



Wanting Too Much, Feeling Too Little: Hyper-Realism, Ethical Crisis, and Social Texture of Prof. Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires*

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ABSTRACT

Prof. Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires* presents a compelling portrait of the ethos of the Indian campus today. This paper argues that the novel uses hyper-realism not to merely depict the anxieties of youth, but to explore the ethical crisis behind this phenomenon of wanting too much and feeling too little. *All Her Fires* examines the mechanisms of social power structures that suppress empathy and heighten self-centred tendencies. Reading the novel as a campus novel, we discern the ethical cost of competitive social relations and the fragile social texture of contemporary life.

Keywords: hyper-realism, ethical crisis, campus novel, Gen Z, social texture

INTRODUCTION

Indian English novel writing has been grappling with contemporary moral quandaries, and Prof. Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires* is part of this growing trend. The novel has drawn critical attention to the anxieties of Generation Z, notably their alienation from society, confusion of identity, and ambiguous social relations. But at the heart of the novel lies the phrase that encapsulates the ethos of the story — “wanting too much, feeling too little”. This phrase can be seen to reflect the rise of an amoral and competitive spirit in contemporary society.

This paper reads *All Her Fires* as a hyper-realistic take on campus life and ethical crisis. We argue that the novel's realism is invested in portraying the mechanisms of morality and how social relations, both peer and gender-based, contribute to the erosion of empathy in the name of self-actualisation. The paper takes its cue from existing criticism of *All Her Fires*, which has begun to engage with the novel as a privileged text for examining the ethical cost of the alienating tendencies of Gen Z.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The critical writing on *All Her Fires* has offered insightful perspectives on the novel's contribution to the emerging discourse on the ethical and existential challenges of Generation Z. Vishal Redhu's article “Alienation, identity, and moral conflict in *All Her Fires* by Prof. Vikas Sharma” examines the novel through the prism of alienation and offers a perceptive analysis of the socio-moral conflicts that colour the protagonist's worldview. We find this approach especially valuable in our reading of Sharma's novel as a text of hyper-realistic ethical inquiry.

Another valuable resource for our analysis is the interview with Sharma published in *The Criterion*, 2026, on the occasion of the novel's release. The article provides us with an overview of critical opinion on *All Her Fires*, as well as Sharma's own views on the novel's contribution to contemporary Indian novel writing. We also rely on general critical opinion on Sharma's fictional writing to position our analysis within the broader parameters of the novel as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

Our analysis is based on close reading and qualitative textual analysis. We approach *All Her Fires* as a novel of ideas, drawing on the themes and motives that Sharma invests in the novel's ethically fraught narrative. In addition to the textual analyses, we also employ a contextual approach, referring to the published critiques of Sharma's novel as part of our larger project of situating the text within the framework of literary realism.

Literary realism is invested in exposing the mechanisms of power structures that govern society. This novel's hyper-realism enables Sharma to depict what happens in ordinary interactions between individuals, as well as the moral consequences of such interactions. The novel's hyper-realism becomes particularly valuable in depicting the social fabric — the ways in which individuals relate to each other. Sharma's realism is thus invested in ethical inquiry.

One of the novel's many strengths is its focus on the campus as a microcosm of social relations. In focusing on the campus, Sharma creates a totalizing novel in which he depicts various aspects of academic life. The novel's hyper-realism shines through in the seemingly mundane interactions between the characters. The way Sharma perceives and depicts campus life offers fresh insights into the social fabric.

While many authors have written about campus life, Sharma's contribution stands out as a unique take on the social organisation of this space. The novel's ethical inquiry becomes apparent in the ways in which the characters navigate the competitive environment of the university. Sharma depicts the campus as a place where individual talent and personality are valued, but where conformity to the system is also necessary.

The phrase "wanting too much, feeling too little" becomes the leitmotif of the novel's exploration of the mechanisms of morality. Sharma depicts ethical crisis as a process of gradual erosion of empathy that occurs as a result of interactions between individuals. The characters' actions and decisions are driven by their desires and feelings, but these are frequently complicated by external influences and moral dilemmas. Sharma depicts ethical crisis as a multi-faceted phenomenon that involves individuals, society, and even the larger systems of governance.

Rebellion emerges as an important theme in the novel, which is further enriched by the complexity of gender relations. Sharma's remarks, published in *The Criterion*, 2026, offer an intriguing look into the genesis of his writing on gender. Sharma examines the ways in which contemporary Indian society negotiates its ambivalence towards patriarchy and feminism, a phenomenon that finds resonance in his novel.

The characters and their complex relationships serve as an effective medium for exploring this issue. Sharma depicts an array of complications that women face in patriarchal social structures. Some of the female characters are portrayed as strong and independent, while others are vulnerable and prone to exploitation. Sharma's realism helps him to depict the multifaceted nature of women's experience in a patriarchal society.

The novel raises crucial questions about the relationship between empowerment and ethics. It asks what it means for women to be empowered and how this concept informs their relationships with others. This issue is especially pertinent to the discussion of gender in *All Her Fires*, as it informs many of the ethical conflicts that the characters encounter.

A recurring motif in the novel is the tension between generations. Commentators on Sharma's novel have noted the distinctiveness of Gen Z in comparison to previous generations. Sharma examines this phenomenon in his article published in *The Criterion*, 2026, where he discusses the ways in which members of Gen Z negotiate their place in society.

Identity is a crucial component of self-discovery, and Sharma's novel reflects this process in all its complexity. The characters' interactions with society are informed by their understanding of themselves and the ways in which they fit into the larger social framework. Sharma depicts a world where freedom of choice and diversity are celebrated, but the characters' lives are often defined by confusion and a lack of direction.

The generational tension informs much of the conflict in the novel, but it also serves to highlight the similarities between the members of different generations. Sharma depicts the disillusionment of both young people and their elders with the existing social order. This shared experience binds the characters together in a collective sense of frustration and contributes to the novel's overall mood.

The social texture of *All Her Fires* emerges through the depiction of the university as a privileged space in society. The campus is presented as a domain in which the mechanisms of power are played out in a concentrated manner. Prof. Sharma's own writings on contemporary Indian society inform the novel's portrayal of the university as a microcosm of larger social structures.

Sharma relies on his vast experience as a writer and thinker to depict the ethical and social dimensions of the university. The novel's strength lies in its ability to portray the complexities of human interactions as part of larger social and institutional frameworks. In depicting the university as a whole, Sharma is able to demonstrate the ways in which this institution influences the lives of its students and staff.

More importantly, the novel examines the ways in which morality plays a role in institutional interactions. In *All Her Fires*, Sharma depicts individuals who are capable of being both cruel and manipulative. He demonstrates that people are not inherently ethical or unethical — their actions are often informed by situational factors and the influence of their social environment.

Fires are a powerful and consuming force, capable of destroying everything in their path. The very title of the novel suggests that desire and anger can easily transform into violent and uncontrollable impulses. Sharma's portrayal of fire as a destructive force aligns with his depiction of the unethical as a phenomenon that is equally consuming and overwhelming.

The novel's conclusion is deliberately elusive, as Sharma himself has noted in his remarks. The novel's ambiguous ending is fitting for the ethical inquiries that have informed the narrative. A conclusive ending would have undermined the very purpose of the novel, which is to provoke thought and introspection.

CONCLUSION

Prof. Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires* is a remarkable novel that combines literary realism with a powerful ethical message. Depicting the campus as a microcosm of larger social structures, the novel examines the ways in which institutional interactions affect individuals' moral worldviews. In *All Her Fires*, Sharma presents a vivid portrayal of the social texture of contemporary campus life.

The novel's title phrase — “wanting too much, feeling too little” — is a succinct formulation of the ethical cost of modern individualism and competition. Sharma captures the spirit of an amoral and aggressive age in which ethics is conveniently discarded in pursuit of self-centred goals. *All Her Fires* is therefore a novel of ideas that makes a valuable contribution to contemporary Indian novel writing.

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