

Glimpses of Buddha's Teachings in Vikas Sharma's *Ashes & Fire*

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Paper Received on 20-06-2026, Accepted on 20-07-2026
Published on 22-07-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.07.236

Abstract: Vikas Sharma's debut novel *Ashes & Fire* is replete with the teachings of the Buddha who is known across the world as a pioneering hero of humanism. Right from the beginning to the end, the entire novel is overloaded with the moral lessons, humanism, passion and compassion seen in the philosophy of the Buddha. Its female protagonist, Suvidha is the pioneering character whose personality is influenced by the enlightened one, the Buddha. Her love for Samyak, the male protagonist is deep and pious like the love of Ram and Sita. Like Sita, of Ramcharit Manas, she is a woman of holy heart, and pious soul. As such Sita is dedicated in rendering her emotional and moral services to her husband, Ram, Suvidha is keenly attentive to come forward for the well-being of her husband, Samyak. Undoubtedly, Vikas Sharma does not claim that Suvidha has adopted Buddhism but shows that she is the ardent follower of the humanistic philosophy of the Lord Buddha. When we go through this novel and its analytical study, we come to believe that indeed Suvidha's heart is keenly harbouring the humanistic approach of the Buddha's teachings. This thing shows us Vikas Sharma's wide range of knowledge; literary, educational, social and humanistic. His knowledge of theology is obviously reflected in this novel.

Keywords: Emancipation, renunciation, labyrinth, mortal, compassion, humanity, devotion, dedication, suppression, belief etc.

Introduction:

India has long been regarded as a sacred land where diverse religious, philosophical, and spiritual traditions have flourished. Since ancient times, its literary heritage has preserved the teachings of revered figures such as Rama, Krishna, the Buddha, Mahavira, and numerous other deities and spiritual guides. Indian English literature, in particular, reflects this rich cultural and philosophical legacy by

engaging with the ideas of saints and reformers including the Buddha, Mahavira, Kabir, Ravidas, Pipa, Dadu Dayal and Guru Nanak. These spiritual thinkers have profoundly influenced Indian society through their advocacy of compassion, equality, moral discipline, and social justice. Among them, the Buddha occupies a pre-eminent position for his enduring philosophy of renunciation, wisdom, and liberation from suffering. His teachings have transcended geographical and cultural boundaries, leaving a lasting imprint on world literature. Contemporary Indian novelist Vikas Sharma also draws significantly upon Buddhist philosophy. His novels incorporate Buddhist ideals of self-realization, ethical consciousness, detachment, and spiritual awakening, demonstrating how ancient philosophical traditions continue to illuminate the complexities of modern human existence.

The world of fiction is rapidly spreading its wings. The entire world has become a global village. The scope and significance of the Indian authors is increasing day-by-day. There was a time when almost all the Indians were prompt to learn moral values in the western literature. But today there is a big galaxy of Indian authors whose English-writings are gaining world-wide admiration. V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Milk Raj Anand, and so many writers of the present day like Amitav Ghosh, Vikas Sharma is also a great name whose novels are considered to be the academic novel, campus novel and the novels of the scientific temper. His depiction of rural and urban life shows that he has tremendous knowledge of the world and society.

The influence of the Buddha's teachings on Vikas Sharma's formation is quite visible in *Ashes & Fire*. It is remarkable thing that Vikas Sharma belongs to the same state of India where the Buddha would preach his ascetic pupils twenty fifth century ago stressing over the humanistic, rational and scientific learning. Humanism was the center-point of the Buddha's teachings of which glimpses are quite visible in this novel. It is said of this country, "India has always been a motherland of not just male combatants but female combatants too. It has produced plenty of warriors fighting and sacrificing their lives for the prosperity and progress of our land. When India was shackled under the clutches of the British empire, it was not just men who fought for its freedom, but women also participated with full enthusiasm and Vigor to liberate their motherland from foreign invaders." (Awasthi 56)

Vikas Sharma emerges as a versatile and intellectually accomplished novelist whose literary vision is deeply rooted in the diverse religious and philosophical knowledge of the world and society. His writings reveal a profound engagement with Indian theology, encompassing the major faiths and belief systems such as Hinduism,

Buddhism, and Jainism. Rather than treating these traditions merely as cultural backgrounds, Sharma incorporates their ethical, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions into the thematic structure of his novels. His literary imagination also extends beyond the Indian religious spectrum to include insights from Islamic thought and literature, reflecting his broad humanistic outlook and his commitment to exploring universal questions of faith, morality, identity, and human existence.

Among these traditions, Buddhism occupies a distinctive place in Sharma's creative vision. The principles of compassion, self-discipline, detachment, mindfulness, non-violence, and the search for inner peace resonate strongly in his fictional world. Instead of presenting Buddhist philosophy in a purely doctrinal manner, Sharma subtly weaves its values into the experiences, conflicts, and psychological journeys of his characters. His narratives demonstrate how ancient spiritual wisdom remains relevant in addressing the moral dilemmas and emotional crises of contemporary society.

The present study seeks to examine the significant influence of Buddhist philosophy in Vikas Sharma's debut novel *Ashes & Fire*. It explores the ways in which Sharma assimilates the teachings of the Buddha into the narrative through characterization, thematic concerns, and symbolic representation. By analyzing the novel from this perspective, the study aims to demonstrate that *Ashes & Fire* is not merely a work of contemporary fiction but also a philosophical narrative that reflects Buddhist ideals of self-realization, moral transformation, renunciation of ego, and the pursuit of inner harmony. Through this synthesis of literature and spirituality, Sharma reinterprets the timeless teachings of the Buddha for the modern reader, highlighting their enduring relevance in a world marked by conflict, materialism, and existential uncertainty.

Description:

Ashes & Fire is the novel in which we find the glimpses of Buddha's teachings. Vikas Sharma's art of writing is so marvellous. He narrates the story in such a manner that it seems as if he wants to take his readers with him to the same spot he has discussed about. He mingles stories within story. In this way, we find many stories in his main narrative. So is the case with this novel too. He starts this novel from the description of the Buddha. Let us see the first para of this novel:

Once Gautam Buddha fell ill due to a change of weather and his disciple Anand became serious about the former's health and asked him- 'What will happen in case you die? Who'll enlighten the people for the right conduct? Who'll explain to us the right definition of liberation and renunciation?

Darkness is bound to spread in the world in your absence, O Lord.' (*Ashes & Fire 5*)

Through this above stanza, the novelist has revealed the Buddha's philosophic teachings to the mankind in which he has taught us to be our own master for our emancipation. Through the discussion between the Buddha and his dearest disciple Anand, Vikas Sharma has drawn our attention towards the reality of the world and human life. As we know that the Buddha did not believe in the supreme power or almighty. His teachings are absolutely based on the human being. There is no room for the imaginary God or Almighty in his teachings. This statement is not an easy one. This is world famous teaching of the Buddha. This is the part of the first sermon of the Buddha given to the five Brahmin ascetics in Rishi Pattan (Now Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh).

The above quoted statement of the Buddha teaches us many things. Replying to Anand, The Buddha said, "A new mentor will definitely be born after my departure. Let everybody be his own mentor. Let you all be torch-bearers of the right philosophy for yourselves as well as the rest of mankind." (*Ashes & Fire 5*)

This reply of the Buddha to his dearest disciple Anand proves the fact that for the Buddha there is no other power in the world that could be supportive to the mankind other than he himself is. Vikas Sharma's main motif behind mentioning this illustration is to inspire the people to go through the pious and rational teachings of the Buddha. As the Buddha belongs to India so the roots of his teachings are found in India but unfortunately his teachings are not adapted by the Indians in a desirable scale. If his teachings had been adapted properly by the Indians, undoubtedly, it can be said that there would not have been any kind of hatred between man and man. By quoting this context, Vikas Sharma has tried to reveal the message of the Buddha; especially for the new generation that is aloof from the philosophic teachings.

Through the conversation between Anand and the Buddha, the novelist has drawn our attention towards the universal teachings of the Buddha. Anand's sorrowful statement, "Darkness is bound to spread in the world in your absence, o Lord!" (*Ashes & Fire 5*) indeed, seems to be pessimistic that shows the hopelessness of Anand who is regarded as the dearest disciple of the Buddha. But, in fact, it was not his pessimistic attitude. Being to be most affectionate, Anand's heart was replete with compassion towards his master, the Buddha. In the consolation to Anand, Tathagat Buddha says, "A New Mentor will definitely be born after my departure. Let everyone be his own mentor." (*Ashes & Fire 5*). Such teaching of The Buddha is optimistic. This consolation inculcates the strength within the hearts and minds not

only of Anand but also within the hearts and minds of the all mankind whosoever comes in the contact of his philosophy. Through this discussion, Vikas Sharma has proved the fact that he has splendid command over the Buddhist philosophy. As a renowned scholar, he has attained deep knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. In such a manner, he has proved that a great writer ought to be higher beyond the boundary of caste, creed, and other prejudices. Vikas Sharma stresses up on the teachings of the Buddha quoting the words of the great enlightened the Buddha, "My warning is that don't follow anybody blindly and beware of rigidity, orthodoxy and ignorance. Light of reason is equally important as it is the best gift of God given to human beings." 5 (*Ashes & Fire* 5)

Through the above quoted Buddha's teaching, Vikas Sharma has revealed the precious teachings of India's great master, and philosopher. The words of the Buddha, "Self-illumination is most important. I have reached the stage where I wanted to." (*Ashes & Fire* 6) are remarkable and highly motivational. Such type of the motivational teachings of the Buddha is profoundly found in the books of history and theology. The Tripitaka is the main source of the Buddha's gospels that are the real teachings of the Buddha.

In this novel, Suvidha is the female protagonist. She has been presented in such a manner that her character seems to be influenced with the teachings of the Buddha. She is morally strong and mentally liberated woman whose relations with Samyak, the main male protagonist, is inspiring and praiseworthy. Suvidha is keenly attentive towards Samyak's well-being. When we go through the Ramcharit Manas, we find an instance of Ram and Sita, in a Chaupai, "Piya Hiya ki Siya Jananhari, Man Mudri Man Mudit Utaari." (Ramcharit Manas, Ayodhyakand, P-26 Gita Press Gorakhpur) in which Lord Ram's wife Sita is shown as well-versed to understand the inner feelings of her husband. When Kebat helped Ram and Sita by passing them through his boat, he was curious to have something as his wages but Ram was not having anything with him so he seemed to be helpless feeling shame and humiliation. His wife could understand her husband's feelings so she hurriedly handed over her ring to the boatsman (Kebati). So is the case with Suvidha and Samyak. Suvidha is capable to grasp the feelings of her husband, Samyak. She is prompt to assist him whenever he feels her need.

Like Sita, Suvidha is keenly attentive towards her husband and his feelings. She is conscious about the fact that Samyak is harbouring love-feelings for her. Both are students and participants of NCC camps. They have innate feelings for each other. Here, the glimpses of Ram-Sita relations are exhibited. Along with this context, Vikas

Sharma has shown us Indian culture in which parents do not allow their children for love-making. Suvidha's father is old-fashioned. He does not like that his daughter should come in contact with any boy to increase love-like intimacy. The novelist writes the words of Suvidha's father:

Look, Beti, if you take disadvantage of my liberty, results will be disastrous for both of us. Take training for-self, and there is no need to waste. If at all any young boy teases you, tell me his name. Rest is my job. (*Ashes & Fire* 7)

By quoting the above words of Suvidha's father, Vikas Sharma has drawn our attention towards the Indian social scenario in which female is supposed to be dependent on male; sometimes on father and the other times brother and husband. Here, we find Vikas Sharma's feminist approach who wants to focus on the compulsions and circumstances of girl as a daughter and later on as a wife to remain as dependent upon man. A father is worried about his daughter's social security so he does not allow to go and mingle herself among the boy-students. The fervour of pessimism is obviously visible here but when we cast our eyes upon the social unfortunate happenings in which girls are cheated, tortured and many a times murdered under several conspiracies constituted by men, then we think that Suvidha's father is not pessimistic, rather he is some more optimistic as he wants to save her daughter from all kinds of mis-happenings.

Let us see what is said by the other scholars about Suvidha's character: Suvidha does not hesitate to eliminate obstacles human or otherwise even if it means crossing legal boundaries. Through calculated risks and strategic decisions, she manages to avoid consequences and keeps her wrong doings under wraps. Her ascent to success is shadowed by acts involving manipulation, corruption, sexual exploitation, and even violence. Yet, she ultimately attains both prosperity and social recognition. In doing so, she she not only defines her own destiny but also ensures a secure future recognition for her children, albeit through means that challenge conventional notions of morality and legality. (Kumar 191)

Here too, the glimpses of Buddha's teaching are quite visible as Suvidha's father wants to make his daughter self-dependent as the Buddha suggests by saying that everyone should be his own master. The impact of Buddha's teachings is found in each and every activity of Suvidha. She is loveable having appreciable characteristic qualities. Suvidha judges Samyak as a young engineer, intelligent, and

appealing, worth trying for. As a smart girl, she prompts to wed with someone who is for her, a dream-boy.

As being a writer of academic novels, Vikas Sharma has beautifully connected the references of Buddha's teachings with the main narrative of this novel. His woman protagonist Suvidha belongs to academic field. She is M.A. in English, fond of attending seminars and increasing her feet towards the research. The novelist has remarkably interwoven the things related Buddhism with his selected characters in a very interesting manner. He writes:

As a post-graduate student of English literature, Suvidha studied a few pages of Buddhism and, at the same time, felt impressed with the teachings of Swami Vivekanand. (*Ashes & Fire* 6)

The novelist, Vikas Sharma has tried to prove that the impact of Buddha's teachings is still relevant. They are motivational, optimistic and thought-provoking. Its impact is indelible. The protagonist of *Ashes and Fire* is replete with the Buddha's teachings. Let us see what Mrs. Chinari writes about the Buddha's teachings "Individuals can do whatever they like. Solid and unwholesome can do nothing for the general population or living creatures and they can't understand any extraordinary or dreadful results." (866)

It is necessary to know about the literary contribution of Vikas Sharma as a novelist:

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. (Redhu 472)

This statement of Redhu, a researcher on Vikas Sharma's novels has tried to reveal Sharma's art and technique. It shows that Vikas Sharma writes realistic novels consisting emotions and symbols. His art of revealing the facts is grand. He infuses the figures of speech like metaphor and several times he becomes poetic. For the sake of inculcating reader's interest, he infuses social and psychological fervors understanding the mood of the readers who are supposed to be the parts of different strata of society.

Outcome:

The present study reveals that the teachings of the Buddha are not confined merely to the disciplines of philosophy, religion, politics, or theology; rather, they extend significantly into the realm of literature, where they continue to inspire ethical reflection and spiritual consciousness. Literature has always served as a powerful medium for preserving and communicating philosophical ideas, and Vikas Sharma's *Ashes & Fire* exemplifies this tradition by incorporating Buddhist values into a contemporary narrative. Through his creative vision, Sharma demonstrates that the wisdom of the Buddha remains relevant to modern society and can illuminate the path towards moral and spiritual awakening. For the present generation; especially studying in colleges, universities and perusing for research, the Buddha's teachings would be more advantageous for maintaining physical and mental balance.

The novel reflects the core Buddhist ideals of compassion, self-discipline, detachment, and inner peace through the experiences of its characters. Instead of presenting Buddhist philosophy as a religious doctrine alone, Sharma transforms it into a practical philosophy of life that addresses the emotional, moral, and psychological challenges of the modern individual. His narrative suggests that human suffering often arises from attachment, ignorance, and excessive materialism, while true happiness lies in self-realization and ethical living.

Contemporary Indian society continues to face numerous social, political, religious, and ethical complexities. Sharma subtly suggests that many of these challenges emerge from the absence of moral consciousness and a failure to understand the true purpose of human life. By drawing upon Buddhist philosophy, he advocates values of non-violence, compassion, tolerance, and selfless service as essential principles for creating a more harmonious society. The novel emphasizes that the ultimate aim of human existence is not merely personal success but the welfare of humanity.

Thus, *Ashes & Fire* successfully illustrates the enduring relevance of the Buddha's teachings in contemporary life. Vikas Sharma's profound understanding of Buddhist philosophy enriches the novel with philosophical depth and humanistic vision, making it not only a compelling literary work but also a meaningful exploration of ethical and spiritual values.

Conclusion:

On the basis of the above study, it is to be concluded that Vikas Sharma's *Ashes & Fire* is the novel having numerous themes including the theme of love, sex, marriage, knowledge, passion, compassion, aesthetics and so on. Through this article

I have tried to find out three things; impact of Buddhas's teachings on Vikas Sharma, the novelist, relevance of Buddha's teachings in the present scenario of the human society and how the Buddha's teachings have been infused by the novelist in the main narrative of the novel. The protagonist of this novel, Suvidha seems to be influenced with the thoughts of the Buddha. Not only the protagonist, but also other characters of this novel are also influenced with the ethical teachings of the Buddha. Another character, Rewati in *Ashes & Fire* is also influenced by the Buddhist philosophy. Sharma's characters are shown fighting for their existence. Most of them are poor and helpless. In his other novel, *I.A.S. Today*, Sharma has told us that human mind is responsible for joy and sorrow. There is no any other thing that affects the mind of human being. It means that through the portrayal of his characters, Vikas Sharma has explored the teachings of the Buddha and tried to convey his message to the present and the forthcoming generation that the teachings of the Buddha are always advantageous for them who want to liberate themselves from unnecessary mental burdens.

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