

A study of Realism – Social and Psychological – in Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone*

Krishnarjun Polakulath, BA student, Department of English and Language, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi campus, India.

Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the concept of realism, both individual and social, in the popular novel written by Chetan Bhagat, *Five Point Someone*. In a broader sense, realism is the true representation of events and facts without the added frills of drama and exaggerations. While psychological realism is the faithful narration of a character and the factors that influence their decisions, social realism means the depiction of the society in all its true colours – good and bad. In *Five Point Someone*, Chetan Bhagat catches the young generation in their natural setting, vulnerable, friendly, confused, ambitious and daring. And, through the novel, he gives a strong message regarding the perils of the existing educational system in the country. He also touches upon some of the major issues faced by the youth in country including unemployment, poverty and social injustice. This paper is an honest attempt to understand the literary technique of realism that takes this novel to a new realm of reading.

Keywords: Realism, psychological realism, social realism, social injustice, education system

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat could easily be called a writer for the new generation as he always chooses youngsters as his main characters and depict their world as true as possible. *Five Point Someone*, his first novel, centers around three IIT students while the next, *One Night @ the Call Center*, tells the story of youngsters' career choices through six call centre employees. Whether it be *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, *2 States*, *Revolution 2020*, *Half Girlfriend* or *One Indian Girl*, his novels echo the voice of this age, and have touched an emotional chord with the new generation, especially the millennials. The paper focuses around the realistic representation of varied themes in the novel *Five Point Someone*.

Realism has been perceived by writers in different ways.

Literary realism is a literary movement that represents reality by portraying mundane, everyday experiences as they are in real life. It depicts familiar people, places, and stories, primarily about the middle and lower classes of society. Literary realism seeks to tell a story as truthfully as possible instead of dramatizing or romanticizing it. (Literary Realism-Google)

While social realism deals with the lives and living conditions of the people around us, psychological realism looks at the 'what and why' of their actions and present them as accurately as possible.

Realism as a genre looks at real life people and situations, catching even the dialect of people, their customs and behavioural patterns.

The Oxford Dictionary points out that realism means something not exactly real, rather it means representing things in a life-like manner. So, 'Realistic Fiction' can be understood as a fictitious book or a story narrated on the basis of real-life situations and real-life characters which describes the characters and situations in a fictitious manner or as it should be or as it could be in a realistic manner.

American writer William Long puts it right when he defines the concept of realistic fiction as:



Mirroring life as people experience it, realistic fiction deals with many complex problems and situations from understanding sexual orientation to dealing with family problems. At its core, a good realistic novel is about people, their problems, and their challenges. The characters in the novel should be believable and their language and actions should be appropriate for setting off the story and reflective of the culture and social class in which they live. (William Long, 25)

The novel starts with a disclaimer –

This is not a book to teach you how to get into IIT or even how to live in college. In fact, it describes how screwed up things can get if you don't think straight. (1)

It is a story about three friends in IIT who try to cope with the system as it poses one challenge after the other. Alok, Hari and Ryan belong to three different social statuses, each dealing with their own problems. The book is unraveled through the perspective of Hari who hails from a middle-class family. While Alok's

family is one from the lower strata of society, Ryan has a rich family background and likes to have fun in the campus unlike the others.

The novel takes readers through the difficult life in IIT and the issues that students have to face right from the first day. The temperament of Ryan and Alok are totally different which often leads to conflicts. Still, their friendship grows stronger as the days go by. Soon, they find themselves at the lowest rung of the class as far as their academic scores are concerned. The turning point of the story is the arrival of Neha into the picture as Hari, narrator of the story, falls for her. Neha's father, Prof Cherian, who heads the Mechanical Engineering department, considers the three friends far below his realm because of their low grades (5 point GPA). The plot has interesting turns as the trio meets with obstacles and challenges of all kinds to complete the course.

Though Hari is the narrator of the tale, Ryan is the hero as he holds the story together and moves it forward through a series of hits and misses, highlighting his belief that education system should be flexible enough to accommodate the wide spectrum of students and not vice versa. He is inspiration for his friends though his ideas often land them in trouble. Ryan adds masala to this campus story that offers a pan-India perspective on the evils prevalent in the society.

The novel was an instant success and since its publishing in 2004 it has sold more than a million copies across the world till now. And its popularity went up when popular Bollywood movie 3 Idiots and Tamil film Nanban were made based on this book. Moreover, Five Point Someone is now part of the curriculum of Delhi University.

So, what makes the book a perfect example of realism in the popular fiction of the new age? For once, the novel does not give a glorified picture of the much-lauded Indian Institute of Technology which is considered the steppingstone to success in life by many. Chetan Bhagat does not mince words when he writes about the darker side of the system in one of the country's prestigious institutes –discrimination against students, unrealistic goals, pressure to perform, mental trauma inflicted by the faculty, suicide, and a lot more. As Ryan complains, “What a crazy week; classes, assignments, more classes, assignments, and not to mention the coming attraction quizzes. You call this a life.” (13)

Even when the friends discuss the war on Iraq, they are quick to realize that studies are more important. ‘Man, the majors are eight days away’, reminds Alok. They had set aside time for fun and games, but Alok and Hari tell Ryan that squash, chess and war have taken a heavy toll on their time – “The heaps of the course material was un-doable even if we studied thirty hours a day” is how Hari narrates it.

Unlike many other fiction writers, Chetan Bhagat does not offer instant solutions to the problems faced by students. Instead, he is very practical in his approach and present the evils of the education system of IITs and only hint at the possibilities if the whole process is reversed. How will students benefit from observing more and mugging less? What difference can a sympathetic teacher make to better lives in the campus? What will happen if excellence in life is given more importance than a high-paying job? Answers to these questions are scattered across the book, and the readers easily connect with these situations because they are common for almost all of us. You may not be a student of IIT, but the issues seem so familiar they become our problems too. Competition among students, categorisation of those with low-grades, race to be the teacher’s favourite, parental pressure... it is all there in the novel as vivid as possible. Even the plan of Ryan to make it through IIT and still have fun through the C2D method (Cooperate to Dominate) sounds real to any student in any campus. And when he says, “this place has let me down. This is not exactly the cutting edge of science and technology as they describe themselves, is it,” (107) it instantly connects with youngsters.

So does the portrayal of parental pressure meted out to them. In the novel, Alok is relentlessly burdened by the expectations of his family from the low-income strata of society, and he feels obliged to live his life as per their wishes. Instead of fulfilling his dreams, his aim is to find a job at the earliest to bring some solace to his mother who is the breadwinner of the family.

The most heart wrenching story of pressurizing youngsters to perform beyond their abilities comes from none other than Prof. Cherian who had to suffer the loss of his son Samir because of this constant conflict. Samir never wanted to pursue a course where he had to study science and had his own reasons and dreams, but his father’s expectations edged him towards depression and frustration, resulting in his death by suicide. The suicide of another student on failing to get his project approved by the teacher concerned too brings the concept of realism closer to the novel’s narrative.

Using the psychological realism technique expertly, Chetan Bhagat selects his characters from a wide spectrum of life, and gives equal importance to their perspectives, beliefs and aspirations. How their personalities are developed over the course of years form the crux of the novel. He also ensures that the novel shows how people's minds are almost always divided in two different directions, how they are confused about taking decisions. He does not add any extra colour to their personalities and make them heroes with commendable virtues or role models for their peers.

The characters are presented with all their faults and vices, and Chetan Bhagat does not make any attempt to show what they are not. So, the three friends devise ways to reduce their workload, enjoy life outside the campus and try to steal papers from the professor's cabin and are caught in the act. The confusion in the minds of youngsters while they are at a turning point in their lives is realistically described through the three main characters. They are not happy with the way their skills are tested, and wish to be at their natural best. As Ryan says, "Where is the room for original thought and for creativity? It is not fair."

It is this disillusionment with society and system that Bhagat has tried to present through his novel, and he has succeeded in catching the attention of youngsters who always want to have a place in the global world, and still they do not want to surrender to the system.

Prof Cherian's character is also a realistic portrayal of a man who manages to project himself as a true disciplinarian who cares only about grades. Even though he suffers from a personal loss, he does not let it affect his role as the head of department and obviously has not learnt from his mistake. Through his characterization, Bhagat effectively shows how people remain chained to their beliefs and perspectives even when life shows them some real hard truth about the folly of their convictions.

Five Point Someone gives a vivid portrayal of people, young and old, rich and poor, failed and successful. Chetan Bhagat takes readers on a bumpy ride through their lives, showing them in their true colours. And they are as real as we are.

Chetan Bhagat sums it well when he says, "the youth may not see me as the best author, but they'll say 'he's my author'. They feel a connection, probably because they see I am an ordinary person, a boy next door. They do not feel much of a gap between them as readers, and me as the author.

Conclusion

Five Point Someone is an excellent example of literary realism, both social and psychological, as it mirrors the lives of people as they experience it. As William Long explains, “a good realistic novel is about people, their problems, and their challenges. The characters in the novel should be believable and their language and actions should be appropriate for setting off the story and reflective of the culture and social class in which they live. “And that is exactly what Five Point Someone does. It is a realistic story, not a fairytale!

Reference

Long, William. *English Literature*. AIT.B. Publishers & Distributors, 2004. Print

Bhagat, Chetan. *Five Point Someone*. New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 2004. Print.

Ermarth, Elizabeth. “Realism, Perspective, and the Novel.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1981, pp. 499–520. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1343115. Accessed 8 July 2021

