

Confessional Narrative as An Ethical Strategy in Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone*

Dr. Subhalaxmi Mohanty

Associate Professor, Acharya Institute of Graduate Studies, Bengaluru

doi.org/10.64643/IJIRT13I2-206042-459

Abstract—This research article examines Chetan Bhagat's debut novel, *Five Point Someone: What Not to Do at IIT* (2004), through the lens of narrative ethics and Foucauldian discourse analysis. While often categorized merely as popular “campus fiction” (Ruprah 408), the novel employs a sophisticated narrative strategy of secular confession. By positioning the protagonist, Hari Kumar, as a confessing subject who meticulously chronicles his academic failures, moral transgressions, and emotional vulnerabilities, Bhagat constructs a “counter-conduct” against the disciplinary power of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) system (Foucault, *Discipline* 195). This paper argues that the discourse of confession in the text functions not merely as a comedic device but as an ethical strategy that dismantles the hegemony of academic perfectionism (Gupta 53). Through the “five-point” perspective, the narrative validates the marginalized ethics of friendship, mediocrity and human fallibility over the institutional demands for efficiency and rank (Mun 1). Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories of confession and power as well as contemporary critiques of Indian English fiction (Sreeramulu 2), this study illuminates how Bhagat's narrative voice reclaims agency for the “underachiever” in a hyper-competitive postcolonial society.

Index Terms—Confessional discourse, narrative ethics, campus novel, Indian English Literature, disciplinary power.

Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (2004) is widely credited with inaugurating a new wave of commercial Indian English fiction, specifically the genre of the “campus novel” (Ruprah 408). However, beneath its colloquial register and populist appeal lies a distinct narrative framework: the retrospective confession. The novel does not present itself as a heroic journey or a *Bildungsroman* in the traditional sense, but rather as a cautionary tale, explicitly framed by its subtitle: *What Not to Do at IIT* (Bhagat 1). This paratextual framing immediately establishes a pedagogical and ethical

relationship between the narrator and the reader. The narrator, Hari Kumar, speaks from a position of acknowledged failure, offering his story as a testimony of transgression (Gupta 55). In the context of narrative theory, this mode of storytelling aligns with what Michel Foucault describes as the “discourse of truth” produced through confession, where the subject constructs their identity by verbalizing their hidden faults (Foucault, *History* 61).

The ethical dimension of this narrative strategy is profound. In a society obsessed with the “topper” narrative—where academic success is synonymous with moral worth—Hari's confession of being a “five-point someone” (a mediocre student) acts as a radical disruption (Mun 2). Scholars have noted that Bhagat's protagonists often grapple with the “anxieties and insecurities of the rising Indian middle class” (Ruprah 408), and Hari is the archetype of this anxiety. By choosing to narrate the story of failure rather than success, Bhagat employs confession as an ethical narrative strategy to humanize the statistical “residue” of the elite education system (Sreeramulu 1). This article explores how the confessional voice in *Five Point Someone* operates as a mechanism of resistance, transforming the shame of academic underperformance into a validated ethical stance that prioritizes human connection over institutional ratification (IJARSCT 335).

The narrative structure of the novel relies heavily on the intimacy established between the narrator and the reader. As critiques have pointed out, the “first-person narrative” allows readers to view the rigid IIT system through the eyes of the marginalized, creating a “universal shape” of shared struggle. The confession here is not directed toward a priest for absolution, nor a judge for punishment, but toward a peer group for validation. This horizontal confession shifts the ethical locus from vertical authority such as professors,

parents, grades to horizontal solidarity like friendship, effectively rewriting the moral code of the campus (Gupta 54).

To understand the weight of Hari's confession, one must first establish the power structure he confesses against. The IIT campus in the novel functions as a classic Foucauldian disciplinary institution (Foucault, *Discipline* 200). In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes the Panopticon as a structure where subjects are constantly visible and internalized surveillance forces them to self-regulate (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). In *Five Point Someone*, the Grade Point Average (GPA) system functions as this Panopticon (Mun 2). The students are reduced to numbers—"five pointers"—and their moral worth is calibrated by their proximity to the coveted "ten points" status (Bhagat 35). As noted in recent scholarship, the "education system of the present Indian society which is portrayed in the novel is very discouraging," acting as a rigid mechanism that suppresses creativity in favour of compliance (IOSR Journal 2).

The faculty, led by Professor Cherian, embody the agents of this disciplinary power. Cherian is not merely a teacher but a gatekeeper of the "sovereign" power of the institution. His dominance is absolute, extending even into the private lives of the students and his own family (Gupta 18013). The pressure he exerts is what Foucault would term "bio-power"—the management of life itself (Foucault, *History* 140). This is tragically illustrated in the subplot of Samir, Cherian's son, whose suicide is a direct result of his inability to conform to the biological and intellectual template demanded by his father (Bhagat 210). As Gupta notes, "Professor Cherian's son too could not carry the Herculean task of securing a seat in an IIT," leading to a "murder, not a suicide" by the system (Gupta 56).

In this environment, "truth" is usually produced through examination papers—a form of involuntary confession where students must prove their adherence to the curriculum (Sreeramulu 2). However, Hari, Ryan and Alok fail this form of truth-production; their GPAs mark them as deviants (Mun 3). By writing a novel instead of an exam paper, Hari reclaims the "technology of the self". Foucault argues that confession "was secularised in the 18th and 19th centuries," shifting from a religious act to a way of constituting the self in discourse (Foucault, *History* 60). Hari's narrative is a voluntary confession that

counters the involuntary "confession" of his transcript (IJARSCT 336). By detailing his cheating, his lethargy, and his romantic indiscretions, he constructs a "true" self that the GPA system cannot capture (Bhagat 12).

Hari Kumar is an unreliable yet deeply ethical narrator. His unreliability stems not from deceit but from his admitted lack of competence; he is not the hero of his own story, a role often ceded to the charismatic Ryan Oberoi. However, Hari is the *ethical* centre because he is the one bearing witness (Ruprah 410). The discourse of confession requires a "confessing animal" who is willing to expose their own interiority (Foucault, *History* 59). Hari's narrative voice is laced with self-deprecation, a rhetorical device that disarms the reader's judgment (Mun 2). When he describes the "plan to steal question papers," he does not frame it as a master heist but as a desperate, clumsy act of survival by students who "dare not screw the system" but feel they have no choice (IOSR Journal 2).

The act of confessing the heist is pivotal. In a standard moral framework, stealing exam papers is a clear ethical violation (Gupta 18014). However, the narrative strategy reframes this transgression. By detailing the *motives*—Alok's starving family, the crushing weight of the curriculum, the sheer impossibility of the workload—Hari's confession recontextualizes the crime as a critique of the victimizer, the Institute (Bhagat 150). The confession reveals that the students are not criminals but refugees of a pedagogical war (Sreeramulu 2). As Sreeramulu argues, the novel "exemplifies teachers support in bringing students from wrong way to right path," but this "right path" is only found after the system itself is exposed as defective through the boys' transgressions (Sreeramulu 2).

Furthermore, the confessional mode allows for the inclusion of the "body" in the narrative. Foucault emphasizes the relationship between political power and the body (Foucault, *Discipline* 25). In the IIT system, the student body is a vessel for information retention (Mun 3). Hari's confession, however, re-inscribes the body as a site of pleasure, pain, and fear (IOSR Journal 31). He details the physical sensation of fear during the ragging, the taste of the terrible mess food, and the sexual awakening with Neha (Bhagat 45). The description of mess food—"noodle in superglue," "French fries... like coal"—is not just

comic relief; it is a somatic confession of the neglect students suffer (IOSR 1). By focusing on these bodily realities, the narrative resists the disembodied abstraction of the “intellectual elite” (Ruprah 411).

The core of Hari’s confession is the affirmation of friendship as a higher ethical law than academic integrity. “The Five Point Someone” identity is a collective one (IJARST 337). The narrative strategy constantly shifts from the singular “I” to the plural “W” (Bhagat 5). The confession of their shared failures binds Hari, Ryan and Alok together in a pact of solidarity that the institution cannot break (Gupta 55). This aligns with narrative ethics, which posits that stories teach us how to be human in relation to others. The trio’s refusal to abandon Alok, even when his “wailing” becomes a burden, or Ryan’s insistence on “cooperative learning” over competitive mugging, represents an alternative ethical system (Mun 4).

Ryan Oberoi serves as the high priest of this counter-ethic. While Hari is the confessor, Ryan is the ideologue (Sreeramulu 1). Ryan critiques the “passive cramming and bookish knowledge,” advocating for innovation and “independent thinking” (Mun 1). However, Ryan cannot narrate the book because he is too heroic, too detached (Bhagat 18). He needs Hari, the “Everyman” (IJARST 336), to humanize his rebellion. Hari’s confession serves to ground Ryan’s lofty ideals in the messy reality of compromises (Gupta 18012). When they steal the papers, it is Ryan’s idea, but it is Hari’s terror and guilt that make the scene ethically resonant for the reader (Bhagat 160).

The “Coke bottle” ragging scene in the opening chapters sets the stage for this dynamic. Ryan refuses to confess or submit to the seniors’ power, choosing physical punishment over degradation (Bhagat 10). Hari, however, watches and records. His narrative captures the trauma and the eventual bonding that arises from this shared victimization (Mun 3). The “confession” here is one of witnessing the cruelty of tradition. As noted by researchers, “ragging creates a great psychological effect on the minds of students,” and Bhagat uses this scene to establish the boys as victims who are morally justified in their later rebellion (Mun 3). The ethical narrative strategy here is to garner sympathy for the “criminal” before the crime is even committed (Ruprah 412).

The discourse of confession in *Five Point Someone* is not limited to the male protagonists. Neha Cherian, the

professor’s daughter, occupies a unique space in the ethical landscape (Jilile 2). Her relationship with Hari is conducted in the shadows, a series of secrets that must be confessed to the reader but hidden from the father (Bhagat 88). Neha’s character is often critiqued as “typical well cultured Indian girl”, yet her role in the narrative is disruptive. She is the keeper of the darkest secret of the institution: the suicide of her brother, Samir (Gupta 56).

Hari’s narrative incorporates Neha’s confession—her revelation of the suicide note. This is the narrative’s ethical climax (Bhagat 212). The suicide note is a “text within a text,” a supreme confession of absolute despair (Sreeramulu 2). Samir writes, “I thought my son was useless because he didn’t get into IIT... I was a useless father” (Bhagat 213). By embedding this lethal confession within his own survivable one, Hari creates a juxtaposition between the “living failure” and the “dead failure” (IJARST 335). This narrative strategy exposes the lethal stakes of the IIT ethic (Mun 4). Neha’s sexual intimacy with Hari—often discussed in critiques as a “liberal” depiction of premarital intimacy (Jilile 4)—can be read as a somatic confession of life-affirming rebellion against her father’s death-dealing regime (Ruprah 410). She chooses the “five pointers” Hari over the “ten pointers” ideal that killed her brother (Gupta 18015). The ethical strategy here is the dismantling of the Patriarch. Through the confessional voices of Hari and Neha, Cherian is stripped of his authority. He is revealed not as a distinguished professor, but as a grieving, broken father who failed his primary ethical duty: the care of his child (Gupta 56). Foucault suggests that power effectively hides its tracks to remain tolerable; Bhagat’s narrative exposes those tracks, rendering the “sovereign power” of the professor intolerable and demanding a new ethical configuration based on forgiveness and acceptance (Foucault, *History* 86).

Ultimately, the “discourse of confession” in *Five Point Someone* serves to validate the ethics of mediocrity. In a neoliberal economy that fetishizes excellence, Bhagat’s narrative strategy acts as a salve (Ruprah 413). The title itself—*Five Point Someone*—is a badge of shame turned into a badge of honour (Bhagat 1). The confession acts as a purging of the shame associated with being “average” (Mun 2). By the end of the novel, the characters do not miraculously

become toppers; they remain five pointers, but they survive (Gupta 18015).

The narrative suggests that “survival” with one’s soul intact is a greater ethical achievement than “success” with a hollowed-out self (IJARSCT 338). This is explicitly stated in Cherian’s final speech, a moment of “reverse confession” where the authority figure confesses to the students (Bhagat 265). He admits, “GPA... is not the end of the world... never judge anyone who is not from this institute” (Gupta 56). This moment validates Hari’s entire narrative journey. The “confession” has moved from the margin Hari to the centre Cherian, transforming the institution itself (Mun 4).

Critics have argued that Bhagat’s writing style is “simplistic” and “lacking in depth” (IJRTI 1). However, this stylistic simplicity is intrinsic to the confessional strategy. A confession must be accessible; it must feel authentic and unpolished to be believed. If Hari spoke in high theory or dense prose, the “everyman” illusion would break (Ruprah 409). The “plain, simple and even casual English” functions as a democratic narrative tool, inviting the vast middle-class readership to participate in the confession (IJARSCT 334). The ethical strategy is one of inclusion (Gupta 53). By lowering the linguistic barrier, Bhagat expands the circle of empathy, allowing millions of “average” Indians to feel ethically vindicated in their own struggles (Mun 4).

Chetan Bhagat’s *Five Point Someone* utilizes the discourse of confession as a potent ethical narrative strategy. Through the voice of Hari Kumar, the novel performs a secular confession that exposes the dehumanizing mechanics of the Indian education system (Mun 2). By detailing the transgressions of the “five points” students, the narrative dismantles the binary of success/failure and replaces it with a more humane ethics of friendship, survival, and vulnerability (Gupta 55).

Drawing on Foucauldian concepts, it can be observed that the confession resists the disciplinary power of the Panoptic grading system (Foucault, *Discipline* 201). The narrative transforms the “underachiever” from a statistic of failure into a complex ethical subject worthy of attention and empathy (Ruprah 411). The inclusion of the darker confessions—Samir’s suicide and Cherian’s guilt—elevates the novel from a mere comedy of errors to a serious critique of the

“meritocratic” violence inherent in postcolonial institutions (Gupta 18014).

In the final analysis, the narrative is an ethical assertion that human worth cannot be quantified. Bhagat’s strategy of confessional storytelling provides a “counter-conduct” that empowers the youth to reject the “sovereign” demands of the previous generation (Foucault, *History* 95). It is a narrative that forgives the reader for their own mediocrity, offering a literary space where being “someone” is enough, even if that someone is only a five pointer (Bhagat 270).

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