

# Traversing the Elements of Campus Novels in Soma Das's *Something of a Mocktale*

## Abstract

This paper is an endeavor to explore significant aspects of Campus Novel in Soma Das's maiden step into the world of letters *Something Of A Mocktale* (2007). Soma Das resplendently portrays the close bonding cherished by the three friends Kaya Pattnaik, Ragini and Shubhra, their false and short-lived squabbles, raucous mischief, dreams, failures, collapse and maturity. The effervescent and vibrant experiences of students within the territory of Campus have been captured with minute observations. The action comes in full circle when the trio realized that they can never leave nor live in JNU Campus which has left an enduring imprint on their persona. The novel observes the walls of Ivory Towers from a student's perspective.



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## Introduction

The Campus Novel is formerly an Anglo-American genre though burgeoned in India lately. It is quite astounding to glance that in India which has worlds' primeval Universities called *Nalanda*, *Taxshila* and *Vikramshila*, this genre had remained untouched for a long time. As M. K. Naik and Shyamala Narayan affirmed that *the Campus Novel is not a favoured form with Indian novelists* (96). It is only with the publication of *Atom and the serpent* (1982) penned by Prema Nandakumar, indubitably reckoned as a trend-setting Campus Novel in the history of Indian English Fiction, the trail of this genre became a center for attraction with the Indian Writers writing in English.

But the genre touched its zenith with the publication of *Five Point Someone* (2004) by the mighty pen of **Chetan Bhagat**. A swarm of young college alumni emerging out of the colleges with their observed experiences look up towards the Ivory Towers and assign their imagination to soar in the sky of the closed world of Campus. The youth mirrors themselves in these stories woven around the closed walls of the Ivory Towers such as Bunking of Classes, Fun in Canteen and Hostel, Library, College Excursions, Bonding between friends.

## Review of Literature

Aida Edemariam observes Campus Fiction in her article "Who is Afraid of Campus Novel?" *Universities have served writers well*, and offer them *subjects for serious study* (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/oct/02/featuresreviews.guardianreview37>).

John Lyons scrutinizes Campus Novel as *one in which higher education is treated with seriousness and main characters are students or professors* (18). Christopher Bigsby opines Campus Novel as *... a proud tributary of the comic flow of English letters. From Amis to Bradbury and from the page to the T. V. screen, the academy has proved to be a superior source for humour but with serious undercurrent.* (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/farce-majeure/420320.article>)

Soma Das, another college alumnus, comes with her fresh blossom on college trivia. After completing her Masters in JNU she is pursuing her doctorate in JNU University Grants Commission fellowship. Presently, she is teaching in Miranda House College. She has also been a graded Odissi dancer in *Doordarshan*, a *Sangeet Visharad* from *Pracheen Kala Kendra* and a recipient of the national Scholarship conferred by Centre for cultural Resources and Government of India. Her literary works



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found place in the anthology entitled *Poets 2004* and the Sahitya Academy Journal.

Being the inhabitant of the place Soma Das paints the sanctified statuette of JNU with its perpetual vigor to battle and with the flaws and follies common to all institution whether academic or non-academic. As she confesses: *...no institution is infallible. I have highlighted the flaws...underplayed the virtues* (<https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-metroplus/campus-notes/article2254710.ece>). She finds JNU a fertile ground for creation and asserts *...I found no form of literature that explored JNU...and I wanted to write...did not know much on anything else. So, writing on JNU suited me fine* (*The Hindu*). No further research in this area is initiated in my knowledge. Thus, being less exigent the area caught the attention to be traversed.

#### **Aim of the Study**

The genre, Campus Novels are not extensively researched nor critically examined in Indian context. The paper aims to traverse the significant features of Campus Novels in Soma Das' *Sumthing of a Mocktale* (2007).

The genre Campus Novel came to light as a result of the great sociological changes after the World War Second. Academic life is, as George Watson states *the nearest thing English Fiction has had to a subject since 1945* (12). Elaine Showalter the distinguished critic of Campus Fiction comments on the emergence of Campus Fiction that *...it developed because readers like to read about their own world, and indeed about themselves* (1). But that does not connote that novels portraying Campus were not penned before. Angela Hague is apt to remark that *universities and their denizens have provided subjects for fiction since the novel began* (171). *Villette* (1853), *The Professor* (1857), *Middlemarch* (1872) and *Gaudy Night* (1936) can be appraised some of the precursors of the genre. Victorian novelists like Thackeray and Trollope too adjoin some chapters denoting Campus before their heroes steps into real world.

Earlier the term 'Campus' espoused to denote a particular urban space at college or university during the early decades of the eighteenth century. Later the meaning developed including all the physical space and institutional properties with the advent of **Kingsley Amis**, **David Lodge** and **Malcolm Bradbury** with their classics of the genre. Siefried Mews quotes Kramer's inspection of Campus Novel *...an institution of higher learning as crucial parts of its total setting...includes among its principal characters graduates or under-graduates students, faculty members, administrators and/or other academic personnel*. (714)

The narrative of the novel unfurls with Kaya Pattnaik, the protagonist who narrates the story as well, entering into the walls of JNU and finds it a whole new world where *Kurta* falls in love with jeans. The hubhub of classrooms and hostel, the dating cites such as- *Ganga Dhaba* and *PSR* (Parthasarthy Rocks), College Romances, great Excursions and

maddening preparation for IAS are thrashed out in the novel.

First and foremost the premises or location plays a sovereign function in determining the disposition of Campus Novels. These sorts of novels evince a fictional rendering an actual college. It delineates the every day activities of Campus comprising of lecture-rooms, canteen and hostel where students wrestle, escapades and sometimes are shattered emotionally. Kaya, the protagonist in the novel portrays the edifice of JNU that epitomizes microcosm of India- *The map of JNU has been constructed keeping in mind the map of India...north of JNU is called Uttarakhand...Dakshinapuram is the southern region...the western part of JNU is known as Paschimabad...on the same lines, we have Purvanchal* (Das, 6-7). She further, welcomes us to the *crispy cottony handloom world of JNU* (1) where as Kaya, observes *cotton unisex kurtas and ethnic chappals, the jhola is the final stamp* (2) and those who do not follow the above code *feel alienated. So did I on my first day.* (2)

In ancient times education is rendering to be imparted in the lap of nature far away from the hustle and bustle of town. All the eminent seats of learning in ancient India too had bucolic surroundings like- *Gurukulas* and forest schools. In Vedic period as Sahana Singh states *...holistic learning could only be obtained in the midst of nature* (11). Sahana further quotes A. S. Altekar who discerns: *not all gurukulas were in the forests though... however, secluded locations were preferred.* (12) Thus, bucolic vicinity for Campus Novels. Soma Das draws the stupendous picture of JNU in the lap of nature- *As I entered the campus through the cavernous North gate, I could already sense the distinct nature of this rocky Kingdom. This kind of lush continuum of greenery in Delhi, by itself could become tourist attraction.* (Das, 2)

Portraying *PSR* (Parthasarthy Rocks) on the lines of ancient education within the territory of JNU Campus Kaya further smears how JNU is embracing Nature: *Far from the madding crowd...explore the lanes of love, dark and lighted with herds of mosquitoes, insects of all types, porcupine, neelgai, and obviously the rocks...PSR is a beautiful scenic place, where relics of Aravali declare that their territory is over after this point.* (51)

The world of the Ivory Towers is closed therefore, there is always a jeopardy of tedium and ennui as Adam Begley scrutinizes: *Campus novels always cover the same turf...even when you look back more than four decades to Mary McCarthy's The Groves of Academe* (1952) and *Randall Jarrell's Pictures from an Institution* (1954), *twined classics of the genre, you're struck by how little has changed. The novelist's perspective shifts, but the place itself remains substantially the same* (40). Regarding the similar humdrum themes he asserts- *On every campus in every decade, there's the urgent need for new funds, issues of academic freedom, worries about hiring and admission quotas, petty jealousies, endless inter and intra-departmental squabbles.*

*Descriptions of the scholarly temperament are amusingly constant. It seems they've been stamping social scientist with the same cookie cutter for half a century...The students are elements, as unvarying as earth and fire. (40)*

Thus, the restricted nature of actions is being made alleviated by shifting the action from location to location and bringing in characters from the world outside. Place of action is extended to near by surroundings and swift pace is lent to the narration of the plot. The novel also hovers over a wide range of locations like- Kamal Shopping Complex, Vasant Kunj, Sarogini Nagar, Shakuntala Theatre, and Priya Complex etc. Soma Das seeks to make the reading experience compelling by introducing excursions and trips in the novel. During such an excursion Kaya is infatuated towards a Pahari boy, Abhimannu and couldn't resist her feelings, and falls in love; *If there is a love blooming between two unequals, it has to be the one with the upper hand who has to initiate the process. (Das, 149)*

Campus Novels also highlight issues beyond the territory of universities that encounter society as Fiedler comments Campus is *microcosm reflecting the great world (5)*. Showalter articulates the cognate stance that *the best academic novels comment on contemporary issues (4)*. A village trip in the novel brings a vinegary reality of Indian villages where girl child is still not given her prime right to live; *women are imprisoned in the cage of love and culture, where mustard and marigold shine beautifully under the sun and beneath them lie buried small baby girls who were declined first right to cry and their first right to live. (Das, 123)*

Students are the most ineluctable aspect of Campus Novel. It is observed that the British or American Campus Novels are usually centered around faculty and quite opposite to its counterpart, the Indian Campus Fiction generally focus on students who forms three fourth population of Campus. In British novels, as Angela Hague reflects students are depicted as *victims, willing or otherwise, of the sexual and political machination of professors (174)* and they linger as *faceless presences with little or nothing to do with the university's real purpose or day to day functioning. (174)*

Soma Das proffers the companionship and close bonding among students with full esteem and vehemence. Students, at distance from their home manifest true compassion and home like stance with their friends. Soma Das mentions JNU *a large Indian joint Family household, full of customs and rituals (200)*. Their desires, adventures, anxiety, and aimlessness are rendered exquisitely. Evaluation parameters like- grades and pressure of exams are some of the concerns that are poured over by the Author. Deboshree one of the seniors of Kaya in CSODR delivers her lecture regarding Grades. It is amusing to note her delineation of grades:

*If you spend months of sleepless nights, cram all the notes, stop combing, stop taking bath and study, you will get A-only. If you just submit your assignment on time, read the*

*questions, go write coolly, you will manage an A-minus which is still considered decent. If you miss a few assignments, just mug up the answers, vomit them out in end-semester exams, you will still manage a B-plus. (Das, 28)*

Janice Rossen states that *the university can be a place of exclusion and marginalization, rife with class-consciousness, misogyny, competition, and xenophobia (7)*. The same feeling of depression and frustration are exceptionally captured by Soma Das. One of the students in the trance of dope is projection of an escape from the mind-numbing Campus life that express the dejection and the struggle they have to face to sustain within this world of bogus learning; *this place is a cremation ground of your dreams. Thousands of dreams are cremated here every year. (54)*

Students contemplate an IAS preparation with that of a nine month cycle of pregnancy, *the preparation for Indian Civil Services is like carrying a baby in your womb for nine months. The exam itself is like the labour pain. The result in many cases a miscarriage. The next attempt is like trying to conceive again (167)*. Soma Das probes that the preparation is so tedious and shattering of hopes and dreams results in students losing their own identity and sometimes turn into some other- *This is the mother of all examinations...It becomes your lifestyle, your beloved, your prestige, your tears, a part of you, your first grey hair, your hope and much more...The exam transforms lives in one way or the other. It gives you what you didn't expect, it takes away what you do. It remains the mystery queen, wrapped all in veils, even when veils are out of fashion. This National hobby of JNU makes poets out of the dry souls, mads out of counsellors, suicidal minds out of ultra brave. (167-68)*

Kaya ponders over the pessimistic blow of continuous failures in exams over the whole persona of an individual *...their lives have turned into ashes and how they drink day and night. It unnerves me. Those days the world seems nasty, everything including life, love and conscience saleable. Those smiles fake and mocking as if to mean "look at the village boy, trying to act smart. He will become IAS!" my head spins and I avoid people's gaze. I wish I could be all by myself. (176)*

*Ganga Dhaba ...spot in a way the closest interface with the outer world...exhales frustrated unemployed air and inhales fresh air from outside (50)*, is a sigh of relief to this tedious Campus life, and functions like Page 3 of JNU demarcating all the differences - *When it strikes 12, Ganga Dhaba is full of hustle and bustle...the nocturnal hotspot of JNU. JNU's active social nightlife is centered around GD. (44, 43).*

A fraction of Students is depicted as lost generation who destroys their life and bury themselves in booze, smoke and drugs. Now-a-days Dating are in vogue within the Campus. *Ganga Dhaba* is the official pre-dating destination of JNU, in the same way PSR (Parthasarathy Rocks) is the official dating spot. Kaya opines that *the first Vice Chancellor*

of JNU must be shedding tears. While it is a great privilege for anyone to have a place named after himself, it might not be one of his greatest wishes that a place which is not known for the right reason carries his name (52). PSR bears with weighty heart the 'smaller vices' or the imprints of degraded social and cultural values:

*By smaller vices I mean nobody commits murder or attempts rape there. The witness to what happened the previous night at PSR are the littered used condoms, empty Mc Dowells No. 1 bottles and doping residues. PSR bears the consequences of the three sure shot ways to the altered state of consciousness. Doping, Drinking, and Making love. (52)*

Strike or protest is also a significant aspect of Campus Novels where students appear as aggressive and violent crowd, but this element is accomplished in the novel in an amusing way. On the day of Mahashivaratri Mess serves non-vegetarian (as they have fixed day on which non-vegetarian is served). Students decide to protest against the act saying; *how can he be so insensitive to the majority opinion?...on this auspicious day?...saala...dharambhrasht karaega* (48). Therefore, students on the name of protest buy all the non-veg thalis and destroy the food by throwing it into bin (48). Thus, Crudity and vulgarity, a shift in language is observed a trade mark facet of Campus Fiction.

Nick-naming of teachers or friends has been very common with students and is a considerable aspect of Campus Novel. Pinaki one of the classmates of Kaya Pattnaik, is called 'Talcum' (5). One of the Professors Heerendra Nath Prasad is nicknamed as "Heera" (132) in the novel. Fun adds flavour to life.

Professors form indispensable part of Campus Novels. Students and Professors exist together. "You exist, therefore we are." Writers of Campus Novels delineate teachers in most humorous and sarcastic manner. As Chris Baldick opines Campus Novel is a novel that is *comic or satirical...and highlights the follies of academic life* (30). Professors are portrayed as conventional, clichéd and stereotyped. The occurrence of comedy assuages the acrimony of satire. Showalter scrutinizes the acceptance of Campus Novel though being viciously critical to Academy *...we professors now live in the age of celebrity, publicity, and fame, being a character in a satiric academic novel, even a nasty one, may be a kind of distinction. Stanley Fish likes being identified with David Lodge's Morris Zapp; Laurie Taylor didn't mind being falsely thought to be the original History Man...* (5)

Kaya describes the faculty members of JNU in her student's lingua coinage about, the over enthusiastic Bichitra Roy, Toramal Thakur with baldheaded and potbellied, and lean, sporty and hyperactive Prof. Birendra Bahuguna. She evinces humorous sketch of Prof. Bahuguna- *His hair stood upright on his head, toothbrush bristle, defying gravity like a bed of thorns and he himself looked like a*

*leaner replica of Marco Polo, Einstein or somebody great* (Das, 14). The portrait of Bichitra Roy is also very amusing. Her way of teaching as explained by Kaya is all the way out of anybody's approach and funny. *You know...hmm...what happen is that....hmm....when people are not exactly employed but....hmm still are employable....hmm...mane do you understand...ok leave it* (12). Kaya refers one of her professor Naqvi as 'Sweet Grandpa' (Das, 6).

Love, lust and sexual pursuits are the integral requisites of Campus Novels. Some Campus love stories are successful whereas some are ordained to collapse. Soma Das expresses her philosophy of love; *Sin is conscious, love is unconscious. Sin is deliberate, love is unintentional. You don't apply for love, you just fall in love...in India you can never rise in love* (53). She further paints the season of love and the fertile soil bestowed by the Ivory Towers for the budding of the plant of love:

*Why does this happen? In every class, love happens in bulk. Not one, two, or three, but half of the class falls in love at the same time...sometimes with the same person. Is there a season of love? Does love really have a germination, flowering, maturing, ripening cycle like a fruit or flower? And why do the trips, excursions, study tours form the fertile ground for love to bloom? (97)*

The building love between Pinaki and Janvi, *often caught coochie-cooing under public gaze* (19), has no potential of blooming in future on the grounds of reality as *Janvi was a respected member of a distinguished Prof's family. Janvi could never ever carry forward Pinaki's family line* (19). Ragini has many love affairs with Jagpreet, Zaheer, Pritam Anand and many more. But as Kaya asserts, the attention-grabbing fact about her love interaction is- *she never ever spoke to any of them, did not know the names of the most of them and I am not even sure if she remembers all of them today...*(82)

Soma Das also depicts a picture of remorse in love. Roly loves Talcum who breaks her heart brutally and consequently she shatters. *Her heart burnt when she saw Talcum sharing a hearty laugh with other girls in the class. When he passed by her and went ahead to sit with someone else, she felt a glass shard pierced her through inflicting her with an unbearable tension in veins.* (Das, 88)

Soma Das describes a place within the Campus of JNU, the *Ganga Dhaba* where love relationships bloom *...Guys and girls spend months in GD before their love blooms and is formalized... GD has never been the official dating spot of JNU* (44). The official dating spot of lovers are Parthasarathy Rocks; *Once couples sign the agreement of love, they most definitely visit the love shrine of PSR and, with the blessings of Lord PS proceed on the path of love* (51). Soma Das sensed that Parthasarathy must be in abhorrence realizing the fact that a place like PSR, a dating spot is named after him. It is must be a matter

of ignominy for such an individual like him. But all of a sudden a second reflection creeps into her mind:

*I think there could be no other place in JNU more meaningful than PSR to have been named after the first VC. The PSR rocks are most intellectual of the rock species, for they patiently listen to the academics, theories and thinkers in the dark, who propounded deep philosophies without expecting any awards...They have absorbed many tears after those promises were broken and oaths forgotten. These rocks love the dopers, drinkers and lovers... (58)*

Bureaucratic delay is also apparent in Campus Novels. Robert S. Scott dissects non-Academic as vain, arrogant figures who alienate students, faculty, and staff and therefore isolate themselves from their co-workers. Often ruthlessly ambitious, these shadowy characters generally threaten faculty members callously and seek to call attention to themselves through showy display of leadership (83). Sometimes these non-academics behave busier than the academics. As Soma Das ironically asserts that this non-academic staff act more important than the VC himself and formulate the procedure of things long and hectic owing to their haughtiness and desire of self-importance- *Murmuring to myself where to submit which colour folio, I spent my entire day with pan chewing JNU staff, many of them pretending to be more important than the Vice Chancellor. By the time I went back home I knew I must have cleared some great exam or why else would the procedure be so long? (Das, 3)*

The language employed in Campus Novels is colloquial and unconventional which involves Campus slang, abbreviations, and acronyms that contribute for the delightful reading. It is the language that extinguishes all discrepancy of culture and region and homogenizes its crowd. Shubhra's observation too strengthens the fact- *Maybe there is a sense of JNUness in the answer. Whether we agree or not this place grows on to you and grows into you. May be the Profs sense that JNUness in your answer and so they identify us (200)*. The language used by the writers of Campus Novels is brusque, blunt and candid. About the cohesiveness of the language of the Campus Soma Das remarks:

*JNU definitely soaks in your lifestyle, your worldview, your attitude and into you so much so that after a 15 minutes chat session, there is no way that one JNUite cannot recognize another anywhere in the world even if their conversation had no mention of their backgrounds. (200)*

Slang is also an influential tool in Campus fiction. Amitabha Bagchi observes *slang was born inside the walls of the campus, or at least it was given its final form there (231)*. Slang like- 'Cal', 'Red-T', 'Roomy', 'end-sems', 'JNUite' and 'hi-fi' etc are marvelously applied by Soma Das. Similarly '**GBM**' for general Body Meeting (31), '**GD**' for Ganga Dhaba

(43) and 'FFB' for first for breakfast (81) '**PSR**' for Parthasarthy Rock (51) are some instances of Abbreviation in the novel. '**CSODR**' is not Centre for Study of Obstacles in the Development of Regions but Centre for Suppression, Oppression, Depression and Repression. (2)

Use of irony and satire are also apparent to build the authentic picture of the Ivory Towers. The Writers of Campus Novels use these weapons to signify the disparity between manifestation and realism. It is very amusing to note that goal is guided not by one's passion and aspiration but some kind of folklore in the novel. *I saw a Neelgai...the folklore of JNU goes this way 'if you spot a Neelgai in the campus, you will definitely go on to do your Ph.d here' which at least meant for me that I would clear the MPhil entrance. (190)*

Soma Das also uses multiplicity of Narrative voices, which enables the readers to peep into the psyche of Characters. Ragini speaks of her love affairs very candidly- *I had my first boy friend when I was in class 9<sup>th</sup>...my friends were glamorous by my standards. One after the other, they all managed to have boyfriends. Left alone, it became an ego issue for me. So I pounced on the left over. (77)*. Adhbhut Kumar who hails from a small town of Bihar, and is appearing for IAS says; *I know I have to make it big, and making it big at my place meant clearing Civil Services. It doesn't get bigger than IAS there. I knew the journey is long-arduous-full of thorns (174)*. Jignesh Chauhan another aspirant for IAS puts forward his outlook *...in JNU I see so many who are so much ahead of me, in front of whom I am scared to speak lest I speak something wrong, something stupid. So I maintain silence. I am quiet most of the times and try to pretend that I know but won't speak. I burn my nights studying. I spend my days, in studying. (168)*

She also manoeuvres flash forward technique to depict how the closed walls of Campus fling a negative impact on the persona of Itsy and Bitsy. They are introduced as simple and innocent small-town girls who are shy or rather had fear to mingle and face the fast life of JNU during the first-Semester soon drastic changes are witnessed in their attitude and temperament at the end-semester. Kaya observes in second sem *their hair was still unkempt but with no trace of oil, remained disheveled and frizzy (64)*, in third semester- *...necklines plunged and hemlines went up. Now their cellulite was for all the world to see (66)* and in fourth semester all their persona commutated:

*There I saw someone zigzagging, cat walking towards hostel almost off balance...I realized it was Itsy. I didn't quite understand the state she was in. was she drunk?...I spared the thought about all those itsy, bitsy, tiny, minis who remain under veils back home, only to unveil the rebel in them in an anonymous city like Delhi making full use or misuse of their limited freedom while it lasts. (68-69)*

Soma Das commences the narrative with In Cluing technique giving clues and background information about the world she is going to covenant with in linear mode and the events follow in first person narration - *People usually drink black coffee at nights in this corner of the world. Oh no no no.....not that they are particularly fond of it, just that they are hardly left with a choice...this is a place where it doesn't matter where you hail from, which fashion statements you made earlier.....whether you wore chiffon salwar kameez, DKYN tank tops, nylon shirts with tiny mango motif prints over terycot trousers. This is the end of all diversities.* (1)

#### Conclusion

Thus, the novel flings adequate luminosity on many aspects of Campus like hostel life, bonding with friends and teachers, love interests, anxiety and depression for exams, grades and future, and students' adventurous. The Novel truthfully reveals the ambitions, enthrallment and tumult experienced by the characters throughout their journey within the Ivory Towers. Simple narratives, colloquial language, social amalgamation, comic undertone and study pressure are the reasons that *Sumthing of a Mocktale* is deemed to be as a Campus Novel. As Kaya observes that *JNU is like an old T-Shirt, which you know might not look great on you anymore, but you are so comfortable in it that you are not ready to part with it.* (204)

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