

**A Critique of Debauchery and Ruthless Corporate Culture in
Vikas Sharma's Sana**

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Abstract

Vikas Sharma is a renowned author and professor at the Department of English, C.C.S. University, Meerut. He has written several books on campus politics, modern-day relationships, and Generation Z culture, as well as numerous scholarly articles published under his name in reputable journals and magazines. In the novel *Sana*, Sharma attempts to paint a picture of modern-day India with its high-rise offices and cultural landscape that is secretly willing to accept a liberal polygamous-polyamorous set up as long as it propels individuals on the path of economic prosperity.

This novel offers a gloomy picture of the moral health of an ancient civilisation that prides itself on its deep-rooted values while also branding itself as the fastest-growing economy, wanting the world to view it as an alternative to the supply chain ecosystem of China. This research paper attempts to elaborate on this scary aspect of our societal and material progress while exposing the human condition of characters in this hollow and soul-devouring matrix beneath a tantalising façade of grandiose.

Through an in-depth study of the eponymous Sana along with other characters of the novel, the paper delves into the modern-day factorisation of education and the billion-dollar economy built around it that enmeshes thousands of students in the trap of loan procurement and its return. It shows how family structures and relations are affected in a wild goose chase for pleasure and material progress. The complex process of starting up a business venture, risks involved, along with the lack of Research and Development facilities, and a comparative study of the corporate culture in China and the USA shall be touched upon in the paper. Finally,

the vision of author in writing a novel on this topic shall be presented on the basis of a personal interview held with him on the subject.

Keywords: Corporate culture, debauchery, modern-day relationships, polyamorous set up.

Introduction:

Set in the tier two city of Faridabad, Haryana, which is soon catching up in ways with tech metropolises such as Bengaluru and Gurgaon, *Sana* (2023), by author Vikas Sharma, directs the focus of the reader to the decadence of morals and values in a world that counts ends and obliterates means. In this race to achieve financial prosperity, the moral corruption of character is particularly visibilized in the personalities of Sana, Naveen, Katty and Silky and through complex relationships that they share with each other in the novel. Sana, the second-generation heir to the chemical empire set up by her father, Naveen, is crooked enough to first use her husband's friend, Revati Prasad, to satiate her unmet physical needs, and later discards him as a potential business associate in her new business of imparting education through a set of private schools, as she deems him unfit for the role. Similarly, Katty and Silky are unapologetic about having an affair with their boss, who they take help from in order to climb up the social ladder and survive the harsh life of a city, thereby, compromising on the question of moral principles and values.

Commercialisation of primary and secondary education is often debated in newsrooms and elite clubs of our country, as many politicians and members of legislative assemblies have made their fortunes through this route of trading education for money by opening private schools and colleges. It is then only normative to assume that anyone who has made a fortune in this country in one area or the other would eventually open a private school or a chain of these sometime in the future. All this is done most of the time by donating money from a parent company under the garb of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

In the novel, the eponymous heroine, Sana is married off to an economically and educationally inferior Brij Vrat in a 'pratiloma' (a Vedic concept when a woman was married off to a man from a lower caste which was seen against the natural order) conjugal set up to save her from the ignominy of a past affair with a gangster's son, it then becomes imperative on her father to settle the couple financially and what better way of doing it than by opening two schools affiliated to CBSE and I.B for which Naveen gets cheap land from a previous owner who had gone bankrupt post COVID related losses. Education, therefore, from the very onset in the novel, is not a social or noble pursuit, but rather an invisible apparatus built on the tangible power of money to attract more money.

Education, in the novel, is not just a liberator but also a liability hanging round like a "sword of Damocles" (p. 108), catching students in a cycle of loan repayment and a fake sense of accomplishment that they believed could free them from the curse of generational poverty and inaccessibility to better avenues of life. The quality of education offered in countless engineering colleges that have mushroomed in every lane and corner of almost every city in India is critiqued when a general question like rising trade relations between India and China is left unanswered by one of our characters during her stay in China to learn some domain knowledge in something as simple as mobile battery production. Compartmentalisation of education is fine, but the author hints that if we really go on producing engineers in our country who lack a broader perspective of what's happening around the world and a vision to integrate specialized knowledge with growth of the nation, then, perhaps the hopes of becoming a twenty-six trillion-dollar economy in the next two decades would be a far cry from here.

A critique of the new business model (catching like hay fever) in selling spirituality and the rise of new ayurvedic health centres is offered in Brij Vrat's 'Culture Centre', where these centres of wellness and new age neo-spirituality have now mushroomed in every city and town of India. Quack contractors and God-man type marketers with no domain knowledge of specialised fields hire self-proclaimed fitness and wellness experts who milk money out of the urban upper middle class with a disposable income, repackaging centuries-old common knowledge and kitchen secrets of our grandmothers in lucrative, sellable deals. This ape mentality

of following whatever is hot and selling in the West shows the dumbing of our critical faculties in unquestioningly adopting whatever catches the Western eye, which is then rebranded and sold to the Western gentry in the name of wellness and oriental spirituality. This contributes to the growing exoticization and stealth of our traditional knowledge in medicine spices and herbs and even elements of our folk culture by international fashion giants.

In this corporate tale of family, love and lust, Sharma paints a gloomy picture of middle and upper middle-class India that is so desperate to leave the economic drudgery of their previous generation, and move up the economic ladder that they are more than willing to pay whatever price it takes to be a part of the moneyed class. Silky's problematic relationship with Naveen is at the centre of this ruthless, debaucherous aspect of our modern lives. A brother-in-law barter his patronage in exchange for sexual favours from his sister-in-law, and the latter is more than willing to accept it. It is not until then, that Silky realises the futility of such a relationship and makes a choice to get married to a decent family man settled in the U.S.A. She learns that for an orphan like her without the solid backing of a rich, well-off family, her options in life are limited. She, therefore, slips into the role of being a housewife to an expat pharmacist as soon as life throws a choice her way. The novel highlights how emerging economies like Indian and China, which pride themselves on being the oldest civilisations and emerging markets, essentially non-Western, are in fact more morally bankrupt than their transatlantic counterparts. Silky finds herself vulnerable both in India and Shanghai—a "slave to the physical lust of men", finding some peace only when she arrives in the US. It also implies the fact that a woman is safe only when she has her identity tied to that of a man. Silky's homosexual cum homo-curious relationship with her colleague and associate, Katty, is another interesting aspect of the novel where both the girls are aware of their sexual intimacy with Naveen and have no qualms about sharing the man physically, only till the time Silky feels sidelined by Naveen's promotion of Katty's candidature over Silky's for an important assignment. It is only then that Silky develops the feelings of resentment and jealousy for someone she has, until then, had no ostensible threat from. Their relationship is eroticized till they are part of the big patriarchal structure and subservient to the orders and needs of a male boss; the problem arises only when

they start wanting more materially, thus imitating the masculinised world in its greed and chase for material procurement.

Both Silky and Katty confine themselves to a man's idea of success and find themselves vulnerable in a system designed primarily for the advantage of men. Both these characters find redemption only when they are able to break away from the shackles of corporate servility and the status of pariah by refusing to be a plaything in the hands of Naveen and FuFu. They choose their own paths in life, independent of their male masters, subverting the cycle of exploitation. Silky, before almost falling into the plan of the Chinese to have a shell company in India whose profits could dubiously be shown directed to the Indians, in New York, in her free time notes in her journal the "mad race of people for money as they had no time to meditate and understand ethical values of life"(p. 168) highlighting how people have the time to philosophize on such things only when they are financially sorted or taken care of.

In one of the interviews for a journal and personal interaction with him, Sharma notes that the characters of Silky and Katty, as well as that of Sana, are inspired by real-life people the author is acquainted with. The book is not, therefore, just an extension of his imagination, but rather a work of realism, painting the broad strokes of individual follies and accomplishments on the big canvas of life. Many of us with friends in corporate or media houses have routinely heard of stories of corporate debauchery and post-work-car-o-bar sessions where parties like the ones described in the novel become carnivals, normalising all sorts of degenerative behaviour (such as partner swapping), all in the name of work retreat and high society culture. The novel reminded me of the famous Martin Scorsese film 'The Wolf of Wall Street' based on the life of a wall street stockbroker Jordan Belfort and the "ecstasies of money" (Scott, A.O) that he and his colleagues indulge in at their firm—Stratton Oakmont, Inc, is perhaps in the same direction in which many of our characters think and are headed towards. The world at Stratton Inc. is presented through a male gaze, much like the world that the females of our novel exist in—highly masculinised and territorially marked.

Like with Jordan and his friends at Stratton Oakmont, Sharma's fictional world too is not satisfied with less and is intoxicated by the sheen and lustre of money power. As pointed by English historian, Lord Acton, in 1887 that absolute power corrupts absolutely, so does absolute money where long cherished immeasurable virtues like honour, humility and level headedness start belonging to an erstwhile, obsolete world that no more makes sense to modern man with modern thoughts and habits. All this progressiveness, however, gives birth to a plethora of modern afflictions the root cause of which is attributed to the "fake sense of pride and situation created entirely by the human beings on earth" as noted by Gods in the prologue at the beginning of the novel. The Gods tired of hearing human problems wide ranging from money matters to ideological fixations conclude at the end of the session, "that one's real self is entirely different from what one feels" and a balance has to be struck between what is and that which is wanted.

The novel, thus, one could argue, does not just present a tale of excesses and moral corruption of the human mind in an age of consumerism that brings along many vices of flesh and mind, but also warns us against the degeneration of the mind and body and the many repercussions of living and existing in such a world. The beauty of the novel lies in finer details such as its meticulous selection and depiction of characters and their professions, be it commercialization of education, a world too well known by the author or in Naveen's business of pharmaceuticals pointing towards a market that is both the largest producer and consumer of generic drugs and which many a times indulge in all sort of unethical marketing and wrongful licensing of life saving drugs.

Author Sharma, however, does not give us any easy answers to the world of moral dilemma inhabited by his characters, as is evident in Silky's mulling over her past choices who more often than not becomes the mouthpiece of the author in the novel. She justifies her past indiscretions by concluding "poverty is a crime these days" (p. 148) and that the choices she made brought her to where she is in life today—in a New York apartment. One could, therefore, conclude that economic prosperity as it comes, demands a nation and individuals within it, a price to pay, which, then, is up to the individuals to navigate through either by being consumed

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in totality or by finding a middle path that incorporates elements of each but not in an all-consuming tumultuous totality.

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