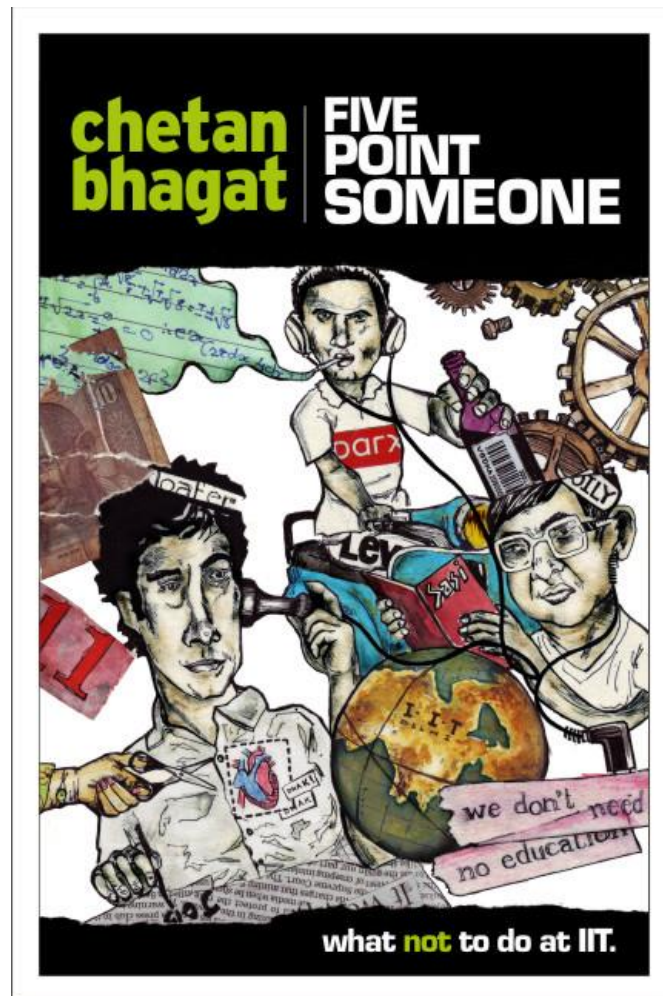


Autobiographical Elements in the Novel *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat

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Abstract

With an oeuvre that defies genres, contemporary Indian English fiction has attempted to combine ethnic and modern elements. Novelists are always looking towards breaking new ground in fiction, acquire more freedom and scope to be creative while they come up with refreshing themes. Chetan Bhagat is one of the many successful novelists in Indian fiction today. Bhagat has written five novels, namely, *Five Point Someone* (2004), *One Night @ the*

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:8 August 2016

Dr. K. Thayalamoorthy and M. Ratchagar

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Call Center (2005), *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008), *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009), *Revolution 2020* (2011), *What Young India wants* (2012), *Half Girlfriend* (2014) and *Making India Awesome* (2015).

An **autobiographical novel** is a form of novel using auto fiction techniques, or the merging of autobiographical and fiction elements. The literary technique is distinguished from an autobiography or memoir by the stipulation of something being fiction. Because an autobiographical novel is partially fiction, the author does not ask the reader to expect the text to fulfill the "autobiographical pact" - names and locations are often changed and events are recreated to make them more dramatic but the story still bears a close resemblance to that of the author's life. While the events of the author's life are recounted, there is no pretense of exact truth. Events may be exaggerated or altered for artistic or thematic purposes.

Many novels about intense, private experiences such as war, family conflict or sex, are written as autobiographical novels. Some works openly refer to themselves as 'nonfiction novels.' The definition of such works remains vague. The term was first widely used in reference to the non-autobiographical *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote but has since become associated with a range of works drawing openly from autobiography. The emphasis is on the creation of a work that is essentially true, often in the context of an investigation into values or some other aspect of reality. The books *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig and *The Tao of Muhammad Ali* by Davis Miller open with statements admitting to some fictionalizing of events, but state they are true 'in essence.'

Keywords: autobiographical novels, semi-autobiographical novels, non-fiction novels, auto fiction techniques, Chetan Bhagat, college campus life, *Five Point Someone*

Autobiographical Novel

The term *autobiographical novel* is difficult to define. Novels that portray settings and situations with which the author is familiar are not necessarily autobiographical. To be considered an autobiographical novel by most standards, there must be a protagonist modelled after the author and a central plotline that mirrors events in his or her life. Novels that do not fully meet these requirements are further distanced from true events and are sometimes called semi-autobiographical novels. Many novels about intense, private

experiences such as war, family conflict or sex, are written as autobiographical novels. Some works openly refer to themselves as 'nonfiction novels.' The definition of such works remains vague. The term was first widely used in reference to the non-autobiographical *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote but has since become associated with a range of works drawing openly from autobiography. The emphasis is on the creation of a work that is essentially true, often in the context of an investigation into values or some other aspect of reality. The books *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert M. Pirsig and *The Tao of Muhammad Ali* by Davis Miller open with statements admitting to some fictionalizing of events, but state they are true 'in essence.'

Chetan Bhagat in the Contemporary Scene

Bhagat is regarded as the campus novelist who heralded the rebirth of the campus novels in the context of Indian writing in English.

Bhagat himself is an IIT product and all his firsthand experiences are narrated in the novel. Along with the narrative, Bhagat incidentally discusses the issue plaguing our Indian educational system, especially in the IITs. Students are not encouraged to be creative or innovative and they are herded into the academic pound with some self-styled rules and regulations. Bhagat throws light on the clash between tradition and modernity which is an important aspect signifying dichotomies at various socio-cultural levels, such as the division between the teacher and student, the young and the old, and of child and parent.

Writer and Autobiography or Autobiographical Novel

The writer of an autobiography or autobiographical novel obviously feels that there is something significant in his life which he would like to share with his readers. It is interesting to note that the author's attitude is revealed even in the choice of names for the central characters. The autobiographical element is found in the novel *Five Point Someone*, which is written in the first person narrative.

The authors may be trying to achieve some kind of aesthetic distance from them and from the events of their lives. But the names chosen for the central characters clearly point to the fact that they have created a persona in each case, which probably represents the quality with which each of them identifies or wishes to identify.

“With the pace of an autobiographical account, the characters are simple people with whom one can identify with, almost instantaneously. Needless to say this pocket friendly to me is a lucid and clear account of a young wordsmith who succeeded in making this book a must read for the fun of it” says Sinha, R.C. P (The Indian Autobiographies in English 3). *Five Point Someone* is semi-autobiographical about Chetan Bhagat’s days at IIT Delhi. As he says, “it is not about how to gain admission at this prestigious institution, nor does it tell you what to do once you are in, but what not to do there” (3 Idiots retains the soul of Five Point Someone, Kingfisher). Chetan’s sense of humour comes through in his conversation and as the story moves fast, the language is typical of collegiate lingo in the Indian Capital or in this case, perhaps it is how IIT-ians speak.

Five Point Someone – Thinking Right

Bhagat’s novel *Five Point Someone* is not a book that teaches how to get into IIT. In fact, it describes how things happen if we don’t think straight: “You can’t screw the system too much, it comes back to screw you – the quiz is an example”. (FPS 23) He presents his novel with his own life experience with some fictional and real elements. Moreover, a good autobiography is neither wholly objective nor wholly subjective. Professor Cherian advises the students to “respect the grading system. You get bad grades, and I assure you – you get no job, no school and no future. If you do well, the world is your oyster. So, don’t slip, not even once, or there will be no oyster, just slush”. (FPS 11) India’s fate is in the hands of the young generation. For this to happen, one should get his own place in the society.

Here is what the youth want – better colleges, better jobs, and better role models, compared to the talent pool. The number of good college seats is very limited. Bhagat says that only one out of 700 applicants now get into the Indian Institute of Management he attended in Ahmedabad, compared with one in 200 when he applied in 1995. The experience he has undergone and his undergraduate studies at the Indian Institute of Technology in New Delhi are the inspiration for the novel *Five Point Someone*. The sub-title “*What not to do at IIT*” is a reference to the struggle of his three main characters that have their low grades. The incidents in the novel cannot apparently be tagged fictional.

Hari and the Author

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The experience of Hari, the narrator of the novel, resembles the author's own life experience at IIT. Though the writer speaks through him he never reveals anything about his family background, his ambition, and the reason for so many things happening with him. In one of the chapters, through Ryan, the reader comes to know a few things about him: a good student during his school career, he got through IIT and his father is a colonel. He has a weak point that whenever he faces, any viva, he can't utter a single word though he knows the answer very well. He recounts his embarrassment: "Sir.... I....Sir, I said, inexorably trembling toward total paralysis. I mean, I totally knew the answer but what if it was wrong? I tried articulating, but the thoughts did not cash into words". (FPS 56) This tendency can conveniently be generalized in the Indian context and the majority of Indian Students coming out of the glorious portals of educational institutions are found to be lacking in communication and interpersonal skills.

The author has given a hint in the fourteenth chapter of *Five Point Someone* that this viva-voce problem occurs because some horrific incident that might have happened in his past. But, he doesn't reveal the facts. Bhagat's father was an army officer, very strict, who never allowed his sons to watch television. This is reflected in his novels. Bhagat had lived in the Boarding School since he was six years old. So, his interest fell on sports, music, and he also learnt yoga and started to write from that age. Since his childhood, he has shared a tremendous interest in contributing articles and features to various newspaper publications of the city. A passionate writer, he always knew he would be getting into writing. During his stay at the IIT hostel, he was the Editor of the hostel magazine. Like Bhagat, Hari, the narrator of the novel, also has interest in sports and tries to avoid mugging. "My last two years in school were living hell, and unless you captained the basketball team or played the electric guitar since age six, probably yours were too". (FPS 2)

Delhi Environment

Bhagat grew up in Delhi in "an uncertain home environment where my parents used to fight a lot". "My brother and I used to make up movie stories. I think that's where this all springs from," Bhagat says (Listen to your heart, Times of India). Television plays a major role in day-to-day life. But for Bhagat, the idea to become a writer might have emerged because of his father's restrictions at home. He started to read about the world, his country and its problems. Through Hari, Alok and Ryan, Bhagat made the younger generation think

about what they should do and what they should not do. He himself says that since his childhood, he has felt it is hard to achieve anything in India. These three characters cannot be confined to IIT campus, Delhi, alone. They may be taken as representatives of the second generation in India now. Chetan presents a picture that deals with the familiar with which he had firsthand knowledge and proceeds to generalize the context where young people of his type in India as well as elsewhere now share certain common thoughts and aspirations. So, Bhagat moves his art of fictionalizing the hard facts that he learnt during his stay on the IIT campus, Delhi.

Slice of Campus Life

The novel **Five Point Someone** narrates a slice of campus life across IITs in India. Bhagat looks at campus life from all possible angles. Academics, romance, youthful mischiefs and misadventures fill the pages of the novel. The novelist takes a handful of IIT-ians and through them he paints campus life in Delhi. This portrayal can lend itself to that of a larger canvas when one visualizes similar campus life across the world. The particular, that is, what takes place on the IIT Delhi premises, becomes the general. The narrative thus enables the reader to transcend the eco-cultural limits and move towards global contextualization of campus life. Chetan Bhagat very efficiently portrays his life story through this novel *Five Point Someone*.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **16:8 August 2016**

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