

Alienation, Identity, and Moral Conflict in *All Her Fires* by Prof. Vikas Sharma

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Abstract:

This paper argues that Prof. Vikas Sharma's novel *All Her Fires* incisively examines the moral and intellectual dilemmas confronting Generation Z in contemporary India. The analysis explores how generational conflict, identity crisis, and social alienation affect the relationship between individual autonomy and societal expectations. By investigating Sanya and Viren's experiences with rebellion and responsibility, and also examining the novel's narrative strategies, this study shows that *All Her Fires* directly addresses challenges to intellectual authority. The novel offers a nuanced view of modern ethical ambiguity.

Keywords: Generation Z, alienation, identity crisis, rebellion, ambiguity.

Introduction

Contemporary Indian English fiction often examines the complexities of modern life and the psychological and ethical dilemmas individuals face amid the tension between tradition and progress. Themes like alienation, identity crisis, gender conflict, and ethical ambiguity mirror India's evolving society. In this context, Prof. Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires* (2026) stands out as a significant contribution. The novel is widely seen as autobiographical, closely paralleling Sharma's experiences, though he has not confirmed this. This autobiographical bridge draws on Sharma's real struggles with institutional politics to lend gritty authenticity to the protagonist's psychological isolation. The protagonist, reflecting Sharma's journey, feels alienated in a rigid, corrupt academic environment, stemming from a refusal to conform to unethical practices. The narrative traces the development of a self-defined identity

against a prescribed professional one. Sharma shows that a scholar's true self is shaped in intellectual independence. Much of the plot revolves around ethical conflicts. Like Sharma, the characters are forced to choose between professional advancement and moral integrity, highlighting the heavy price of preserving ethical values within a corrupt system. The text takes a realist approach, preferring fictionalization to documentation, as seen in the altered names of characters and places.

For instance, 'Mayarashtra' refers to the historical name of Meerut, and the protagonist, Viren, appears to serve as a literary representation of Prof. Vikas Sharma, who was appointed as a Professor at Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut. The narrative also references a college in Baran, the former name of Bulandshahr, where Sharma served as Professor and Principal for seventeen years. Notably, Prof. Viren's interview and subsequent appointment as Professor on 30 April 2018 and 2 May 2018, respectively, mirror Sharma's own career path (*All Her Fires*, 36-37). Similarly, the depiction of Prof. Viren and his brother, Prof. Rajeev, both employed at the University of Mayarashtra (*All Her Fires*, 40), parallels the real-life professional association of Prof. Vikas Sharma and his brother, Sanjeev Sharma, at Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut. Additionally, Prof. Viren's tenure as Principal of a prominent postgraduate college in Baran (*All Her Fires*, 52) reflects Sharma's service as Principal at D.A.V. PG College, Bulandshahr. Furthermore, the author of this research paper completed his Ph.D. under the supervision of Prof. Vikas Sharma during his tenure at DAV PG College, Bulandshahr.

Examining the characters further accentuates the novel's autobiographical nature. For example, Viren's conflicts seem to be the novelist's own and are based on reality. The novelist asserted this fact of agony in many podcasts. The novelist frequently quotes lines from Dushyant Kumar “मैं जिसे ओढ़ता-बिछाता हूँ, वही गज़ल आपको सुनाता हूँ”. This supports the autobiographical reading. Further, the novel *Sana* is claimed to have real-life connections to Vikas Sharma. Critics frequently point out that the protagonist of the novel, “Sana,” is a real-life character who was once close to the author and served as his assistant. The novel's cover page features a photograph of the real-life Sana, i.e., Sunny. As we read the novel, it appears that Vikas Sharma, the author, has closely observed a real-life person to create the character of Sana

(Khurana and Singh, 129). With this evidence, it is clear that the protagonist, Sana, reflects the writer's ex-assistant. Her boyfriend, Chandan, also serves as a real-life reference in the writer's surroundings, having been a student of Vikas Sharma. Professor Shivaji D.Sargar confirms this fact in his article 'Threads of Deceit:Unravelling Infidelity and Pseudo Feminism in Sana'.

"The characters of Sana and Chandan are believed to be real and related to the life of Professor Vikas Sharma, and the cover page of Sana is also of the very Sana we know through Professor Vikas Sharma" (An Insight into the Fictional World of Vikas Sharma,192)

In novel *Sana*, Sana, i.e., Sunny, is shown as married in the novel, but in reality, she is unmarried. Sanya is also unmarried in the novel. Both the characters ,Sana and Sanya ,have a similarity in terms of sexual desires. Sana is shown as having a sexual relationship with Pandit Revati Raman, Chandan, and Akshay Mohan. Sayna in *All Her Fires* is also having so many sexual relationships with Prince, Chandan, Abhay , and Rahul Jain. Sana enjoys smoking Black Clove(*Sana*,14), and Sanya also enjoys smoking Black Clove (*All Her Fires*, 135). Real Sunny came to Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, in 2021 to do her MA, and she completed it in 2023. Sanya, in the novel, also comes to University of Mayarashtra to do her MA in 2021 (*All Her Fires*, 65), and she completes it in 2023. Sunny received a Gold Medal in MA English, according to CCS University records, and Sanya also completed her MA with a Gold Medal (*All Her Fires*, 350). Sana, i.e., Sunny, is doing PhD on the novels of Professor Vikas Sharma from SRM University , Modinagar (UP), and Sanya, in the novel, is also shown doing her Ph.D. from RSM University, but the name of the city is not mentioned in the novel (*All Her Fires* ,363). Sunny is doing her Ph.D. on the novels of Prof. Vikas Sharma. This fact is also evident in Sunny's research papers published in the Research Journal of English on the novels of Prof. Vikas Sharma. Sanya also completed her Ph.D. on the novels of Prof. Viren (*All Her Fires*, 372). The incomplete character of Sana was completed by the novelist through Sanya. Analyzing *All Her Fires* as an autobiographical novel is essential because it connects the gap between fiction and lived experience, giving a deeper understanding of the character's mental complexity. All the above facts show that the novel is entirely autobiographical, revealing the characters' alienation, identity crisis, and moral conflicts. Sana and Sanya are Gen Z and are closely connected with the novelist. There is another similarity between the character Chandan in *Sana* and

Chandan in *All Her Fires*. The girl on the cover page of *All Her Fires* is shown reading the novel *Sana* is the real girl, Rudrakshi, who is mentioned by the writer in the nineteenth and twentieth chapters of the novel with the fictitious name Ruru. This fact is clear in an interview of Prof. Vikas Sharma with a girl whom the novelist calls Rudrakshi. The girl conducting the interview also looks like the same on the novel's cover page. Through the characters Sana and Sanya, the novelist seeks to present them as representatives of Gen Z. The novelist elaborates on this representation in *All Her Fires*, which *Sana* left behind.

“Gen Z is not one thing, not a single face-it's a collage of contradictions shaped by geography, class, and opportunity. In the cities, Gen Z carries smartphones like a second skin. They are fast, sharp, endlessly scrolling, plugged into global trends, K-pop, podcasts, and start-up culture. They speak a language of hashtags and reels, impatient for success, unwilling to wait for age or seniority. Hierarchy irritates them—they want results, not rituals.”(All Her Fires, 20)

The novel captures the emotional and intellectual unrest of contemporary youth. It centers on Sanya, a rebellious young woman who challenges social conventions, and Viren, a professor who represents moral idealism and intellectual responsibility. Their interaction symbolizes generational conflict and ethical struggle. Through their contrasting worldviews, Sharma explores freedom, responsibility, and the meaning of identity in a disjointed world. To establish the novel's significance within its literary context, this paper analyzes *All Her Fires* as a depiction of alienation and moral conflict. It accentuates the novel's thematic scope, character dynamics, narrative technique, and socio-cultural relevance. By placing the novel within the tradition of modern Indian English fiction, the discussion demonstrates its literary and philosophical significance. The novel *All Her Fires* takes place in a contemporary scholarly setting. The atmosphere is one of aspiration, exhaustion, and emotional turmoil. Sanya, the protagonist, is fearless, charismatic, and non-conformist. She rejects conventional morality to attain meaning in intense experiences and emotional freedom. Her life is characterized by excessive desire and inner emptiness, representing the existential crisis of modern youth (Sharma).

“One of the students informed Viren that Sanya was badmouthing even Chandan to other students. She had said to someone, "Chandan and I? Are you kidding? I know that we are involved, but it's not like I am going to marry him. He is just 'time-pass'...

How can you even imagine that I would even think of spending my life with him? I wouldn't marry him even if he were the last man on Earth."(All Her Fires,73)

In contrast, Viren stands for reason, morality, and intellectual discipline. As a professor, he aims to lead students toward ethical clarity along with social responsibility. His struggle against injustice and conspiracy demonstrates the role of the intellectual in society (Sharma).

The relationship between Sanya and Viren constitutes the core of the narrative. Their interaction is equally personal and symbolic, representing the clash between confusion and control, youth and experience, and emotion and reason. Through this conflict, the novel interrogates the psychological and ethical conflicts faced by contemporary individuals. Alienation is a defining theme in *All Her Fires*. Sanya's character demonstrates the emotional and mental detachment common among modern youth. Despite her apparent confidence and rebelliousness, she experiences acute inner emptiness and metaphysical doubt. Her existence embodies the paradox of "wanting too much and feeling too little," a phrase that succinctly captures the emotional condition of Generation Z (Sharma). Alienation in the novel affects people and society as a whole. The academic campus displays a competitive atmosphere and emotional detachment. It functions as a condensed version of modern society, where people are surrounded by others but remain emotionally isolated. Sharma augments this broader sense of alienation with existentialist philosophy. The focus is on the individual's struggle for meaning in an absurd world. Like the existential heroes of Camus or Sartre, Sanya seeks authenticity but does not achieve emotional fulfillment. The novel reflects the existential crisis of contemporary life. Closely linked to alienation is the quest for identity, which appears as another major theme in *All Her Fires*. Sanya's rebellion against social norms shows her attempt to construct an autonomous identity. She refuses traditional definitions of femininity and morality and challenges patriarchal and social expectations.

Yet, her search for identity is defined by confusion and contradiction. While she seeks freedom, she remains trapped in emotional instability. This suggests that identity in the modern world is fragmented and fluid rather than fixed. Viren's character similarly displays a crisis of identity. As an intellectual and moral guide, he tries to reconcile his idealism with the realities of modern society. His internal conflict

illustrates the dilemma of those who try to uphold moral values in a world dominated by relativism and cynicism. Through these characters, Sharma argues that identity is inherently unstable, constituting a continuous process formed by social, emotional, and ethical influences. Transitioning to generational dynamics, the novel's intergenerational conflict is an important feature. Sanya represents the younger generation, characterized by rebellion, emotional intensity, and cynicism toward traditional values. Viren symbolizes the older generation, believing in discipline, morality, and intellectual responsibility. Their interaction shows the larger clash between modernity and tradition in Indian society. Sanya challenges accepted norms. Viren tries to preserve moral order. The novel does not present either view as entirely right or wrong but reveals the limits of both extremes. By portraying this generational conflict, Sharma invokes questions about the future of moral and cultural values in a rapidly changing society, linking personal struggles to larger societal concerns. Turning to gender, Sanya's character questions traditional roles and patriarchal expectations. Through her autonomy and refusal to conform, she disrupts conventional ideas of femininity. She holds a different opinion about marriage, which matches Gen Z's views in contemporary times. Sanya says to Viren:

“And I have never understood why you make your heroines marry so quickly. This whole marriage institution seems bullshit to me. The only objective of marriage is to become financially stable.”(All Her Fires,77)

Sharma does not portray her as a passive victim. Instead, Sanya is an active agent who asserts her selfhood. However, the novel also examines the costs of such freedom. Sanya's emotional turmoil suggests that liberation without self-awareness may lead to self-destruction. Sharma presents a nuanced view of female identity that goes beyond simple feminist narratives. The power relations between Sanya and Viren complicate the gender discourse. Their relationship does not reflect only generational conflict but also the tension among authority and rebellion, reason and emotion, and masculinity and femininity. Just as gender is central to Sanya's rebellion, morality is a central concern in *All Her Fires*. Viren's character illustrates the struggle to preserve ethical values in a morally ambiguous world. As a professor, he feels responsible for leading youthful minds toward ethical clarity. His idealism is constantly challenged by the realities of modern society. The novel raises issues about the role of morality in contemporary life. Is moral authority still relevant? Can ethical values survive in a world dominated by individualism and relativism? Rather than

providing definite answers, Sharma urges readers to think on these questions. The novel suggests that morality is neither obsolete nor absolute. It must be reinterpreted in modern life. Sharma also presents the picture of Gen Z, how they use abusive language with friends and even teachers, and how they justify such behaviour in the name of modernity.

“For all her posturing about 'responding only in English,' Sanya's tongue was sharpest when it slipped into Hindi. She tossed abuses as casually as she flipped her hair. The faculty and the help in the department often heard her screaming abusive words like "bencho" on the call. Any student who asked too many questions or failed to impress her was instantly a "chaman chutiya," the insult rolling off her lips with a mix of disdain and laughter. Even teachers were termed as such behind their backs. She claimed her right to equality, to verbally abuse others as men do.”(All Her Fires ,220)

Sharma uses a realistic narrative manner with mental complexity. The campus setting acts as a dynamic backdrop for social and emotional conflict. The narrative alternates between Sanya and Viren's perspectives, building a layered structure and increasing complexity. The novel's language is contemporary and emotionally charged. This reflects the intensity of the characters' inner lives. Sharma's use of symbolism, especially the “fire” metaphor, highlights passion, destruction, and transformation. The narrative technique combines realism with psychological introspection, making the novel both socially relevant and artistically compelling. *All Her Fires* vividly depicts alienation among Gen Z on a modern Indian campus. The novel explores excessive ambition, emotional emptiness, and confusion between selfishness and survival. By showing these issues through individual characters, Sharma transforms personal conflicts into social commentary. The novel acts as a mirror of modern Indian society. Placing the novel in the author's body of work, in the wider context of Prof. Vikas Sharma's work, *All Her Fires* continues his study of modern identity and social conflict. His novels often examine ethical conflicts, gender issues, and psychological struggles, rendering him an important voice within contemporary Indian English fiction. Many modern Indian novels explore youth alienation and struggles with identity. *All Her Fires* stands out for its philosophical depth and moral complexity. It can be read with works by Aravind Adiga, Chetan Bhagat, and Jhumpa Lahiri. However, Sharma's approach is more psychological and ethical. To summarize, *All Her Fires* is a strong exploration of alienation, identity, and moral conflict in contemporary society. Through the

contrasting characters of Sanya and Viren, Prof. Vikas Sharma presents a subtle portrayal of generational tension and metaphysical uncertainty. Viren says in the novel about Gen Z.

"They are not like us," he admitted silently, "We obeyed authority, respected boundaries, and feared public shame. These children, no, these young adults, have grown up questioning everything. They tweet at politicians, challenge teachers, laugh at tradition, and yet cry openly about anxiety. They are restless souls, but not without courage."(All Her Fires ,179)

The novel suggests that neither rebellion nor moral rigidity alone resolves the crisis of modern identity. It also suggests that this modern generation, i.e., Gen Z, does not have any respect and regard for their teachers, who were treated as equivalent to God earlier. It calls for dialogue, self-awareness, and ethical commitment. *All Her Fires*, as a campus novel with deep psychological and social aspects, is a significant contribution to modern Indian English literature.

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