive changes in the concept of nation. Narrated in the first person by the final year medic, Vishwanath alias Bharat alias Tarzan, the novel unleashes the multi-lingual and cultural contours of India. Since, being an academic novel *The Truth (Almost) About Bharat* by Nambisan picturesquely unveils the truth of Indian academic life plus multifarious aspects of the truth about Bharat, the nation by highlighting the manner in which the deadly evils like corruption, political interference, injustice, ineffectual law, different types of exploitation, lack of fellow feeling, violence, etc., are flourishing day by day.

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