



**Popular Fiction as Social Commentary: A Cultural Study Approach with
Special Reference to Five Point Someone by Chetan Bhagat**

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Abstract

Popular fiction has long occupied an ambiguous space within literary scholarship—simultaneously dismissed as mere entertainment and celebrated as a powerful vehicle for cultural expression and social critique. This paper examines the intersections of popular fiction and social commentary through a cultural studies framework, with particular reference to Chetan Bhagat's debut novel *Five Point Someone: What Not to Do at IIT* (2004). Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this study interrogates how Bhagat's novel functions not merely as a campus narrative but as a sophisticated cultural text that decodes the ideological apparatus of the Indian education system, hegemonic class aspirations, neoliberal pressures on youth identity, and the contested terrain of postcolonial modernity. The paper explores how mass-market fiction, often undervalued in academic discourse, can serve as a democratic platform through which subaltern anxieties and collective social frustrations are articulated and negotiated. Through close textual analysis and intertextual engagement with Indian cultural history, the paper argues that *Five Point Someone* is a significant site where popular culture and social criticism converge, offering readers—particularly Indian middle-class youth—both a mirror of their lived realities and an implicit critique of the systems that govern those realities. The study also addresses questions of genre, readership, commodification of literature, and the politics of literary gatekeeping in the Indian publishing landscape.



Keywords: Popular fiction, social commentary, cultural studies, Five Point Someone, Chetan Bhagat, Indian literature, education system, postcolonial identity, neoliberalism, middle class

1. Introduction: Popular Fiction and the Question of Cultural Value

The relationship between popular fiction and social commentary is one of the most contested and productive debates in contemporary literary and cultural studies. For decades, the academy has maintained an often uneasy hierarchy between 'literary' or 'serious' fiction and 'popular' or 'mass-market' fiction, a binary that has been rigorously questioned by cultural theorists and postcolonial scholars alike. This hierarchical division is not merely aesthetic; it is deeply ideological, reflecting structures of cultural capital, class, and institutional power that determine which texts are deemed worthy of scholarly attention and which are consigned to the margins of critical discourse (Bourdieu, 1984).

In the Indian context, this debate has acquired a distinctive urgency since the early 2000s, when a new wave of popular Anglophone fiction—spearheaded by writers such as Chetan Bhagat, Amish Tripathi, and Durjoy Datta—dramatically altered the landscape of Indian publishing. Among these, Chetan Bhagat occupies a singular position. His debut novel, *Five Point Someone: What Not to Do at IIT* (2004), became not merely a bestseller but a cultural phenomenon, selling over three million copies in India alone and spawning a critically acclaimed Bollywood adaptation, *3 Idiots* (2009), directed by Rajkumar Hirani. The novel's unprecedented commercial success challenged longstanding assumptions about readership, literary value, and the social function of fiction in contemporary India (Mehrotra, 2014).

This paper argues that *Five Point Someone* is far more than a comic campus novel. It is a richly layered cultural text that performs sustained and sophisticated social commentary on the Indian education system, middle-class aspirations, youth alienation, gender dynamics, and the contradictions of postcolonial modernity. By reading the novel through a cultural studies lens—drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Hall (1980), Williams (1977), Bourdieu (1984), Bhabha (1994), and Spivak



(1988)—this study demonstrates how popular fiction can function as a democratic and accessible vehicle for the articulation of social critique, often more effectively than its 'literary' counterparts because of its mass readership and its embeddedness in the lived cultures of everyday life.

The paper proceeds as follows: after a review of relevant theoretical frameworks (Section 2), it provides contextual background on the Indian popular fiction landscape and Bhagat's emergence as a cultural figure (Section 3). Sections 4 through 8 offer detailed analyses of the novel's social commentary across several thematic domains: the education system and meritocracy, class and aspiration, gender and patriarchy, postcolonial identity, and neoliberal subjectivity. Section 9 examines the politics of reception and the commodification of popular fiction before the conclusion synthesizes the study's findings.

2. Theoretical Frameworks: Cultural Studies, Popular Fiction, and Social Critique

(RASHTRAKAVI MAITHILI SHARAN GUPT)

2.1 Cultural Studies and the Politics of Representation

Cultural studies, as it emerged from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1960s and 1970s, fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between culture, power, and everyday life. Rejecting the Arnoldian tradition that reserved the term 'culture' for the highest achievements of civilization, scholars such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall insisted on understanding culture as 'a whole way of life'—a set of practices, meanings, and values through which people make sense of their social existence (Williams, 1958, p. 325). This democratization of the concept of culture opened the way for serious scholarly engagement with popular and mass culture, including popular fiction.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) is particularly valuable for understanding the social function of popular texts. Hall argued that cultural texts encode dominant ideological meanings, but that audiences are not passive recipients of those meanings—they can negotiate or even resist the preferred readings encoded in texts. In the context of popular fiction, this suggests that a novel like



Five Point Someone both encodes and enables the decoding of dominant social ideologies: it can simultaneously reinforce and subvert the hegemonic values it appears to celebrate.

Raymond Williams's concept of 'structures of feeling' (1977) is equally useful here. Williams argued that literature captures the lived, affective dimensions of social experience—the felt quality of life in a particular time and place—in ways that formal sociological analysis cannot. Popular fiction, precisely because of its mass readership and its embeddedness in everyday culture, is particularly well-positioned to give expression to emerging structures of feeling: the anxieties, aspirations, and discontents that characterize a society in transition. In the India of the early 2000s, marked by the liberalization of the economy, the expansion of the information technology sector, and the rise of a new consumerist middle class, Five Point Someone gave voice to precisely such an emerging structure of feeling.

(RASHTRAKAVI MAITHILI SHARAN GUPT)

2.2 Bourdieu, Cultural Capital, and the Field of Cultural Production

Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and the field of cultural production provide a powerful analytical framework for understanding both the content and the reception of popular fiction (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993). For Bourdieu, the literary field is structured by a fundamental opposition between 'restricted' production—literary fiction aimed at other producers and consecrated by academic and critical institutions—and 'large-scale' production—popular fiction aimed at the mass market. This structural opposition maps onto hierarchies of taste and cultural legitimacy that are themselves rooted in class relations.

Applying Bourdieu's framework to Five Point Someone illuminates several things. First, it helps explain the disdain with which Bhagat's work has been received by sections of the Indian literary establishment, who have dismissed his prose style as 'simple' or 'derivative' (Anjaria, 2012). Second, and more importantly, it reveals how the novel itself thematizes these very hierarchies of cultural capital. The IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) functions in the novel as an institution that promises to convert educational achievement into social and economic capital, but the novel exposes

the ways in which this promise is systematically distorted by a culture of rote learning and examination performance that privileges compliance over creativity.

2.3 Postcolonial Perspectives: Bhabha and Spivak

Postcolonial theory offers a further dimension of analysis. Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry (1994) are relevant to understanding the cultural positioning of characters in the novel, who are caught between the colonial inheritance of the IIT system—itsself modeled on elite British engineering institutions—and the demands of an indigenous cultural identity. The students in *Five Point Someone* perform a kind of mimicry of the ideal IIT student—disciplined, academically superior, oriented toward professional success—while simultaneously subverting this ideal through their resistance, friendship, and unconventional choices.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential intervention on the question of who can speak, and whose voices are heard in the production and reception of cultural texts, is also germane (Spivak, 1988). While *Five Point Someone* gives voice to the experiences of a specific demographic—upper-middle-class urban Indian males—Spivak's framework prompts us to ask whose experiences are absent from the text, and what that absence reveals about the ideological limits of popular fiction as a mode of social commentary. The paper returns to this question in Section 8.

3. Context: Indian Popular Fiction and the Bhagat Phenomenon

The emergence of Chetan Bhagat as a literary and cultural phenomenon must be understood against the backdrop of profound transformations in Indian society and the Indian publishing industry in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The liberalization of the Indian economy, initiated in 1991, had by the early 2000s produced a rapidly expanding urban middle class with rising disposable incomes and a voracious appetite for consumer goods, including books (Fernandes, 2006). At the same time, the IT boom had made English a crucial vehicle of social mobility, producing a large readership for Anglophone fiction that was literate in English but not necessarily steeped in the traditions of metropolitan literary culture.



Into this context came *Five Point Someone*, published by Rupa Publications in 2004. The novel was revolutionary in several respects. First, it was written in a simple, colloquial English that was accessible to readers for whom English was a second or even a third language. Second, it dealt with subject matter—the lives and anxieties of students at the IIT—that was immediately recognizable and resonant for a large segment of the Indian middle class, for whom admission to the IITs represented the pinnacle of educational aspiration. Third, it was priced accessibly, making it available to a much wider readership than the expensive hardcover editions that dominated the Indian literary fiction market (Bhatt, 2015).

Bhagat himself has been explicit about his populist literary ambitions. In numerous interviews, he has described his goal as writing books that can be bought at railway stations and read on train journeys—books that speak to ordinary Indians rather than to a metropolitan cultural elite. This democratic literary vision has earned him both mass popularity and critical disdain, a paradox that is itself deeply revealing of the class politics of cultural production in India (Mukherjee, 2011).

Critically, *Five Point Someone* was not simply a commercial success; it was a cultural catalyst. The novel sparked a national conversation about the IIT system, the culture of competitive examination, and the treatment of students who fail to perform at the highest levels. It also inaugurated a new genre of Indian campus fiction that has since produced numerous successors, from Bhagat's own subsequent novels to a host of imitators. Its adaptation into the hugely successful film *3 Idiots* (2009) only amplified its cultural reach and impact (Dissanayake, 2012).

4. The Education System as Site of Social Critique

4.1 Meritocracy and Its Discontents

At the heart of *Five Point Someone* lies a sustained critique of the Indian education system, and in particular of the culture of competitive examination that governs access to elite institutions like the IITs. The novel's central characters—Hari Kumar, Ryan Oberoi, and Alok Gupta—are students at IIT Delhi who find themselves trapped by a system that reduces the entirety of their

educational experience to a single metric: the grade point average (GPA), or in the novel's terminology, the 'five point' scale. The novel's title itself encodes this critique: the characters' 'five point' GPAs—mediocre by IIT standards—mark them as failures in a system that admits of only one form of success.

The ideological critique implicit in this narrative is profound. The Indian education system, particularly at the level of elite institutions like the IITs, presents itself as the ultimate meritocracy—a pure competition in which the most talented and hardworking students rise to the top, regardless of their socioeconomic background. *Five Point Someone* systematically dismantles this meritocratic myth. Through the character of Alok Gupta, whose family's financial precarity forces him into a state of constant academic anxiety, the novel shows how the supposedly neutral measure of academic performance is in fact deeply inflected by class position (Kamdar, 2008).

Moreover, the novel interrogates the content of what is being measured. The education dispensed at IIT in the novel is not a cultivation of genuine intellectual curiosity or creative problem-solving but a relentless drilling in examination technique, a process of cramming and regurgitation that has little to do with actual learning or understanding. Ryan's repeated insistence that the system suppresses creativity and original thinking—and his attempts, however chaotic and destructive, to resist this suppression—voices a critique of rote learning and examination culture that resonates far beyond the IIT context to encompass the Indian education system as a whole (Nambisan, 2010).

4.2 The Panopticon of Academic Surveillance

Michel Foucault's concept of the panopticon—the disciplinary mechanism through which subjects internalize the regulatory gaze of authority and police their own behaviour—is illuminating in this context (Foucault, 1977). The IIT in *Five Point Someone* functions as a kind of academic panopticon. Students are under constant surveillance: their attendance is monitored, their academic performance is continuously assessed, and their standing in the institution is perpetually at risk. The threat of expulsion or rustication—which looms over the protagonists throughout the novel—



functions as a mechanism of discipline that keeps students in a state of constant anxiety and compliance.

The novel's antagonist, Professor Cherian, embodies this disciplinary apparatus. His role in the narrative is not merely that of a personal adversary to the protagonists; he is the human face of a systemic logic of surveillance and control that reduces students to quantifiable units of academic output. His vindictiveness and his abuse of institutional power are presented not as individual pathologies but as symptoms of a deeper institutional culture of authoritarianism and hierarchy. In this sense, the novel's critique of the education system extends beyond pedagogy to encompass the broader structures of power and authority that govern institutional life in India.

5. Class, Aspiration, and the Middle-Class Predicament

Five Point Someone is, among other things, a novel about the aspirations and anxieties of the Indian middle class. The three protagonists represent different positions within this class formation. Ryan Oberoi comes from an affluent upper-middle-class family and possesses the social and cultural capital—including a confident relationship with English, a comfortable material life, and a sense of entitlement—that cushions his academic failures. Hari Kumar occupies a more middling position: his family is respectable but not wealthy, and his academic performance at IIT is a matter of some consequence for his social standing. Alok Gupta's situation is the most precarious: his family's financial difficulties mean that his academic success is not merely a matter of personal ambition but of family survival.

Through these three characters, the novel maps the internal differentiation of the Indian middle class and the different ways in which its members experience the pressures and contradictions of aspiration. The concept of aspiration is central here: the middle class is defined not merely by its current socioeconomic position but by its orientation toward a future of upward mobility, a future that in post-liberalization India is increasingly mediated by credentials, particularly the kind of elite technical and professional credentials that the IITs are meant to dispense (Fernandes, 2006).

The novel's treatment of Alok's family situation is particularly powerful as social commentary.

The subplot involving Alok's disabled father and his family's financial dependence on his future earnings as an IIT graduate dramatizes the enormous weight of social expectation that bears down on young people from lower-middle-class backgrounds who manage to gain entry into elite institutions. This weight is not merely psychological but profoundly material: for Alok, failure at IIT would be a catastrophe not just for himself but for his entire family. The novel's sympathy for Alok's plight is also, implicitly, a critique of a social system that places such crushing burdens on individuals while offering them so few structural supports (Mitra, 2016).

The novel also engages with the phenomenon of what Bourdieu (1984) calls 'social reproduction': the tendency of educational systems to reproduce existing class hierarchies under the guise of meritocratic competition. While the IIT is presented as an institution that is nominally open to talent from all social backgrounds, the novel repeatedly suggests that the social and cultural capital required to thrive there—the confidence, the English-language fluency, the familiarity with Western scientific and technical culture—is unevenly distributed along class lines, giving a systematic advantage to students from more privileged backgrounds.

6. Gender Dynamics and Patriarchal Structures E- ISSN:

Gender is a significant but underexplored dimension of Five Point Someone's social commentary. The novel is set in an overwhelmingly male environment—the IIT—and its three protagonists are all male. Women appear primarily as objects of desire (Neha Cherian, the professor's daughter) or as peripheral figures in the domestic sphere (Alok's mother, the protagonists' female relatives). This representational economy reflects the actual gender composition of the IITs in the early 2000s, where women constituted a tiny minority of the student body, but it also reflects broader patriarchal structures in Indian society.

The character of Neha Cherian is the most fully developed female character in the novel, and she functions in several analytically interesting ways. On one level, the romance between Hari and



Neha follows a conventional Bollywood narrative arc: the rebellious young man wins the heart of the beautiful girl against the opposition of her disapproving father. On another level, however, Neha represents a form of female agency within patriarchal constraints. Her relationship with Hari is conducted in secret, against her father's explicit wishes, and involves a degree of independence and self-determination that is significant given the context.

Nevertheless, from a feminist perspective, the novel's treatment of gender is troublingly conventional. Neha's primary function in the narrative is as a romantic prize and as a catalyst for Hari's personal development. She has no independent plot arc, no professional ambitions, and no engagement with the intellectual or institutional life of the IIT. Her father's authoritarianism is presented as a personal failing rather than as a symptom of wider patriarchal structures, and the resolution of the romantic plot—Neha and Hari's relationship is ultimately validated—does not challenge but rather recuperates conventional heteronormative romance narratives (Krishnaswamy, 2009).

The near-total absence of female students from the IIT world depicted in the novel is itself a form of social commentary, though it may be an unintentional one. The IITs' historical failure to attract and retain female students reflects a broader pattern of gender discrimination in Indian higher education that has been extensively documented (Sedwal & Kamat, 2008). By setting the novel in an overwhelmingly male environment and treating this environment as natural and unremarkable, *Five Point Someone* both reflects and implicitly normalizes the exclusion of women from elite technical education.

7. Postcolonial Identity and the Legacy of Colonial Education

The IIT system in India has a complex postcolonial genealogy. Established in the 1950s under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's development agenda, the IITs were modeled on elite Western—and particularly British—technical institutions and were intended to produce a cadre of technically trained personnel who would drive India's industrialization and modernization. This origin story

encodes a particular vision of modernity: one that is explicitly indebted to Western scientific and technical rationality, and that implicitly positions India's development as a process of catching up with the West (Krishnan, 1997).

Five Point Someone engages with this postcolonial inheritance in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. On one hand, the novel's valorization of technical education and of the IIT as an institution implicitly endorses the developmentalist vision of modernity that the IITs represent. On the other hand, the novel's critique of the IIT's pedagogical culture—its authoritarianism, its suppression of creativity, its reduction of education to examination performance—implicitly questions the Western model of technical rationality that the IIT is meant to embody.

Bhabha's concept of mimicry is particularly relevant here (Bhabha, 1994). The IIT, as an institution, performs a mimicry of elite Western technical education, replicating its structures, its curricula, and its institutional culture while transposing them into a distinctively Indian social context. The students in the novel perform a further mimicry: they are expected to become 'almost but not quite' the ideal Western-educated engineer—disciplined, rational, technically proficient—while remaining recognizably Indian. The protagonists' failure to achieve this ideal is presented not as a personal deficiency but as a symptom of the fundamental incoherence of this mimetic project.

The cultural hybridity that Bhabha theorizes is also visible in the novel's representation of everyday campus life: the mix of Hindi and English in the characters' speech, the juxtaposition of Indian domestic and family pressures with the supposedly impersonal rationality of the academic environment, and the complex negotiation between traditional values and modernizing aspirations that characterizes the characters' personal lives. This hybridity is not presented as a problem to be resolved but as the lived reality of postcolonial subjects navigating modernity on multiple fronts simultaneously (Gopal, 2009).

8. Neoliberal Subjectivity, Youth Identity, and Alienation



Five Point Someone is, in significant part, a novel about the formation of neoliberal subjectivity among Indian youth in the early 2000s. The concept of neoliberal subjectivity refers to the mode of selfhood that is produced and valorized by neoliberal economic and social policy: the self as entrepreneur, as human capital, as a site of continuous self-investment and self-optimization oriented toward market success (Harvey, 2005). The IIT, in the novel, functions as a machine for the production of this kind of subjectivity: its students are trained—or rather, pressured—to understand themselves as human capital whose value is determined by their GPA and their subsequent earning power.

The novel's protagonists resist this neoliberal self-formation in various ways. Ryan's unconventional intellectual interests—his fascination with practical engineering problems rather than examination performance—represent a refusal of the reduction of intellectual life to market value. His invention of the mug sniffer in the novel (though ultimately weaponized against its creators) is a symbol of the creative, non-instrumental intelligence that the IIT system suppresses. Hari's gradual development from a passive conformist to someone capable of making ethically and personally meaningful choices represents a more conventional Bildungsroman narrative of individual self-formation that nevertheless implicitly critiques the impersonal logic of the examination machine.

The theme of alienation runs throughout the novel. In the Marxist tradition, alienation refers to the estrangement of workers from the products of their labour, from their own creative capacities, and from each other (Marx, 1844/1988). The students in Five Point Someone experience a form of educational alienation: their intellectual labour—the countless hours spent studying—produces outcomes (grades, degrees) that are entirely controlled by the institution and whose value is entirely determined by the market. They have little sense of ownership over their own learning, little intrinsic motivation for their studies, and little connection between the content of their education and their actual interests and aspirations.



The friendship between the three protagonists—the novel's emotional and moral centre—can be read as a response to this alienation. In a social environment that is fundamentally competitive and individualistic, the solidarity of their friendship represents an alternative set of values: loyalty, mutual support, and a shared resistance to the dehumanizing logic of the institution. This valorization of friendship and solidarity as a counter-hegemonic practice has deep resonances in Indian cultural and philosophical traditions, even as it also draws on familiar tropes of Western coming-of-age fiction (Tharu & Niranjana, 1994).

It is important to acknowledge the representational limitations of the novel in this context. The experience of neoliberal subjectivity and educational alienation depicted in *Five Point Someone* is a specifically gendered, classed, and caste-located experience. The protagonists are all upper-caste or at least socially dominant-caste Hindu males from urban backgrounds whose social position gives them a degree of cultural familiarity with the IIT environment that is not available to students from lower-caste or rural backgrounds. The novel's failure to engage with caste as a structural determinant of educational experience is a significant omission that limits the scope of its social commentary, a point that returns us to Spivak's question of whose voices are heard and whose are silenced in popular cultural texts (Spivak, 1988).

9. The Politics of Reception: Popular Fiction, Cultural Gatekeeping, and Democratic Literature

The reception of *Five Point Someone* in India exemplifies the cultural politics of popular fiction in a postcolonial context. The novel was embraced by millions of readers—particularly young, urban, English-reading Indians—with an enthusiasm that the Indian literary establishment found difficult to comprehend or accommodate. Critical responses ranged from dismissive—focusing on the novel's plain prose style, its narrative conventionality, and its apparent simplicity—to celebratory accounts of its democratic accessibility and its cultural resonance (Anjaria, 2012).

The dismissive critical response to *Five Point Someone* is itself a form of cultural gatekeeping that reproduces the very class dynamics that the novel critiques. When critics accuse the novel of

being 'too simple' or 'not literary enough,' they are deploying criteria of literary value—stylistic sophistication, formal complexity, intertextual density—that are themselves products of a specific cultural training available primarily to those with high levels of cultural capital. The implicit assumption is that the only literature worth taking seriously is literature that addresses readers who already possess this cultural capital: that is, a relatively small educated elite. Literature that speaks to a mass readership in accessible terms is, by definition, not serious literature (Bourdieu, 1984).

This critical stance is particularly problematic in a postcolonial context, where the gatekeepers of literary value are often applying criteria derived from metropolitan Western literary traditions to texts that operate in very different cultural contexts and address very different readerships. Bhagat's deliberate choice of a simple, colloquial prose style can be read not as a failure of literary craft but as a political decision: a conscious rejection of the elitist cultural codes that define 'literary' fiction in favour of a mode of address that is genuinely accessible to a mass readership (Mukherjee, 2011).

The sociologist John Fiske's concept of 'popular productivity'—the capacity of popular cultural texts to generate meanings and pleasures that exceed the intentions of their producers—is useful here (Fiske, 1989). The phenomenal popular success of *Five Point Someone*, and in particular the passionate identification of millions of young Indian readers with its characters and their experiences, suggests that the novel tapped into a reservoir of social experience and feeling that was not being addressed by more 'literary' modes of fiction. This popular productivity is itself a form of cultural value that the literary establishment's criteria are ill-equipped to recognize or assess.

The conversion of *Five Point Someone* into the Bollywood film *3 Idiots* (2009) raises additional questions about the relationship between popular fiction and other popular cultural forms. The film, which substantially altered the novel's plot and deepened its social critique of the education system, reached audiences far beyond those who had read the book, and its cultural impact—which included public statements from senior politicians and educators about the need for educational reform—demonstrated the capacity of popular cultural texts to intervene in public discourse in ways



that are not available to more exclusively 'literary' works. This transmedia dimension of the novel's cultural life is an important part of its function as social commentary (Dissanayake, 2012).

10. Five Point Someone in the Context of Indian Literary Tradition

To fully appreciate Five Point Someone as a work of social commentary, it is necessary to situate it within the broader context of Indian literary tradition, both in English and in vernacular languages. Indian literature has a long tradition of social engagement and critique, from the reformist fiction of the nineteenth century—figures like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore—through the progressive writers' movement of the 1930s and 1940s, to the postcolonial literature that emerged after independence. This tradition has consistently used literary forms to interrogate social hierarchies, challenge orthodoxies, and give voice to marginalized experiences (Mukherjee, 2000).

Bhagat's novel both inherits and departs from this tradition. It inherits the tradition's commitment to social engagement and its democratic orientation—its address to a broad popular readership rather than an elite audience. It departs from it in its comic tone, its lack of formal experimentation, and its relatively uncomplicated narrative structure. In this sense, Five Point Someone represents a new kind of socially engaged popular fiction: one that achieves its critical effects not through formal complexity or aesthetic difficulty but through the immediacy and accessibility of its social diagnosis.

Comparisons with other Indian campus novels are instructive. The genre of campus fiction has a significant history in Hindi and other vernacular literatures, and Bhagat's novel can be read as bringing this tradition into the Anglophone domain while also adapting it to the specific conditions of the post-liberalization urban middle class. At the same time, the novel's engagement with the IIT—an institution with a specific cultural and social significance in contemporary India—gives it a topicality and cultural specificity that distinguishes it from more generic campus fiction (Kapur, 2009).



11. Conclusion: Popular Fiction as Democratic Social Critique

This paper has argued that *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat is a significant work of popular fiction that functions as effective and multifaceted social commentary. Through a cultural studies framework that draws on the theoretical resources of Hall, Williams, Bourdieu, Bhabha, and Spivak, the paper has demonstrated how the novel encodes and enables critique across a range of social domains: the ideology of meritocracy and the contradictions of the Indian education system; the class dynamics and aspirational anxieties of the Indian middle class; the patriarchal structures that shape gender relations in elite institutional spaces; the postcolonial legacies that inflect Indian modernity; and the neoliberal pressures on youth identity and subjectivity.

The paper has also argued that the dismissal of *Five Point Someone* by sections of the literary establishment reflects the class politics of cultural gatekeeping rather than a neutral or objective assessment of the novel's literary or social value. The novel's accessibility—its plain prose style, its familiar narrative conventions, its direct address to a mass readership—is not a deficit but a strength: it is precisely this accessibility that enables the novel to function as a democratic platform for social commentary, reaching audiences and giving voice to experiences that more 'literary' modes of fiction cannot.

At the same time, the paper has been attentive to the limits of the novel's social critique. Its failure to engage with caste as a structural determinant of educational experience, its marginalization of female characters and perspectives, and its focus on a relatively privileged demographic within the Indian middle class all represent significant limitations on its capacity to function as comprehensive social commentary. These limitations remind us that popular fiction, like all cultural forms, is embedded in specific social positions and speaks from specific subject positions: it can illuminate certain aspects of social reality while remaining blind to others.

These limitations notwithstanding, *Five Point Someone* represents a significant intervention in Indian cultural and social life, one whose effects—including the national conversation it sparked



about educational reform—demonstrate the capacity of popular fiction to function as more than mere entertainment. In a cultural moment defined by the simultaneous expansion of literacy and the fragmentation of the public sphere, popular fiction may be one of the few cultural forms with the reach and accessibility to function as a genuinely democratic mode of social commentary. The cultural study of popular fiction—including works like *Five Point Someone* that are often dismissed by the literary establishment—is therefore not merely an academic exercise but a contribution to the broader project of understanding and critically engaging with the culture of our time.

Future research might productively extend this analysis by examining the reception of *Five Point Someone* among different readership demographics, including students from non-IIT backgrounds, female readers, and readers from lower-caste and rural backgrounds. Comparative studies with other works of Indian campus fiction, or with popular fiction that addresses similar social themes in other postcolonial contexts, would also be valuable in situating *Five Point Someone* within a broader global conversation about the social functions of popular literature.

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