

**Political Power and Human Suffering in Vikas Sharma's Novel
*Hell for the People: A Critical Study***

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Paper Received on 19-07-2026, Accepted on 21-08-2026
Published on 22-08-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.08.516

Abstract:

Vikas Sharma's novel *Hell for the People* (2025) offers a multifaceted critique of the suffering of ordinary people, war, corruption, authoritarianism, social inequality, and political power. The novel transforms "hell" from a supernatural place of punishment into a social, political, economic, and psychological condition that human beings have created. Sharma investigates the repercussions of unbridled ambition and negligent power by means of historical conflicts, wars, the Emergency, political imprisonment, industrialisation, electoral politics, caste politics, dynastic succession, and class struggle. Marxism and capitalism illuminate economic inequality and exploitation, while Sisyphus symbolises the unending struggle of human existence. The novel does not condemn development, technology, education, healthcare, industrialisation, or administrative efficiency; rather, it challenges development that is divorced from human dignity, justice, freedom, and equality. This paper investigates the concepts of power, domination, justice, freedom, and human struggle, drawing on the works of Karl Marx, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci, John Rawls, Amartya Sen, B. R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi, and Albert Camus. It contends that political and economic systems are transformed into "hell" when power is devoid of ethical accountability. In the end, Sharma promotes a democratic order that is characterised by justice, accountability, freedom, equality, and a concern for the well-being of the general populace.

Keywords: Freedom, Hell, political power, people, justice, capitalism, corruption.

Introduction:

The relationship between human suffering and power has always been a subject of profound concern in literature. The lives of individuals and communities are frequently influenced by the decisions of powerful figures, including kings,

emperors, politicians, industrialists, and bureaucrats, who have frequently been the focus of literary narratives. Political power has the potential to establish order and progress; however, it can also become oppressive when it is not held accountable. This contradiction is precisely the subject of Vikas Sharma's novel *Hell for the People*. The novel depicts a comprehensive social landscape in which political authority, economic ambition, war, corruption, family conflict, class struggle, democracy, and human suffering are interconnected.

The title "*Hell for the People*" is of particular importance. Sharma does not confine the definition of "hell" to a religious or metaphysical context. Rather, hell is a state that is created by human beings through the use of violence, greed, political oppression, economic exploitation, war, imprisonment, corruption, and unbridled ambition. The people are subjected to "hell" when rulers engage in power struggles, soldiers die in wars, prisoners are deprived of their freedom, workers are exploited, elections are rigged, and political ambition erodes family relationships.

Consequently, the novel can be interpreted as a socially conscious work that poses a fundamental question: What is the consequence for ordinary individuals when power supplants human welfare? This inquiry establishes a connection between Sharma's narrative and the works of significant political and philosophical philosophers. The novel's examination of capitalism and labour is enlightened by Karl Marx's analysis of class conflict. Hannah Arendt's distinction between power and violence offers a valuable framework for comprehending political authority. Prison and surveillance are elucidated by Michel Foucault's examination of power and institutions.

The relationship between oppressed people and rulers is illuminated by Frantz Fanon's concern with violence and political domination. The influence of dominant groups is made more comprehensible by Antonio Gramsci's concept of political and cultural hegemony. A framework for assessing inequality is provided by John Rawls's theory of justice. Sharma's critique of development without liberty is fortified by Amartya Sen's comprehension of development as freedom. Sharma's interest in constitutional morality and equality is particularly pertinent to B. R. Ambedkar's democratic philosophy. Albert Camus's philosophy of the absurd illuminates the figure of Sisyphus, while Gandhi's ethical politics offers a contrasting model of responsible leadership. Consequently, the novel is deserving of examination not only as a political narrative, but also as a philosophical and ethical reflection on modern society.

The misuse of political power is one of the central themes of *Hell for the People*. Sharma examines history and notes that monarchs frequently engage in conflicts over the throne, territorial expansion, prestige, and political supremacy.

Conflicts of this nature are seldom restricted to the rulers themselves. These struggles disproportionately affect ordinary individuals. The narrator notes, "The people who supported one of the princes in power grabs were subjected to hell as a result of the numerous princes' disputes" (Sharma 5). The title of the novel is directly explicated by this statement. Political ambition is the cause of the "hell" that the populace endures, rather than supernatural forces. The historical association between political authority and violence and conflict is illustrated by the examples of Ashoka, Aurangzeb, and Alauddin Khilji. Sharma urges readers to reevaluate the conventional veneration of kings and rulers. Historical narratives frequently commemorate political accomplishments and territorial victories; however, Sharma underscores the hardships that preceded these accomplishments.

This comprehension of power is compatible with Hannah Arendt's distinction between legitimate collective power and violence. In "On Violence," Arendt asserts that "power is the capacity of the human being to act in concert, rather than an individual act." Rather than coercion, political authority should be derived from collective participation in the democratic sense. In the same vein, Sharma's novel implies that political authority loses its moral legitimacy when it is disassociated from the populace. In the novel, war is perhaps the most apparent example of political "hell." Sharma examines the rationale behind wars and emphasises the anguish endured by both soldiers and civilians.

The narrator raises the question, "After all, what was to be gained from these wars?...Often, there is no logic for war, and yet war takes place, creating the darkness of hell" (Sharma 7). The question is morally significant because political leaders frequently employ concepts such as national honour, territorial security, supremacy, ideology, or historical destiny to describe war. However, the repercussions are felt by the general populace in the form of psychological trauma, poverty, injury, displacement, and death. The two World Wars serve as significant illustrations. Hitler and Mussolini are examples of leaders whose political ambitions resulted in significant devastation. Hitler's aspiration for German supremacy serves as an illustration of the destructive potential of nationalism when combined with authoritarianism and racial ideology:

Hitler and Mussolini primarily created the hell that the people of Germany and Italy endured from 1936 to 1945. The Second World War would not have occurred if Hitler had made additional concessions. He lost his temper and incited the soldiers to attack the enemy in order to achieve German renown when the Allied Nations imposed numerous restrictions on Germany. Ultimately, he committed suicide after the six-year atrocious Second World War. Due to the waning of their status as war heroes, Mussolini and Japanese leaders were compelled to accept dishonour. They were also ensnared in torment. (Sharma 7)

Frantz Fanon's writings on colonial violence offer an additional valuable perspective. The psychological and physical suffering that political domination induces is illustrated by Fanon. His analysis elucidates Sharma's comprehension that violence inflicts harm on more than just individuals; it also undermines human relationships and communities. Sharma's argument is further enriched by the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The human toll of war is immense, regardless of whether it results in political independence. Numerous Indian soldiers were killed, their families were devastated, and economic resources were exhausted. Consequently, Sharma's analysis of war prompts readers to evaluate political decisions not solely on the basis of military victory, but also on the impact they have on human life.

The novel's philosophical dimension is significantly influenced by the narrative of King Sisyphus. Sisyphus is depicted as a cruel ruler who inflicts torment on his subjects without expressing any remorse. He is compelled to carry a heavy stone to the summit of a mountain as a form of retribution from the gods. He is compelled to restart each time he approaches the summit, as the stone rolls back down. The narrative serves as a representation of the perpetual human struggle. Sisyphus is unable to achieve permanent success despite his continuous efforts. Ultimately, he comprehends that "life is an absurdity." The association with Albert Camus is particularly noteworthy. Camus concludes in *The Myth of Sisyphus* that "the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart." Sisyphus is transformed into a philosophical symbol of human existence by Camus. In the same way, Sharma employs Sisyphus to symbolise the repetitive struggles that human beings undergo in order to experience suffering. Symbolically, the stone may symbolise political accountability, economic pressure, social expectations, ambition, or personal issues. Despite the uncertainty of success, the individual persists in their endeavours. The relationship between Sisyphus and King Madho is also noteworthy. Madho's life is not necessarily devoid of anxiety or suffering, despite his royal authority. In this way, Sharma challenges the notion that happiness is contingent upon one's political status.

Another significant representation of "hell" is political imprisonment. Political opponents are isolated from their families, colleagues, journalists, supporters, and the general public. Their intellectual participation in society is disrupted, and their communication is restricted. The narrator states, "There is no exchange of thoughts at this time," and "No editors have arrived to conduct their interviews" (Sharma 24). These statements illustrate that imprisonment is not merely physical confinement. It is also characterised by intellectual and social isolation. The capacity to engage in public discourse is forfeited by a political prisoner. The metaphor of hell is further emphasised by the physical conditions of imprisonment: "At nite, the mosquitoes tormented them like hell" (Sharma 24). Michel Foucault's examination of disciplinary institutions is particularly pertinent in this context.

Institutions, surveillance, classification, discipline, and control are the mechanisms through which modern power operates, according to Foucault. Sharma's portrayal of institutional authority is illuminated by his renowned observation that "Power is everywhere". Political dominance is physically represented by prison in Sharma's narrative. Movement, communication, association, and expression are all under the state's control.

Sharma does not exclusively portray the Emergency through a negative lens in *Hell for the People*, which is an intriguing aspect. The novel acknowledges specific administrative accomplishments that are linked to the era. The narrative posits that government departments became more disciplined, punctuality increased, pending files were cleared, strikes were restricted, industrial production continued, roads and bridges were constructed, industries expanded, and housing schemes were promoted. Narrator: "In an instant, it appeared as though India had become a developed nation" (Sharma 25). This assertion establishes a significant contradiction. Development seems to be on the rise, while political freedom is on the decline. Amartya Sen's theory of development offers an exceptional framework for comprehending this tension. Genuine development cannot be achieved solely through economic growth, according to this viewpoint.

Another significant source of "hell" is economic ambition. Sharma describes an industrialist who, with the help of his two sons, establishes "fifty industries." His accomplishment is indicative of his entrepreneurial prowess and willpower. It is referred to as "the pinnacle of ambition" (Sharma 16). The industrialist also establishes schools, colleges, and hospitals for the benefit of workers and their families. This suggests that wealth has the potential to be allocated to social welfare. Nevertheless, Sharma simultaneously underscores the perils of unbridled accumulation. He states, "The more he acquires, the more he desires" (Sharma 16). The psychology of greed is encapsulated by this straightforward statement. Satisfaction is not necessarily a consequence of economic success. Conversely, the aspiration for increased wealth may become insatiable. Karl Marx's theory offers a pivotal theoretical perspective in this regard. Marx famously commences *The Communist Manifesto* with the proclamation, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." Sharma's industrial narrative also acknowledges the conflict between capital and labour. The capitalist pursues profit, whereas labourers strive for improved economic conditions and dignity.

The economic dimension of the novel is augmented by the discussion of Karl Marx in *Hell for the People*. Marx is introduced as a critic of capitalism who emphasises economic power, class relations, labour, and material conditions. The theory of surplus value is especially pertinent. Capitalists accumulate profits, while workers contribute labour to production. Class conflict may arise when wealth

distribution becomes unequal. Sharma enacts this conflict by depicting an industrialist whose employees revolt against his factory. They coalesce, ignite the factory, and devastate industrial property. The occurrence is a manifestation of social "hell." Industrialists endure destruction and insecurity, while workers endure economic inequality. In the end, violence is detrimental to both parties. This conflict is also elucidated by Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Institutions, ideas, and social structures are all ways in which dominant economic groups maintain their influence, in addition to financial resources. Consequently, the conflict between industrialists and workers is not merely a dispute over wages; it is a struggle for social status and power.

The relationship between Indira Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, and Maneka Gandhi serves as an illustration of the potential for political ambition to infiltrate familial relationships. Financial and personal tensions are generated by the issues associated with the magazine *Surya*. The passing of Sanjay Gandhi has exacerbated the uncertainty surrounding the future of Maruti Udyog, the magazine, and political succession." Two kings don't exist in the same kingdom" (Sharma 57) is a succinct summary of the conflict between Maneka and Indira Gandhi. The sentence functions metaphorically. It implies that the distribution of political power can be challenging when two powerful individuals have conflicting aspirations.

Sharma's political critique encompasses the general election as an additional significant subject. Elections are depicted as occasions of anticipation and optimism. Political parties pledge to improve agricultural conditions, rural development, employment, tax reforms, and economic progress, as well as to reduce prices and provide affordable petrol. The significance of citizens in a democratic system is illustrated by election promises. Political parties endeavour to persuade electors in order to secure public support. Nevertheless, Sharma also illustrates the more sinister aspects of electoral politics. Money, organization, supporters, political networks, and occasionally physical power are all necessary for elections. Voting patterns and candidate selection can be influenced by caste calculations. Dynastic politics are also the subject of the novel. The continuance of political influence within families is illustrated by the examples of Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and Rajiv Gandhi. The discourse encompasses contemporary political succession through references to Rahul Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi. B. R. Ambedkar's democratic philosophy offers a substantial theoretical framework in this regard. Ambedkar underscored the necessity of transforming democracy into a lifestyle that is founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Social and economic inequality must be addressed in order for political democracy to continue to be meaningful.

The novel also raises the question of whether educational qualifications should be the determining factor in political leadership. A minister is not necessarily

required to possess a specialised academic degree. Leadership, public recognition, party organization, electoral support, and political experience may be more critical. This inquiry is pertinent to John Rawls's theory of justice, as political institutions ought to be assessed in accordance with their equitable allocation of rights and opportunities. In his book *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls asserts that "every individual is entitled to the most comprehensive fundamental liberties." Therefore, Sharma's apprehension regarding political leadership can be interpreted in accordance with the principle that political office should ultimately serve citizens, rather than solely political elites.

Fear, imprisonment, corruption, violence, and exploitation are the consequences of exercising power over others. Welfare, education, healthcare, security, justice, and development are all the results of power for the people. This paper, which pertains to the President's decision to recognise combat widows, offers a constructive illustration of political authority. The President has organised a ceremony that will provide widows with financial assistance, national recognition, and respect. In addition to the monthly pension, the President presents each widow with a white shawl and a cheque for two lakh rupees, as a military guard brings her before him. The recitation of Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's renowned phrase, "सिंहासन खाली करो कि जनता आती है" (Sharma 136) confirms the democratic principle that political authority ultimately belongs to the people. Mahatma Gandhi's ethical perspective is pertinent in this context. Gandhi repeatedly linked politics to moral responsibility and devotion. He implies that political power should be subordinated to human welfare in his comprehension of public life.

Another significant aspect of the novel is the character of Kanishka. She is a member of the former royal family of Jodhpur, which is characterised by inherited privilege. However, she is also intellectually drawn to democracy. Her interest in Abraham Lincoln, Rousseau, Bentham, and J. S. Mill is fostered by her education at Mayo College, Ajmer. She is in favour of the principle of governance that is dedicated to ensuring that the greatest number of individuals experience the most happiness (Sharma 108). Kanishka begins to question the immense luxury that is associated with monarchy. She enquires, "What is the necessity of a 400-room palace for a king?" Why does he maintain a museum of weapons? (Sharma 108). Nevertheless, Kamal Lalmani continues to be sceptical of Kanishka's devotion to sovereign history. He is of the opinion that she is incapable of fully adapting to a social environment that is equal.

Vintosh and Maria's narrative broadens the novel's social perspective beyond India. Vintosh is employed as Kanishka's attendant in the United States, but he is experiencing job insecurity. Interracial relationships, migration, marriage,

employment, and immigration are all raised by his relationship with Maria. Despite the distinction between attendants and mistresses, Maria is prepared to relocate to India. Vintosh is concerned about his temporary employment, while Maria suggests that he pursue vocational training in the field of catering. Consequently, the novel depicts education as a means of social mobility and survival, rather than solely a formal qualification.

The concept of suffering is expanded to encompass family responsibilities and gender relations in the novel's later passages. Working women are required to balance their professional obligations with their familial obligations. Mrs. Prabudh's narrative illustrates her remarkable fortitude in the aftermath of her husband's passing. Despite her emotional distress, she remains focused on the future of her children, employment, and property. "Her declaration that "the predicament must be confronted" (Sharma 146) indicates her resolve. Thus, the narrative transcends conventional depictions of women as passive victims. Economic and emotional challenges are confronted by women who become decision-makers.

Sharma also investigates contemporary social issues through the lens of medical education and student life. In order to emphasise the significance of practical training, medical students are obligated to observe operations. The evolving challenges that young people encounter are illustrated by the examination of sexual health, substance addiction, marijuana, opium, chemicals, and mobile-phone addiction. Both opportunities and issues are generated by technology. Communication and learning can be facilitated by mobile phones, social media, and online education; however, excessive dependence may erode concentration and deteriorate interpersonal relationships.

The novel also addresses constitutional change, taxation, national debt, regional languages, fundamental rights, and cybercrime. The contemporary technological environment is particularly pertinent to the discussion of cybercrime. Crime is not necessarily eradicated by the existence of laws. It is imperative that laws are effectively enforced, and citizens must also exhibit responsible behaviour. This concept is in accordance with Foucault's concept of institutional power: laws, institutions, surveillance, and disciplinary mechanisms can influence behaviour, but they cannot independently ensure ethical behaviour.

The novel is enriched by the emotional narrative of Devanshi and Professor Krishna Avtar Goyal. Devanshi learns that her father, whom she had presumed to be deceased, is actually alive. She eventually reconnects with him after conducting a search for him on Facebook. The meeting transforms into an emotive moment of reconciliation. Technology, which is occasionally depicted in a negative light in other parts of the novel, is utilised in a positive manner in this instance. This contradiction

is significant. Sharma does not regard technology as inherently good or bad. Its value is contingent upon the manner in which humans employ it. Sharma composes:

Dr. (Mrs.) Bansal's acquaintance, Dr. Goyal (42) was divorced and was tired of her daughter, Devanshi (18). Devanshi was now in the process of maturing and harboured a strong aspiration to be with her father, Professor Krishna Avtar Goyal. For many years, Mrs. Goyal deceived her by falsely asserting that her father was deceased. However, the astute girl was able to ascertain the specifics of Professor K.A. Goyal by locating the photo album of her mother's wedding (Sharma 156).

A balanced perspective is presented in the final discussion of capitalism. Sharma acknowledges the continued significance of capitalism in the economic framework of India. Economic development is influenced by private investment, industrial production, computers, media, and professional management. Nevertheless, the novel also critiques profit-oriented behaviour when capitalists disregard the needs of ordinary individuals. Sharma also recognises that industrialists have the ability to establish research centers, hospitals, universities, colleges, and schools. Consequently, the novel refrains from presenting a simplistic dichotomy between capitalism and social welfare. Rather, it urges capitalism to adopt a socially responsible approach. Amartya Sen's emphasis on the development of human capabilities is in harmony with this concept. Economic growth becomes significant when it enhances the actual opportunities of individuals to lead dignified lives.

Conclusion:

Hell for the People, a novel by Vikas Sharma, is a philosophical, social, political, and economic work that delves into the human repercussions of power, conflict, corruption, inequality, authoritarianism, and unbridled economic ambition. Sharma illustrates the profound impact of political and economic decisions on the lives of ordinary individuals through historical conflicts, the World Wars, the Bangladesh Liberation War, the Emergency, industrialisation, electoral politics, and class struggle. The ongoing struggle of human existence is further symbolised by the figure of Sisyphus. The novel does not condemn development; rather, it raises concerns about the absence of humanity in development. Industry, employment, education, healthcare, infrastructure, technology, and economic growth are indispensable; however, they must also contribute to human dignity, freedom, and welfare. Marx, Arendt, Foucault, Fanon, Gramsci, Rawls, Sen, Ambedkar, Gandhi, and Camus offer valuable theoretical perspectives for comprehending human struggle, justice, freedom, ethical politics, power, and domination. The title is especially significant due to the recurring presence of workers, soldiers, prisoners, women, families, students, migrants, and ordinary citizens. They are subjected to the repercussions of decisions made by influential authorities. In conclusion, Sharma posits that political power without accountability is oppression, economic ambition without morality is greed, and democracy without equality is manipulation. The novel's "hell" is the result of human beings abdicating their responsibility to one

another. Its alternative is rooted in ethical leadership, democratic participation, social justice, equality, freedom, and respect for human dignity. Consequently, *Hell for the People* is not merely a critique of society; it is a powerful appeal for a more equitable and compassionate social structure.

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