

Stressed Student-life: A Prominent Feature in the Recent Indian Campus Novels

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Abstract

Campus novels, in general, reflect various facets in the life of students on campus. The academic stress, caused by the very system of education, acquisition of grades, coping up with peer pressure and parental pressure, is well presented in campus novels. An objective reading of select Indian campus novels tells us that it is obvious in the present system of education whatever may be the institute or university. Though it is a matter of serious concern for many psychologists, unfortunately, no corrective measure has been initiated by any institute so far, and students are left to their fate.

Keywords: campus novels, academic stress, examinations, assignments, grades acquisition, parental pressure, suicides.

It is believed that people used to lead simple and ascetic lives in good olden days. The modern man tends to become more materialistic due to the concepts of industrialization, urbanization, globalization etc. In India, the western influence has brought in the materialistic life style and culture in place of the old simple life style and culture. The trend has continued prominently during the post-independent times in India. Obviously, undergoing stress has become very common phenomenon in modern-life. All the man-made comforts, facilities, luxuries, problems and conflicts make man's life more and more stressful.

The most inevitable and alarming issue in academic institutions that affects the students is stress. Many scholars of behavioural sciences recommend more attention on the stress. (Agolla 25-35) Further, we are warned that if stress is not managed well, the academic institutions will face both positive and negative consequences. (Stevenson & Harper 167-178)

Academic stress is experienced by students especially during their preparation for exams, when they are expected to master the large amount of content in a small amount of time and in

grade competition among their peers. (Abouserie 323-330). In this connection, Supe and Saipanish analyse the reasons for stress among students on campus thus:

University is a time when academic challenges increase significantly, and self-driven study and learning habits as well as self-determined time management become essential skills to master. Pressure to perform well in assessments and thinking about the future also increase. However, in addition to the many academic pressures, early studies have reported that psychosocial factors are also significant sources of stress for students. (Supe 1-6 & Saipanish 502-506)

The above perceptions hold good even in the Indian context. Indian parents have great hopes and expectations about their children. They want their children to be in high-rated technical institutes viz... IITs and IIMs or in reputed medical colleges of the country in line with the present trend. Therefore, stress has crept into the student community just as it has been affecting the parents of the present day, in this competitive world, as a common phenomenon.

The scope of this paper is to focus on some of the Indian campus novels which have been published during the last decade. A study of incidents that are discussed below from the select campus novels viz... *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat, *Sumthing of a Mocktale* by Soma Das, *Keep Off the Grass* by Karan Bajaj, and *Nine Months Ago* by Manish Gupta, reveal how the novelists have given enough attention to the academic stress manifested in some of the characters of the novels.

The student trio in the novel *Five Point Someone* is from diverse backgrounds who aspire to become IITians with different academic standards. Once they are in, they get baffled initially with the system and the life at IIT, for instance, classes, assignments, more classes, and quizzes. (Bhagat 14) They make students anxious and totally busy with a lot of academic activities all the time. Their watching of a movie before the exam has led to obvious failure in the quiz. They are all worried about their grades since there is no value for five pointers at IIT and only those who acquire 10 for 10 deserve respect. In Prof. Cherian's words, "We judge people here by their GPA. If you are a nine, you are the best. If you are a five, you are useless. I used to despise the low GPAs so much..." (Bhagat 261) Hence, grades attained by the student will decide his or her fate or destiny. The narrator of the story, Hari also worries about "... a dozen assignments a week. Plus, there is a viva component that I hate". (Bhagat 143) His worry about assignments, viva and grades has another reason too. His girlfriend Neha will introduce him to her professor- father if he gets really good grades.

The discussion continues further in the novel *Sumthing of a Mocktale*. Teachers in JNU also say, "Here you have to EARN your grades". (Das 27) The senior students provide some more

information and guidance on grade system to juniors from their years of experience. Thus, a senior student Deboshree explains how to earn grades at JNU:

“The grades. See there are slots and you yourself are the enlightened one to decide what you want. 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)

She also says that even when one prepares for IAS exam, he or she also can manage with B grade. If someone misses one or two papers and doesn't do assignments the one will be getting B-minus which is called a benchmark. If that is also not possible and one manages a C, history will be created on the one's name at CSODR for years to come. More over an A- Plus will be like the moon and the stars, only decorative pieces. The senior is of the opinion that even if one gets an A-plus that is not worthy. She also makes an alarming note here by saying “once bracketed into a particular slot it is almost impossible to break the mould and move into another”. (Das 28) Now it is the junior or the student who has to decide which grade she/he wants and work accordingly.

The issue between the students and the teacher in *Keep off the Grass* is also related to the relative grading system existed in IIM. According to the lady professor of Accounting they have four grades, A, B, C, and D which are determined through a series of ten quizzes, a mid-semester exam and a final exam. They may have almost an examination every week. When she has started explaining the results of the relative grading system, some students express their dissent saying,

“Ma'am that seems unfair. Technically, even if I get 90 out of 100, I could still get a D because the rest of the class got a higher score. What are we trying to measure here? My ability to understand the subject or whether I can beat others in understanding the subject?” (Bajaj 50)

The professor's quick response will give the success mantra in corporate life:

“What do you think success in corporate life is about? Your doing well or your doing better than your peers? My classes should simulate the reality you are going to face when you graduate from here, and my course is as much about learning accounting as it is about being the best at learning accounting.” (Bajaj 51)

This clearly explains the pressure the grades put on the students. The individual gain of knowledge and performance in a subject is not sufficient, but the performance should be comparatively better than others. Students have come to know that the grading system is common with all courses and teachers only with slight variations. The hectic schedule runs, the semester one completes and finally the results are out to make all disappointed. Sarkar manages marginally behind top ranker with 3.8 GPA while Samrat scores 2.9. A Yale valedictorian finds a pleasant surprise to be a topper of 50 percent of the class in IIM. (Bajaj 173) This is the effect of the relative grading system.

Examinations of both types- academic and competitive, cause stress for the students. They strive to get good grades in academics in order to maintain an edge over their peers whereas a competitive exam for a career in public or private sector will be a life and death problem for many. In one instance, in *Sumthing of a Mocktale* describes how Kaya has prepared for an entrance exam with a nerve-throbbing head, parched throat and the bile crammed foodpipe during the sleepless nights. Her condition is compared with an Iraqi soldier battling against US army who is sure of his own defeat. Finally, she bowed before god uttering prayer ‘This time Lord, only this time, one last time, I know I have said this before, but I mean it this one time, Please... Please’... (Das 194,195) The true description by Somadas of students’ stress before the examinations is very realistic in manner. Both the physical as well as the mental strain they undergo before exams is illustrated through Kaya in *Sumthing of a Mocktale*.

A similar situation can also be found in the novel *Nine Months Ago* written by Manish Gupta. He records his fresher experiences more effectively than other campus-novelists regarding the grade system. He presents grades of End-semester exams achieved by different students and their feelings. Ever hard-working Akash has scored 9, Routlu gets 7.7 along with one FF (re exam) in analog lab, Nangu gains 5.1 and 2 FR (Fail and Repeat the course). But the protagonist Shashank is able to make a good show of 8.01 because of the care taken by his girlfriend Arpita. Routlu is very much worried and utterly disappointed with the result as failure in lab exams is a rare case at IIT. He cries literally and asks the other friends to help him in getting through the exam. He howls, “please do something for me else I will commit suicide, or worse, my father will kill me.” (Gupta 113) Soon his friends start the rescue operation by talking to the TA (Teaching Assistant), Shreya. The problem is solved finally after correction of the marks by TA. The agony of Routlu indicates the pressure he faces from different directions. He wants to get through the situation somehow. Otherwise he is ready to commit suicide. If he does not, his father will kill him. It is another instance of pressure by Parents. Nangu, another character in *Nine Months Ago* also commits suicide in the hostel, unable to withstand the pressure.

Very often, academic stress leads to attempts of suicides on the part of young students who failed in achieving the goals planned and fixed up for them. Some aspirants drop in the middle of

the process unable to withstand the stress they undergo during the process and take hasty decisions to end their lives to avoid being stamped as failure cases. Some other students try all possible ways to meet the expectations and aspirations of their parents but fail to bring to realization the dream of the parents. The pressure from the parents on their kids is illustrated in the novel *Five Point Someone* through the character Samir. Neha's brother, the only son of Prof. Cherian, commits suicide after having failed to get a seat in IIT. He writes a note to his beloved sister in which he mentions-

I have tried three times to get into IIT, and each time I have disappointed dad. He cannot get over the fact that his son cannot handle Physics, Chemistry and Maths. I cannot do it..... I cannot get into IIT. And I cannot bear to see dad's eyes.....what can I do? Keep trying until I die? Or simply die? (Bhagat 167)

Hence, Samir commits suicide out of parental pressure. The father does not care what his son aspires to be in life. The consequence is loss of an invaluable life! When Prof. Cherian realizes the fact, it is out of his hands. He has lost the invaluable life of his own son. Alok, one of the three friends, also attempts suicide when he is unable to digest the punishment awarded in the light of breaking into Prof. Cherian's office for exam papers and the consequences in his life. Alok being a sensitive, career-oriented middle-class student, with a lot of familial responsibilities, unable to secure good grades, cannot withstand the pressure, shame and punishment; has tries to commit suicide. After all, grades are affecting student life in a bad way resulting in their deaths.

At times, the grades affect friendship and relations among the students. The three friends, Hari, Alok and Ryan become good friends on campus. They live, work, study and enjoy all their time together. When the grades are announced, the much ambitious Alok breaks up his friendship with Ryan, believing that the latter's idea of going to movies and other acts of enjoyment has been responsible for their poor grades. The boy blames Ryan for his poor grading and joins another hard-working bookworm for a period of time. It takes a lot of time for their reunion. Grade system has its own effect on love and relations too. Neha, the daughter of Prof. Cherian and the girl friend of Hari once tells him "If you do get an A, I will probably tell him that we are friends". (Bhagat 143) The words of Neha indicate that she feels insulted to be a friend with a five pointer, or her IIT-Professor-father does not like her friendship with a boy of low grades. Poor Hari is forced to try for that in order to have a relationship with his beloved.

Conclusion

Grade system, though it is developed in the postcolonial era with the advancement of technology, is affecting student life to the core. Besides, the pressure from peers as well as parents also causes depression on the part of low performers and sometimes leads to committing suicides. Sometimes students even try different fraud and foul means to earn grades.

At this juncture we cannot simply ignore the observations made by experts. They feel that students experience physical and psychological impairment when they are stressed. They advise students to follow certain methods to reduce stress like effective time management, social support, positive reappraisal, and engagement in leisure pursuits. (Murphy & Archer 20-28) Kasim also found that students who balance their academic and non-academic activities have a higher-grade point average. (53-64)

To conclude, a strict mechanism should be developed, to identify the emotional disturbances and stress levels of student community on a regular basis, and immediate counseling has to be taken up to stop the deaths of students in many prestigious institutions and universities.

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