

Epistemic Fortitude in the Panoptic Campus: Professor Viren's Moral Stoicism, and Resistance to Fabricated Narratives in Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires*

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Abstract

The novel *All Her Fires: Every Flame She Lit Had a Cost*, by Vikas Sharma (2026), is a coeval Indian campus novel addressing generational conflict, education politics, institutional bias, techno-culture, moral dilemmas, and the changing face of higher education in modern-day India. The novel's action and themes are driven by Sanya's insubordination and deal-making tactics, while Professor Viren functions as its ethical centre. A progressive educator committed to intellectual labour, Viren confronts factions, bureaucracy, institutional politics, and reputational damage. This paper studies Viren's character through the concept of epistemic fortitude and examines his resistance to institutional pressure and fabricated narratives through Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism, Pierre Bourdieu's theories of academic and symbolic capital, Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of self-reliance, Stoicism, and the Indian guru-shishya tradition. The paper also examines the novel's autobiographical parallels, its representation of Gen Z consciousness, and its treatment of gender dynamics. The exposure of the conspirators and their formal apologies, followed by Viren's forgiveness, reinforce the paper's focus on moral endurance, ethical autonomy, and human perseverance.

Keywords: Epistemic Fortitude; Institutional Politics; Stoicism; Human Perseverance; Indian Campus Novel.

Introduction

Generally, the university is considered to be a sanctuary of intellectual inquiry that is free of inhibition, restraint, and uncritical judgment. Nevertheless, the campus atmosphere in literary works is rarely idyllic; rather, it is an arena defined by institutional and reputational interests, professional rivalries, and struggles for

authority. It is specifically the critique revealed through the campus novel that possesses a sharp edge, exposing the clash of humanistic ideals with bureaucratic systems. The setting of Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires: Every Flame She Lit Had a Cost* (2026) interacts dynamically with this environment at the University of Mayarashtra. The novel contrasts Sanya, a transactionally minded student, against Professor Viren, an academic scholar who subscribes to established ideals of intellectual rigor and ethical responsibility. This generational dissimilarity emphasizes Viren as a moral counterweight to contemporary disengagement and ethical drift.

It is based on this dynamic that this study suggests Viren's distinct viewpoint is best understood through the lens of epistemic fortitude. His inner conflict is more than struggling to survive as an academician or preserving his image; it is a conscious struggle to protect his view of objective truth against institutional pressures. Whereas Sanya reacts by questioning conventional wisdom for utility, Viren revolts against a system that attempts to substitute reality with artificial stories.

Autobiographical Adaptation: Fictionalizing the Lived Agony of Prof. Vikas Sharma

To fully comprehend the depth of Professor Viren's epistemic fortitude, it is essential to examine the novel through its autobiographical framework. *All Her Fires* serves as an imaginative fictional adaptation closely mirroring the real-life academic trajectory, institutional conflicts, and personal agony of the author, Prof. Vikas Sharma. The novel bridges the gap between fiction and lived experience, infusing the narrative with psychological urgency stemming from actual administrative battles and campus politics.

The realist method of the novel prefers fictionalization to exact documentation, altering key names while maintaining clear biographical parallels. The fictional "University of Mayarashtra" directly corresponds to Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, where Prof. Vikas Sharma serves as a senior professor. Similarly, the fictional town of "Baran" refers to Bulandshahr, where Sharma served as Professor and Principal at D.A.V. PG College for seventeen years.

Exact temporal and administrative milestones reinforces this autobiographical foundation.

Table 1

Autobiographical Parallels between Vikas Sharma's Life and *All Her Fires*

Real Life	Fictional Adaptation
Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut	University of Mayarashtra (Historical name of Meerut)
D.A.V. PG College, Bulandshahr (Served 17 years)	Postgraduate College in Baran (Former name of Bulandshahr)
Interview: 30 April 2018; Appointment: 2 May 2018	Prof. Viren's interview on 30 April 2018; Appointment on 2 May 2018
Academic partnership with brother Prof. Sanjeev Sharma	Joint employment of Prof. Viren and his brother, Prof. Rajeev
Real-life assistant Sunny/Sana	Protagonist Sanya/Sana
M.A. English Gold Medalist (2021-2023) at CCS University	Sanya completes M.A. English with Gold Medal (2021-2023)
Ph.D. enrolment on Vikas Sharma's novels at SRM University	Sanya pursues Ph.D. on Prof. Viren's novels at RSM University
Interviewer Rudrakshi	Character Rudrakshi/Ruru

As per Vishal Redhu, striking parallels can be established between the novel and Prof. Sharma's real life. He presents Prof. Viren as a literary adaptation of Prof. Sharma himself. Redhu also considers the professional trajectories of Viren and Sharma to be similar. Viren's association with his brother and his service as Principal of a postgraduate college in Baran parallel Sharma's service as Principal at D.A.V. PG College, Bulandshahr (Redhu 467).

Redhu also identifies parallels between the novel's main character, Sanya, and the real-life Sunny/Sana, particularly in their academic lives, including their Master's degrees, Gold Medal achievement, and Ph.D. research on Sharma's novels (Redhu 467-68).

This autobiographical alignment demonstrates that Viren's character is not a mere literary construct of passive virtue, but a distilled representation of a living scholar's battle against institutional alienation and reputational sabotage. The text transforms personal isolation into universal commentary regarding the price of maintaining moral integrity in higher education.

Viren and the Ethical Concept of Education

Professor Viren possesses a strong professional identity anchored in a vision of teaching that illustrates the human dimension described in classical educational philosophy. Higher learning, to Viren, is not merely a collection of objective data but the cultivation of character and thoughtful judgment. This understanding of higher education corresponds with John Henry Newman's view of the university as a place in which learning goes beyond the simple accumulation of facts (Newman). He considers teaching to be a moral obligation per se: to spread learning, hone understanding, and develop character.

This worldview stands in sharp contrast with the transactionalism followed by Sanya and her peers. Viren represents a generational commitment to moral idealism, intellectual discipline, and structured authority. His adherence to classical Indian sensibilities contrasts sharply with Sanya's outward disdain for traditional heritage. Sanya openly voices her hostility toward traditional cultural frameworks: "This Indian civilisation is backward, traditional, and patriarchal. English is grace-both man and the language. I pity those who feel proud in this primitive Indian civilisation" (Sharma 75).

Furthermore, while Viren upholds the stability of home and traditional values, Sanya dismisses long-term institutional commitments and domestic constancy, articulating her rejection of marriage: "'Marriage?' she once scoffed in a group conversation. 'It's outdated. Who can eat the same *dal-chawal* every single day? Life needs flavours. Spices. Variations'" (Sharma 135).

While Sanya regards education instrumentally as a credential for immediate social and professional mobility, Viren regards it as the elemental progress of personal development. This divergence elevates their conflict beyond a standard disagreement between professor and student into a universal argument about the core purpose of academia: Sanya seeks what education can give (material benefit), whereas Viren seeks what education can bring (moral transformation). Viren's courage is shown by his refusal to abandon this ideal even as the institutional ecosystem grows increasingly hostile.

The Camus and Kafka Intellectual Nexus: Foundation of Viren-Sanya Dynamics

A critical insight into the novel's thematic architecture is that the relationship between Professor Viren and Sanya is fundamentally anchored in high-level intellectual conversations surrounding existentialist literature—specifically Albert Camus and Franz Kafka. Professor Viren is deeply devoted to world literature and philosophical inquiry, naturally seeking scholarly resonance in his students.

It is precisely this intellectual openness that Sanya targets. Under the explicit guidance of her companion Chandan, Sanya intentionally invokes Camus and Kafka in her interactions with the professor. Viren is immensely impressed that a young student possesses familiarity with demanding European thinkers, making this engagement the primary reason he takes a special interest in her mentorship.

The calculated, transactional nature of this intellectual rapport is exposed when Sanya boasts to her peers about how easily she cultivated Viren's favor: "I thought gaining Viren's favour would be a tough nut to crack. But I didn't have to do anything. Just a bit of intellectual talk, some fake admiration and he is yours. A bit of Camus here, a little Kafka there, and admire his own novels and your work is done" (Sharma 118).

Rather than engaging in sincere literary appreciation, Sanya uses literary references as tools of leverage. Sanya directly challenges Viren's artistic choices and traditional sensibilities, demanding that he abandon subtle portrayals in favor of explicit commercial literature: "You do not adequately express the sexual encounters in your novels, Sir. You should describe it in more detail. There is no passion in the lovemaking you portray. You should take some inspiration from books like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The Western literature is way better than the Indian literature" (Sharma 73).

This textual dialogue demonstrates how Sanya uses Western references to challenge traditional literary canons. Her performance and calculated vulnerability work together as tools to establish control. Unaware initially of her underlying cynicism, Viren engages with her as a promising scholar, demonstrating that the bedrock of their complex relationship was built upon these initial intellectual exchanges.

The Panoptic Campus: Foucault and Surveillance

Michel Foucault's theory of panopticism offers a strong framework for analyzing the institutional context in *All Her Fires*. Foucault demonstrates that

institutional power often operates omnipresently through pervasive observation, compelling individuals to internalize the gaze of power.

Foucault further explains that the Panopticon seeks "to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (201).

In Sharma's novel, this panoptic system operates through both formal administrative channels and informal mechanisms—rumors, digital traces, peer surveillance, and institutional intrigue. The digitization of academic life accelerates this process; casual communications become permanent records, intimate dialogues are subjected to administrative review, and discord is systematically documented. Consequently, the campus functions as a panoptic space where self-censorship becomes the default norm.

Viren's stance stands out because it is not subdued by this atmosphere of institutional fear. Rather than seeking status through administrative compliance, he bases his actions on principles that are empirically tested and morally grounded, defying the obedience through anxiety that panoptic institutions demand.

Bourdieu, the Economy of Flattery, and Life as a Marketplace

The structure of power within the novel can be further explained through Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of academic and symbolic capital. Bourdieu explains that capital can take different forms and that "the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world" (243). Advancement in academic spaces often relies less on pure scholarly prowess than on proximity to authority, tactical networking, and compliance. In *All Her Fires*, the University of Maharashtra mirrors an economy of flattery where administrative loyalty is rewarded and intellectual rigor is frequently sidelined. Within such a setting, compliance provides professional protection, administrative closeness yields symbolic authority, and independent thought carries penalties.

This economy of flattery is rejected by Viren. He declines to trade his intellectual independence for administrative favor, demonstrating that the academic community need not be entirely homogeneous.

In stark contrast, Sanya completely embraces this transactional framework, reducing human relationships and educational institutions to a commercial market.

Her core philosophy is articulated with cold clarity: "People called it manipulation. She called it resourcefulness. Why slog through books the way everyone else did, hoping merit alone would shine? Life wasn't a merit list, it was a marketplace. Looks, charm, timing—those were the currencies that mattered" (Sharma 127).

Garg similarly notes that Sanya's transactional approach extended to her understanding of human relationships and how her success was tied to her effectiveness in them. She feels that Sanya's marketplace philosophy has made everything from relationships to mentoring into a transaction where people are driven by what they can get out of it (Garg 701-02).

This opportunistic worldview manifests in her interactions across campus. When discussing personal relationships and human solidarity, Sanya mocks those who act out of altruism, stating her user philosophy: "'A soap opera,' she muttered loud enough for them to hear. Then, leaning against the doorframe, she added with a mocking smile, 'Shivani, why do you care so much? We can only help ourselves in this world. Don't be so *mahaan*. People will just walk all over you. Nice people get used. I prefer to be the user'" (Sharma 6).

While Sanya treats academic and personal spaces as trading floors, Viren refuses the monetization of his symbolic capital, preserving the intrinsic dignity of scholarly life.

Produced Accounts, Fabricated Narratives, and Textual Refutations

A central dimension of Viren's character is the distinction between reputation and character. Reputation is external and socially constructed, easily manipulated by rumors or coordinated plots; character is internal, consisting of a stable history of moral judgments. This distinction leaves principled individuals vulnerable to smear campaigns when unverified claims are accepted over thorough examination.

Throughout the novel, fabricated narratives are constructed by administrative rivals and opportunistic students to disrupt Viren's standing. Sanya actively generates malicious accounts once Viren attempts to enforce professional decorum and academic discipline. When Viren cautions her regarding her public behavior and campus decorum, Sanya responds with immediate insubordination:

"Sir, I think I should be the one to decide what is good for me and what is not. Thank you for your concern, but please stay out of my way.

Those bitches are complaining about me now? Those ugly, good-for-nothing, bitches would tell how I should behave? I don't think so. I will do whatever the fuck I want. And about Chandan. I will fuck whoever I want and wherever I want. Who are you to order me around? Don't try to be my baap, Professor Sharma." (Sharma 115-16)

Sanya's practice of distorting relationships is documented throughout the text. She routinely demeaned her partner Chandan to her peers, reducing him to a transactional convenience:

"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'. He can't even differentiate between 'Then' and 'Than', and 'Their' and 'There' or where to use 'has', 'have' and 'had'. Putting together five sentences in English properly is impossible for him. And don't get me started on his fluency. You know how tall he is? Just 5'6". How can you even imagine that 'I' will even think of spending my life with him? I wouldn't marry him even if he were the last man on Earth." (Sharma 70)

Literary Politics of Accusations: Ibsen, Kafka, Orwell, and Camus

Viren belongs to a literary tradition of characters whose commitment to truth brings them into conflict with established systems. A clear parallel exists with Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, where Dr. Thomas Stockmann exposes public health risks but is declared an enemy of the community when his findings threaten economic interests. Similarly, Viren becomes an administrative liability because his adherence to principles disrupts institutional convenience (Ibsen, act 4).

A parallel is also observed in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, where Josef K. faces ambiguous accusations that destabilize his reality. However, Viren differs from Josef K. in an important respect: rather than internalizing the ambiguity of the system accusing him, Viren evaluates the institution using established moral standards, preserving his identity by denying false claims the power to define him.

The extreme boundary of institutional narrative control is illustrated in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Although *All Her Fires* is set in contemporary academia rather than a dystopian state, Viren addresses a central Orwellian question: can an individual maintain an independent understanding of reality when institutional structures demand compliance with manufactured narratives? Viren demonstrates that objective reality is preserved through disciplined judgment (Orwell, pt. 1, ch. 4).

This persistence aligns philosophically with Albert Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Sisyphus pushes his rock repeatedly, finding meaning in the conscious act itself. In the same manner, Viren receives no guarantee that institutional politics will permanently cease; resolving one conflict does not eliminate future challenges. Genuine fortitude is not the naïve expectation of seamless victory, but a continuous dedication to ethical duty despite ongoing uncertainty (Camus 119-23).

Gender Dynamics, Pseudo-Feminism, and the Subversion of Patriarchal Apology Norms

In *All Her Fires*, female agency is portrayed across a broad spectrum through characters like Sanya, Disha, and Shivani. Sanya pursues absolute individualistic autonomy; Disha navigates complex domestic expectations; Shivani carries the weight of personal resilience and independence. This spectrum reflects the multifaceted nature of contemporary women in India. Within this context, Viren's pedagogical role is not to impose rigid dogmas, but to foster awareness regarding the consequences of one's choices.

However, Sanya's professed progressive ideals collapse whenever they conflict with her immediate personal interests, revealing a transactional pseudo-feminism. The text highlights key instances of this moral failure.

The Zoya Khan Confrontation: When Zoya Khan publicly confronts Chandan over emotional betrayal at a campus event, Sanya dismisses Zoya's distress: "It's not his fault," she declared, her chin high. 'You both did *ayyaashi* together. You enjoyed it too, didn't you? So why cry now? Be mature and move on" (Sharma 138).

Hostility Toward Female Classmates: When female peers voice objections regarding her public behavior and breach of campus decorum, Sanya expresses unvarnished hostility toward them: "Those bitches are complaining about me now? Those ugly, good-for-nothing, bitches would tell how I should behave? I don't think so" (Sharma 115).

Sanya's Derogatory Remarks over Priya's Simple Looks: "You think anyone would ever look at you that way? Keep dreaming. No one would fuck you even if you pay them" (Sharma 218).

Her abusive take on her own Doctoral Supervisor, whose English accent she mimicked: "Oh! She knows nothing. She should retire now and take care of Chullha-Chawka" (Sharma 352). Extending the abuse to:

"She behaves like she is my Saas", "I think she fights with her husband every morning and pours her bitterness onto me", "I bet no one cares about her in her personal life, she never smiles and she takes out her frustration on me", "Maybe she is envious because she doesn't have a godfather like I have Viren or she is jealous that I will achieve great things in life with my guardian angel and she is serving at a private university at the age of 42", "Or maybe she is a lesbian because she is obsessed with me." (Sharma 352-53)

Her comments on both these female characters show how deeply she is indulged into narcissistic traits of pseudo-feminism.

Sanya's pseudo-feminist attitude is explicitly apparent in her tendency to judge other women on the behalf of their physical appearance. The narrative observes, "She had her private list of irritations too. Sambhawna's height, Sunidhi's acne, and Inder's voice" (Sharma 202). The remark reveals how Sanya's supposedly progressive outlook coexists with a tendency to scrutinize and devalue others on the basis of physical attributes.

Caste Prejudice: Her progressive posturing falls away entirely during moments of conflict, as seen in her aristocratic claims of familial superiority regarding her family's heritage in Benaras:

"In Benaras, we have a haveli. You won't believe the aura my grandfather has there. In simple words, he is at the top of the food chain. If I say that his words are like a verdict to those who visit him, it won't be an exaggeration. You know, those despicable SCs and STs don't even have the permission to sit on chairs. They have to sit on the floor if they are ever asked to sit. Otherwise, they just stand." (Sharma 103)

Despite these toxic dynamics and manufactured accounts, the novel introduces a significant subversion of institutional allegation norms. In contemporary Indian social and academic contexts, administrative proceedings involving gender-based allegations often result in the male figure capitulating under systemic pressure. *All Her Fires* presents a literary subversion where the fabricated narratives

constructed against Professor Viren are disproved through objective investigation and cybercrime inquiries. Consequently, the involved conspirators are compelled to tender formal apologies.

What follows defines the moral heart of the novel: Professor Viren, displaying immense open-heartedness, unconditionally forgives the conspirators involved in the plot against him. In institutional contexts where feuds are often pursued to total destruction, Viren's act of clemency for forgiveness highlights his moral grandeur. His forgiveness is an expression of ethical autonomy, proving that his self-worth remains entirely independent of administrative retribution.

Stoicism and Ethical Self-Reliance

Reflecting the principles of classical Stoicism—specifically the dichotomy of control articulated by Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius—Viren maintains internal mental stability. External circumstances, such as administrative directives, social opinions, and institutional factions, remain outside an individual's direct control; however, moral choices and internal integrity remain strictly within one's power.

Viren applies this principle consistently. He recognizes that he cannot control administrative maneuvers, group opinions, or malicious rumors. What he can control is his refusal to compromise his moral integrity. His Stoicism represents disciplined resistance rather than passive resignation. This orientation is reinforced by Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of self-reliance, which cautions against depending on external validation. Administrative approval does not determine Viren's sense of value; he retains his moral identity even when his professional standing is threatened.

The Pedagogical Duty: Dronacharya-Arjuna Paradigm

Viren's pedagogical framework draws upon the Indian Guru-shishya model, reflecting the structural relationship exemplified by Dronacharya and Arjuna. While modern higher education operates within administrative frameworks, this paradigm offers foundational principles: rigor, ethical instruction, and professional responsibility.

Viren views teaching not as a routine service, but as a commitment to student development. This outlook shapes his initial engagement with Sanya. Although Sanya approaches the university with transactional pragmatism, Viren offers a framework rooted in moral responsibility. His perspective holds that an educator points the way, but the student must walk it. Viren does not seek to restrict freedom, but to anchor freedom in moral awareness.

Viren and the Generation of Transactions: Gen Z Consciousness

Rather than acting merely as an opponent, Viren emerges as a guide and observer of Generation Z. Sanya embodies aspects of contemporary youth culture characterized by high visibility, self-expression, and pragmatic utilization. Generation Z is conceptualized in the novel as a "collage of contradictions shaped by geography, class, and opportunity" (Sharma 19).

The novel provides a sophisticated sociology of Gen Z across spatial divides. In urban centers, Gen Z carries smartphones "like a second skin," endlessly scrolling, impatient for success, and irritated by hierarchy (Sharma 19). In small towns, Gen Z balances between modern aspirations and traditional rituals, scrolling Instagram while touching their parents' feet before exams (Sharma 20).

In rural areas, Gen Z experiences life through borrowed screens, facing patchy internet and tight family control, where instant gratification means a second-hand bike rather than branded sneakers (Sharma 20).

Observing this generation, Professor Viren captures their complex nature:

"They are not like us," he admitted silently. "We obeyed authority, respected boundaries, and feared public shame. These children—no, these young adults—they 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." (Sharma 172-73)

A central tension arises when the desire for individual autonomy is detached from moral responsibility. Viren maintains that when intellect is unmoored from ethics, it leads to personal and institutional instability. His perspective shows that while institutional methods evolve with time, core principles—integrity, personal responsibility, and human dignity—remain essential. His critique is not anti-modern, but an objection to the idea that modernity requires moral detachment.

Endurance: The Most Admirable Quality Viren Has

The defining strength of Viren's character lies not in administrative victories, but in moral endurance. Despite facing institutional hostility, he does not succumb to despair—the common retreat in compromised environments. Where others might conclude that ethical principles are meaningless due to systemic flaws, Viren maintains a clear distinction: institutional corruption does not diminish the intrinsic value of education. Academic dishonesty does not invalidate genuine scholarship,

fabricated narratives do not make truth less significant, and systemic injustice does not undermine the necessity of justice.

By separating human and institutional failures from the validity of core principles, Viren maintains his ethical grounding. His identity remains rooted in his commitment to truth rather than the imperfections of the institution.

The Right to Remain the Author of One's Reality

All Her Fires explores intergenerational, institutional, and ethical tensions, centered on a fundamental question: Who holds the right to define an individual's moral reality? Viren answers this question through knowledge and moral restraint:

With Foucault, he resists internalizing institutional surveillance.

With Bourdieu, he rejects trading academic autonomy for administrative favor.

With Stoicism, he maintains moral agency independent of external circumstances.

With Emerson, he preserves self-reliance against institutional pressure. Emerson similarly emphasizes individual self-trust, declaring, "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" (35).

With the Guru-shishya tradition, he views education as character formation.

With Ibsen, he upholds truth over administrative convenience.

With Kafka, he refuses to allow baseless accusations to alter his self-knowledge.

With Orwell, he guards the sanctity of objective reality against manufactured narratives.

With Camus, he commits to duty despite ongoing uncertainty.

Ultimately, the novel distinguishes between winning and enduring: winning asks whether one conquered external opponent; enduring asks whether one's moral integrity withstood the trial. Viren's strength lies in perseverance—he continues to teach, analyze, guide, and uphold truth against fabrication. In an era where narratives often displace facts, Viren demonstrates the power of epistemic fortitude. He cannot

prevent others from constructing artificial accounts about him, but he refuses to let them rewrite his reality.

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