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## **Fires That Mirror a Generation: A Conversation with Prof. Vikas Sharma on *All Her Fires* and the Realities of Gen Z**

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*All Her Fires* by Vikas Sharma has quickly become one of the most discussed novels in contemporary Indian fiction. With its unflinching portrayal of Generation Z like their ambitions, contradictions, emotional detachment and moral uncertainties, the novel has sparked debate in classrooms and literary circles alike. At its centre stands Sanya, a young woman who is sharp, cynical and strategically brilliant, yet deeply disconnected from the empathy that traditional values demand. Alongside her, characters like Shivani and Disha present contrasting responses to the same generational pressures which creates a rich portrait of young womanhood under siege. The novel is not merely a campus story. It touches on domestic violence, academic corruption, AI, caste prejudice, child abuse, pseudo-feminism and the slow erosion of moral anchors in a world that rewards performance over sincerity.

In this interview, Poorvi Garg (PG), a research scholar at CCS University, Meerut, speaks with Professor Vikas Sharma (PVS), the novelist and a

Professor in the Department of English at Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut. The conversation explores the creative choices behind the novel, the real-life observations that shaped its characters and the urgent questions it raises about empathy, education and the future of a generation that burns brightly but often without direction. Their exchange offers a rare window into the mind of a writer who has spent three decades observing the transformation of Indian youth from the vantage point of both the classroom and the writing desk.

**PG:** *All Her Fires* presents Generation Z as sharp, self-aware, yet emotionally detached. Did you create Sanya mainly as a symbol of this generation, or first as an individual character?

**PVS:** Sanya is both. She is a Gen Z character, but I must say that not all of Gen Z is like Sanya. Gen Z has tremendous energy. They are brilliant and intelligent, but often they are not focused. Their energy goes in many directions at once. Sanya represents a particular kind of Gen Z young

woman—one who knows how to use every resource she has, including her body and her charm, to get what she wants. She is not a bad person by nature, but the environment she lives in has taught her that manipulation works faster than merit. I created her from observation, not from imagination. I have seen many Sanyas in my three decades of teaching.

**PG:** Do you think Sanya's emotional distance comes from the pressure of survival, or is it a conscious moral choice she makes?

**PVS:** It is a conscious choice, but that choice is shaped by her circumstances. She has learned early on that her body is a medium—a tool that can be used. There is what I call the corruption of beauty. When a young woman realises that her looks can open doors faster than her degrees, something shifts inside her. That shift is what I have tried to capture. It is not that she cannot feel. She can. But she has decided that feelings are a weakness she cannot afford. That is the tragedy of her character.

**PG:** Why did you choose to show today's youth as practical survivors rather than idealistic rebels?

**PVS:** Because that is what I have observed. The youth today is practical—not one hundred percent, there are always exceptions. But the majority is practical. And in that practicality, they are lacking emotions. They are not empathetic in the way earlier generations were. I am not judging them. As a professor, I have been observing students for three decades in higher education from B.A. to M.A. to Ph.D. and across every

generation I have taught, I find these tendencies becoming stronger. This generation takes care of health, of appearance, of career—but when it comes to emotional depth, there is often something missing.

**PG:** Many people feel that Generation Z understands social issues intellectually but lacks empathy in practice—something Sanya seems to embody. Was this idea important to you while writing the novel?

**PVS:** It was very important. My novel is essentially a personal diary of seven years of observation. I did not sit down one day and decide to write about Gen Z. I lived among them. I watched them in classrooms, corridors, conferences and trips. I saw how they spoke about equality but practised hierarchy. I saw how they used the language of feminism but abandoned it the moment it threatened their comfort. Everything in this novel comes from what I have witnessed. That is why the characters feel real because they are real, in a sense.

**PG:** Sanya, Shivani and Disha respond very differently to life's pressures. What made you create these three contrasting female characters?

**PVS:** I have seen both extremes in life. I have seen fire—absolute fire—in some people, and I have seen remarkable balance in others. Shivani is my vision of balance. She is compassionate, grounded, but life tests her and eventually hardens her. Sanya is the extreme—brilliant but dangerous, like fire without a container. And Disha is caught between these two, unable to be

either. She wants to be free like Sanya but does not have the courage. She wants to be strong like Shivani but does not have the resilience. These three characters represent the variety I have seen in society. If you look around, you will find all three types. That is the truth of this generation.

**PG:** Shivani's kindness often causes her pain in the novel. Do you think empathy has become a weakness in today's world, especially for women?

**PVS:** Empathy has become a weakness for everyone, not just for women. Today, people who are emotional, sensitive and loving often get cheated. That is a reality I cannot deny. But I must also say this—for creative artists, empathy is not a weakness. It is the very foundation of their work. If I am not an emotional person, what will I write? Emotions drive creativity. The problem is not empathy itself. The problem is a world that punishes empathy and rewards indifference. That is what I am critiquing in the novel.

**PG:** Disha's helplessness reflects domestic violence and emotional neglect. How important was it for you to include such lived realities alongside academic spaces?

**PVS:** It was essential. When students come to me, I do not only see their academic lives. I understand their personal lives and their problems. I play two roles—I am a teacher and I am a writer. As a teacher, students confide in me. As a writer, their experiences become material for my stories. Disha's story is not fiction. It is the reality of many young women who come to universities carrying burdens that no one sees. I can write

about what happens in the classroom, but I can also write about what happens outside it like the domestic violence, the betrayals, the silent suffering. A writer's duty is not limited to the campus. It extends to every corner of life that his characters inhabit.

**PG:** Would you say *All Her Fires* critiques not only patriarchy, but also the internal fractures among women themselves?

**PVS:** Absolutely. I am showing that women can be problematic too. How can a woman who claims to be a feminist attack another woman's dignity? That is the question I am asking. Sanya talks about feminism, about freedom, about her body and her rules. But where is her feminism when Ritu is molested by her boyfriend? Where is her feminism when she attacks Priya with casteist slurs? She is a character who demands equality for herself but denies it to others. That is pseudo-feminism and I wanted to expose it. The fractures among women like the jealousy, the competition, the willingness to destroy each other are as dangerous as patriarchy. Perhaps more dangerous, because they come disguised as empowerment.

**PG:** The novel touches on sensitive issues like abuse, caste prejudice and trauma. How did you handle these topics responsibly as a writer?

**PVS:** I was very sensitive because this was based on real events and real people. I carry my sensitivity like a torch. My main aim was not to sensationalise but to present reality as it is. When I wrote about the casteist abuse that Sanya hurls at Priya, I did not write it to shock the reader. I

wrote it because it happened. When I wrote about Ritu's molestation complaint and Sanya's dismissal of it, I did not invent it. These are the things I have seen in academic spaces. A writer's responsibility is to hold a mirror, not to decorate it.

**PG:** The university in the novel appears highly political and corrupt. Is this based on your real experiences in academic spaces?

**PVS:** Of course. I have lived in the university system my entire life. I was a student leader. I come from a family of professors. I have served as a principal and now as a professor. In my career, I have seen academic politics at every level—from departmental rivalries to vice-chancellors who protect their allies at the cost of justice. The character of Inder, the character of Aneja—these are not fantasies. They are reflections of the people I have encountered. Academic spaces are supposed to be temples of learning, but they often become arenas of power and ego. I have written what I have lived through.

**PG:** Do you think today's education system focuses more on producing competitors rather than thoughtful individuals?

**PVS:** This is absolutely true. The system has become superficial. Knowledge is not deep anymore. It is surface level. When everything is objective and competitive, where is the space for critical thinking? Where is the space for reflection? Students today can score ninety percent but cannot think originally. They can clear examinations but cannot solve real problems. The

environment, the system, the pressure—everything pushes them towards competition rather than understanding. That is what I am showing through the university setting in the novel.

**PG:** Professor Viren occupies a complex moral space in the novel. Is he meant to represent ethical resistance within a compromised system?

**PVS:** Yes, Viren is rebelling—but quietly. He is fighting within the system, not against it from outside. As a writer and as a professor, he wants to change things. But the system resists change. Viren represents the kind of person who refuses to give up even when the odds are against him. He sees Sanya's potential and tries to guide her, but she is beyond his reach. His frustration with her is also his frustration with the generation—so much talent, so much intelligence, but directed towards manipulation rather than meaningful growth.

**PG:** Do you see AI as a metaphor for Gen Z's worldview—efficiency without empathy?

**PVS:** Yes, I see a connection. The way AI works—processing information without emotion, producing results without feeling—that is how some members of Gen Z operate. They are efficient but not empathetic. They are practical but not compassionate. Selfish and calculating. But I must say that people like Shivani still exist. They are fewer, perhaps, but they exist. The danger is when the majority starts functioning like machines. That is when we lose something essential about being human.

**PG:** Your novel ends on an unsettling note rather than offering resolution. Do you believe literature should comfort or disturb the reader?

**PVS:** Literature should disturb. It should open your eyes. I did not give a resolution because life does not always offer resolutions. I had to show reality and reality is often uncomfortable. If I had given a neat ending where Sanya reforms and Shivani forgives and Disha finds freedom, it would have been a comfortable lie. I did not want to tell a lie. The reader should finish the book and feel disturbed—feel that something is wrong with the world. That disturbance is the beginning of change. A comfortable novel makes you sleep. A truthful novel keeps you awake.

**PG:** How would you describe *All Her Fires*—as social realism, psychological fiction, or a generational document?

**PVS:** It is all three. It is social realism because it portrays the society I have observed. It is psychological fiction because it explores the inner lives of complex characters like Sanya and Shivani. And it is a generational document because it captures a specific moment in time—the reality of Generation Z in contemporary India. I did not set out to write a manifesto. I set out to tell a story. But the story turned out to be bigger than any single character. It became a record of its time.

**PG:** Finally, if Gen Z were to read this novel as a mirror, what question would you want them to ask themselves?

**PVS:** I would want them to introspect. Look inside yourself and find your shortcomings. Ask yourself—am I living a meaningful life, or am I just chasing comfort? Look at your health, your eating habits, your party culture. Everything is becoming superficial—fun, chill, instant gratification. Our fathers and grandfathers were strong and lived long because they had discipline. This generation is forty or forty-five and already facing health problems. And beyond the physical, look at the moral dimension. Know your traditions. Be modern, yes—but do not throw away everything that came before you. The good traditions, keep them. The bad traditions, leave them. That is what I want Gen Z to understand. You are not just individuals. You are part of a social fabric. And when you tear that fabric, everyone suffers—including you.

*Thank you, Professor Sharma, for this candid and deeply insightful conversation. Your words remind us that literature, at its best, is not merely entertainment but an act of conscience—a fire that illuminates the uncomfortable truths we would rather ignore. All Her Fires is not just a novel about Generation Z. It is a challenge thrown at every reader to examine the gap between what we profess and what we practise, between the values we display and the values we live by. As Professor Sharma's characters remind us, fire can warm or it can consume—and the difference lies in whether we choose to direct it with wisdom or let it burn without purpose.*

### About the Interviewee

Professor Vikas Sharma is a distinguished author, poet, and researcher known for his work in Hindi and English literature. He is a Professor in the Department of English at Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut (UP) and General Secretary of The Association for English Studies of India. His debut Hindi novel *Raah Ke Patthar* (2021) explores Hindu-Muslim unity and received widespread appreciation from readers. Beyond fiction, Professor Sharma has edited four anthologies on poetry, prose, and drama under the title *Epiphanies*. His literary portfolio includes several novels, such as *Love's Not Time's Fool*, *I.A.S. Today*, *498A: Fears and Dreams*, *Medicine: Light in Twilight*, *Ashes and Fire*, *Hope Against Hope*, *Ideas and Events*, *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *SANA*, *Never Together Never Apart*, *Media Revolution 2030*, *Love and Ego*, *Honey Trap* and *Hell For The People*. Many of his novels have been incorporated into the syllabi of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in multiple universities, and scholars are researching his novels. His novels have also been translated into various Indian languages, and twelve critical books have been published on his literary contributions so far.



### About the Interviewer

Poorvi Garg is a Research Scholar in the Department of English at Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh. She has actively participated in national- international conferences and seminars, presenting insightful papers and is a life member of the Association for English Studies of India (AESI). Her areas of interest are Indian literature, Linguistics, Communication Skills and Personality Development.

