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Corridors of Power and Panopticism: Departmental Politics, Flattery Economy and Gendered Resistance in Vikas Sharma's novel, *All Her Fires: Every Flame She Lit Had a Cost* in the Light of NEP 2020

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Abstract:

Professor Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires* (2026) is ostensibly marketed as a novel about women. However, its central achievement lies in portraying the Indian State University as a site of departmental politics in the NEP 2020 era. Through close reading of a fictional State University, where Professor Viren, an idealist Head of Department, confronts Vice-Chancellor worship, enquiry committees, audit scams, and WhatsApp surveillance, this article examines how power operates through what Foucault calls the micro-physics of power. The novel's three protagonists, Disha in a salwar suit, Shivani as keeper of emotional labour, and Sanya as a Gen Z strategist who treats academia as a passport to mobility, embody gendered resistance to a corrupt academic field, a struggle for academic capital that Bourdieu terms. Using textual evidence, the study shows how Sharma fictionalises governance failures: illegal appointments, splitting projects to evade tenders, silencing student unions, and weaponising caste and gender complaints. The corridor metaphor captures the precarity of ad hoc faculty and female scholars, while "corridors of power" analyses how a tyrant captures NEP 2020's promise of holistic, ethical education. The novel shows that departmental politics erodes integrity, forces lonely survival, and alienates contemporary learners, for whom University appears as a bazaar, not a temple. It situates the novel within the third wave of Indian campus novels and connects it to higher education reform.

Keywords: departmental politics, panopticism, gendered resistance, NEP 2020, academic corruption.

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Introduction

Professor Vikas Sharma's second campus novel, *All Her Fires,* spans 413 pages and 20 chapters. At first glance, its cover and marketing suggest a story about women and their inner fires. However, a deeper reading reveals that the novel's most sustained and powerful narrative is not about romance but about the University itself.

Sharma constructs two distinct fictional universities that anchor the novel's institutional geography. The first is the University of Mayarashtra (hereafter, fictional state university), located in North India, where Vinita Shukla serves as Vice Chancellor. The second is a Central University headed by a more formidable figure, Gita Srivastava, described as "spouse of a senior judge and herself, a VC of a central university" (Sharma 299), who "walked like someone who knew that she was born to rule" (Sharma 299). It has a flatterer named Inder who, in a state University of Mayarashtra (Sharma 297) has "made a habit of flattering the Vice Chancellor. Every chance he got, he praised her — called her 'visionary,' 'inspiring,' 'my hero', and 'the ideal academic leader.' (Sharma 398). In contrast, Viren, the novel's central consciousness, is the idealist head of department whose labour is reduced to managing enquiry letters, Facebook messages, and WhatsApp group surveillance, culminating in the ethical realisation that he has been reduced to bureaucratic affect management. The novel opens with the axiom that "A kind heart is a rare gift, but remember—sometimes too much kindness becomes a burden you cannot carry" (Sharma 14).

Sharma is an English professor and former academic administrator who has publicly written about governance failures, administrative burdens, and political intrusions by party leaders in higher education. His fiction, therefore, draws on familiar academic settings. This article treats the novel as fiction, not autobiography, and analyses any resonance with real institutions as literary representation.

> "All Her Fires' seeks to reflect the realities prevailing within educational institutions and society at large, while also encouraging debate and introspection among readers." (Garhwal Post Bureau)

The novel's opening sets the tone for this critique. The classroom is introduced not as a sacred space but as a fractured space of disinterest and performance:

> "A girl…who didn't look like she belonged to the same Gen Z tribe...scrolled endlessly through reels and memes, Disha came to class in neatly pressed salwar suits." (Sharma 1)

And the student response to the syllabus:

> "Sanya didn't look up from her phone. "As long as it's not about the syllabus." (Sharma 1)

These two lines contain the entire crisis of NEP 2020: students are physically present but mentally absent, teachers are ethically charged but institutionally unsupported, and the syllabus itself has become a symbol of irrelevance rather than knowledge.

The fire in the title is thus polysemic. It is domestic fire that traps Disha, sexual fire that drives Sanya, and most importantly, it is the fire of departmental conspiracy that consumes idealism. The purpose of this article is to map this third fire - the fire of departmental politics.

Literature Review

The Indian campus novel has evolved in three distinct phases. The first phase, from the 1930s-40s, presented the college as an extension of the home - moral and benign. The second phase, from the 1980s to the 2000s, introduced cynicism and market pressures but kept the department in the background.

The third phase, which this piece terms the NEP-era campus novel, includes precursors from 2015- 2019 and the NEP-era campus novel post-2020. It includes Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (2004), Neelum Saran Gour's *Requiem in Raga Janki* (2018) as a music-academic novel, and recent campus fictions. In these novels, the department, the Vice Chancellor's office, the Board of Studies, the IQAC, and the audit report become central characters. Sharma's *All Her Fires* belongs to this third phase.

Scholars have theorised the academic novel as a genre in which the university itself is the protagonist. Showalter argues that faculty towers function as sites of power, gossip, and status anxiety (Showalter 3). In the Indian context, the campus novel has been read as a record of institutional precarity and audit culture (Joshi 2011; Khair 2018). As of Aug. 2026, no peer-reviewed critical article on Sharma's *All Her Fires* has been published, leaving a gap that this article addresses.

Scholarly work on departmental politics has largely remained in non-fiction. Deshpande argues that academic hierarchies reproduce merit as caste privilege (Deshpande 2439), while Menon critiques the university as family, where paternalism masks power (Menon 38). Recent UGC and CAG reports on financial irregularities provide the sociological context with which the novel's episodes resonate. This paper analyses how these sociological realities take literary form.

Theoretical Framework

Three theories anchor this article:

a) Foucault and Micro-physics of Power and Panopticism: Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish (1975) argues that power is not possessed by the VC alone; it circulates through capillaries - through corridors, enquiry committees, WhatsApp groups, and reference letters. The department is a panopticon where, as Foucault argues, power operates through permanent

visibility and an unverifiable gaze, and the inmate self-monitors because he may be watched (Foucault 200-201). The novel's WhatsApp groups illustrate lateral surveillance (Andrejevic 2005), a peer-to-peer form, which this paper distinguishes from classical panopticism. The line "Viren heard things now and then — from old students, from WhatsApp groups. He never commented. Just nodded and changed the topic." (Sharma 398) shows Panopticism in action. No one needs to order surveillance; everyone self-monitors because a screenshot can destroy a career.

b) Bourdieu and Academic Capital and Flattery Economy: Pierre Bourdieu in Homo Academicus (1984) argues that academia is a field where actors compete for cultural capital (publications, citations), social capital (proximity to VC, membership in committees), and symbolic capital (being called "visionary"). Sharma satirises how social capital converts into career progression through flattery. Inder's long, sugary emails after every meeting are investments. He knows that in the Indian system, proximity to power matters more than research. This article terms this the "Flattery Economy."

c) The Neoliberal University and Gendered Labour: Scholars like Henry Giroux (The University in Chains) and Indian critics like Nivedita Menon argue that NEP 2020, while promising multidisciplinary and holistic education, has intensified audit culture. The result is what this article terms the "tyrant university": "It was a tale of a tyrant. A tyrant who was ruling over an academic institution in a way that could even make Satan look like an angel... The name of this tyrant was Gita Srivastava." (Sharma 299). Here, tyranny is gendered, but more importantly, it is structural - protected by judicial and political networks. Within this tyrant university, female labour, especially emotional labour, remains invisible.

Textual Analysis

The Corridors of Academia Without Belonging: Precarity and Panopticism. The novel's significant sociological phrase comes in Chapter 11:

> "Sanya soon became a familiar presence beside Viren at conferences and seminars. She moved easily among the corridors of academia without ever belonging to them." (Sharma 198)

Moreover, "Corridors of academia without ever belonging to them" (Sharma 198) captures the existential condition of India; UGC reports show contractual faculty constitute the precarious academic workforce - guest faculty, ad-hoc teachers, PhD scholars waiting for viva, and female researchers who are visible as companions in conferences but invisible in appointment letters (UGC Annual Report 2022, XX). As Sharma adds:

> "She never troubled herself with research articles. "Why should I read or present when there are enough people dying to do it?' she would laugh, brushing off the suggestion. She considered the grind of drafting abstracts, sitting through dry sessions, or defending an argument as something below her." (Sharma 198)

This is not just a character flaw. It critiques the conference economy created by API under UGC 2010/2018, abolished in 2019. NEP does not have API. Change to appraisal metrics under UGC regulations and later institutional performance indicators. When research is measured by the number of presentations, not quality, outsourcing becomes rational. Sanya's cynicism therefore mirrors the system.

Moral Turpitude, Transactional Intimacy and Panopticism of Screenshots: The Inder Exemplification

If Viren represents the idealist, Inder represents the anti-idealist who thrives in the tyrant university through what this article terms the flattery economy and transactional intimacy.

Chapter 3, titled “You reap what you sow” (Sharma 45-48), provides the forensic evidence of this economy. Sharma writes: “these are some of the WhatsApp texts from Inder to a student Meghna, which got viral during the COVID-19 lockdown. In February 2021, this girl Meghna contacted Inder to ask for help in her studies for the M.Phil. entrance examination.” (Sharma 45). Chapter 3 exposes the same abuse of power: his WhatsApp messages to student Meghna—“Your nose is so cute” (Sharma 45)—which went viral during COVID-19—reveal how sycophancy toward authority coexists with predatory familiarity toward students. Inder’s response is framed as long-standing loneliness, turning mentorship into predation: “Who wouldn’t want to be friends with such a beautiful girl as you?” (Sharma 45), “Beautiful rose - beautiful girl.” (Sharma 45), “You should lose some weight.” “Though you look good being chubby as well.’, ‘Change your DP.’ (Sharma 45). The diminutive “cute” and body-shaming imperative “lose some weight” followed by immediate qualification “Though you look good being chubby” illustrate transactional intimacy - flattery and control oscillate. The shift from entrance exam help to appearance policing shows power’s productive dimension.

The panopticon becomes literal - WhatsApp screenshots become a surveillance archive. As Sharma notes:

> “She also revealed how the professor didn’t respect any kind of boundary between them and how he tried to seduce her by giving her temptations of helping her in the M.Phil entrance examination.” (Sharma 48)

The climax is visual: “Inder asked her to talk to him on a video call, and when he picked up the call, he was half-naked, with only his towel wrapped around his waist. Meghna showed all the screenshots to the committee, proof that no one could refute.” (Sharma 48).

Chapters 2 and 4 show this is not isolated but structural. Some instances are shown here:

> "The affairs he had had till now were no different. The girls who came in contact with him showed him the dreams of a life of love and affection and used this innocent fellow to the content of their hearts." (Sharma 41). Moreover, "They had him write the thesis of their M.Phil/PhD, increase their marks in internals, and shape their careers with his influence." (Sharma 41).

The novel here frames female students through Inder's perspective as manipulative. This paper notes this as a familiar gendered trope that risks reproducing patriarchal logic, where women's agency is read as seduction, as discussed in feminist critiques of campus fiction (Menon 38). Thus, the passages are read not as fact, but as a focalised male perception.

This corresponds to the professor's margin note on Chhaya, Nimica, Pallavi, Aastha, Anjali. The most explicit case of academic capital exchange is Suchi Chauhan: "One of these girls, Suchi Chauhan, was the daughter of an assistant professor of the University itself. It later became apparent that Inder helped her get the gold medal by giving her good marks in internals as a return gift for helping him defame Viren." (Sharma 42). Another student involved was Mini Rana (Sharma 42).

This same transactional network is used for fabrication, which Foucault calls power's productive dimension - power not only represses but produces knowledge, discourses and subjects (Foucault 26): "At this time when Viren was in a very good place, Inder staged a fake shooting scenario to trap Viren in an attempt to murder case and, obviously, SC/ST propaganda was going to be a frosting on the cake." (Sharma 39), the Thorat Committee documented differential treatment of SC/ST students (Thorat et al. 2007). This context helps read how caste complaints function in academic fiction, though the novel's depiction diverges, and "concocted a plan to character-assassinate him. He used two girls and the brother of one of these girls from

the English department and directed them to write defamatory posts about Viren on social media." (Sharma 42).

In Foucauldian terms, the WhatsApp group is the new panopticon: "Viren heard things now and then — from old students, from WhatsApp groups. He never commented. Just nodded and changed the topic." (Sharma 398) - because a screenshot can destroy a career, as Inder learns when his own texts become evidence before the enquiry committee.

Enquiry Committees, Caste Slurs, and the Weaponisation of Ethics

The heart of departmental politics in the novel is the enquiry letter, reproduced verbatim in Chapter 12 (Sharma 238-239). This is where Sharma moves from personal rivalry to institutional conspiracy. Professor Viren Sharma (All references to Viren Sharma denote the fictional character, not the novelist Vikas Sharma). The enquiry letter performs institutional fairness while threatening punishment. It opens with paternalistic affect, "I am deeply disturbed" (Sharma 238), and quickly moves to a warning of "strict disciplinary action." The use of "It pains me", followed by "unacceptable" (Sharma 238), shows what Foucault calls pastoral power, caring and controlling at once.

This letter clearly illustrates institutional language. It performs fairness –

> "I am deeply disturbed," "It pains me" - while threatening: "I will be forced to take strict disciplinary action against you." (Sharma 238)

Sanya's reply reverses the victimhood, claiming "I have been an eyesore to many... I can't help that I am... beautiful as well as smart" (Sharma 239). The shift from "deeply hurt" to privileged beauty shows strategic essentialism - she mobilises gender and class as defence.

Sharma does not take sides. He shows how caste, gender, and privilege become tools in departmental battles, where every student learns to manipulate and become the victim. This

reflects a documented reality: SC/ST grievance redressal mechanisms, while essential for social justice, can also be captured by departmental factions, as noted in the Thorat Committee Report and subsequent studies. Sharma's point is not against social justice, but against procedural capture.

Corruption, Scams, and Illegal Appointments: The Hard Power

If enquiry committees are soft power, corruption is hard power. A student conversation alleges illegal appointments and fund diversion through splitting projects to evade tenders, including appointing personal staff on the university payroll (Sharma 298). The passage uses anecdotal evidence ("chore boy," "eats almonds from table") to satirise audit culture, though the narrative technique remains reportage rather than showing.

This episode resonates with patterns flagged in audit reports. In its 2023 compliance audit of Central Universities, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India flagged splitting works to avoid tender limits and appointing personal staff on the university payroll as common irregularities (Comptroller and Auditor General of India 42). Sharma adds political insight, saying they have stopped conducting student union elections. Financial corruption requires the silencing of political representation. The VC's silence when "a few hooligans entered her office, lay on her sofa and ate almonds from her table" (Sharma 298) is not weakness but a calculated strategy, tolerating hooliganism to retain her position.

The Idealist's Fate: Misunderstood, Alone, and Exhausted

Sharma notes Viren's isolation: he "was just alone" after mistaking "cynicism for intellect" (Sharma 399). The free indirect style merges the narrator and the character's self-justification.

This is the final cost of departmental politics. The honest teacher withdraws, stops taking students, builds a small bunker of trust. The novel ends with bureaucratic rotation rather than reform: a new VC arrives and "Viren was HOD again" (Sharma 399). Peace is framed as

exhaustion – "All's well that ends well" (Sharma 399) - ironically. Peace as exhaustion is Sharma's most honest contribution. The system does not reform; only the personnel change.

The Gendered Fire: Disha, Shivani, Sanya as Strategies

While the title *All Her Fires* suggests a celebration of feminine energy, Professor Vikas Sharma does not present women as idealised goddesses. Instead, he presents three distinct survival strategies that women adopt when departmental politics converts the university from a temple of knowledge into a bazaar of influence. Disha, Shivani, and Sanya are not just characters; they are three sociological responses to what sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls emotional labour and what Gayatri Spivak (1988) calls Strategic essentialism, the idea that subaltern groups temporarily essentialize identity for politics, not patriarchy (Spivak 281).

a) Disha - The Domesticated Conformity and the Fire of Suffocation: Disha is introduced in the very first line as a counterpoint to Gen Z: The salwar suit she wears is not just a dress; it is a semiotic code of respectability, domesticity, and control. Disha is married, expected to be modest, regular, and silent. Her fire is not ambition but suffocation - the fire of a woman who does everything right according to patriarchal academic standards and yet remains invisible. She attends class; she respects teachers, but the department has no place for her sincerity. In Foucauldian terms, she is the docile body - fully disciplined, fully compliant, and therefore fully ignored by a system that rewards flattery over sincerity. Her tragedy is that departmental politics does not even need to oppress her actively; her invisibility is enough. She represents the thousands of female students in Indian universities from small towns whose only strategy is conformity, and whose cost is self-erasure.

b) Shivani - The Invisible Emotional Labour and the Fire of Loyalty: If Disha is invisible, Shivani is hyper-visible but only as a support system for Professor Viren. Shivani belongs to this circle. She is the confidante, the one who listens, who sustains the idealist professor when

the department isolates him. This is what Arlie Hochschild calls emotional labour in *The Managed Heart* (1983): the unpaid, uncounted work of managing feelings, maintaining relationships, and providing solace (Hochschild 7). UGC API scores include no column for emotional labour. No metric captures who stayed with Viren when WhatsApp groups assassinated his character. Shivani's fire is loyalty. However, loyalty in a politicised department is dangerous. She risks being branded as part of a faction, a member of the "Viren group". Her strategy is to survive through alliance with an ethical male mentor, a common strategy for women in patriarchal departments where confrontation with the tyrant VC is career suicide. Her cost is that her own research, her own identity, is always secondary to Viren's battle.

c) Sanya - The Cynical Agency and the Fire of Transaction: Sanya is the novel's most complex and controversial creation, and Sharma's true critique of NEP-era Gen Z alienation. Her arc begins with academic disinterest, and it ends with entrepreneurial cynicism:

> "One day I'll open a hotel and bar... Not for everyone—only the rich and powerful like politicians, bureaucrats and millionaires. And I'll make sure they're never bored. Girls, entertainment, everything. Exclusive." (Sharma 358)

She rationalises:

> "Society is hypocritical anyway... Men already buy girls, cheat on their wives, and drown themselves in luxury." (Sharma 359)

When a senior in a private Engineering University where Sanya is working as a lecturer tries to woo Mayank Aggarwal, son of a trustee, described as a prominent donor of the university, her colleague, Priyanka, tells her, "Sanya, this is a university, not a bazaar. You can't just use

people like rungs on a ladder." (Sharma 358); her unspoken reply is that the university is already a bazaar.

Sanya is a fictional character; she has not read Bourdieu. Sanya's strategic navigation of access can be read through Bourdieu's concept of social capital. She knows that the University does not run on merit but on access - access to conferences in Ahmedabad and Varanasi, access to politicians, bureaucrats, millionaires. If Professor Inder can sell flattery to the VC for promotion, why can't she sell exclusivity to the powerful for money? Her hotel-bar fantasy reads as a logical extension of the flattery economy, where access trades for capital. If everything is for sale - appointments, tender divisions, enquiry committee reports - then why not sell desire itself?

In feminist terms, Butler (1990) argues that gender is constituted performatively through repeated acts (Butler 179). Sanya's hotel-bar fantasy enacts this. She performs the very patriarchal logic that exploits women, but she wants to be the owner of that exploitation, not its victim. Her fire is transactional ambition. Her cost is that she internalises the very corruption that alienated her in the first place. She begins as a victim of a hollow academia and ends as a potential perpetrator of the same hollow system.

Synthesis: Three Fires, One Cost: Thus, Disha, Shivani, and Sanya complete the map:

1. Disha - conformity and self-erasure
2. Shivani - emotional labour and secondary status
3. Sanya - cynical agency and moral compromise

Sharma's title, *All Her Fires,* becomes clear here. None of these strategies liberates. Each has a cost - erasure, secondary status, or moral compromise. This episode can be read as an attempt to foreground gendered costs of departmental politics, though its framing invites further feminist questioning (Menon 38).

In the context of NEP 2020, which speaks of gender inclusion and equity, this section is a warning. Inclusion without institutional reform includes women in a burning house and then asks them why they smell of smoke.

NEP 2020 and the Tyrant University: NEP 2020 promises autonomy, multidisciplinary education, and ethics. The novel shows how these noble goals are subverted at the departmental level. Multidisciplinarity becomes more committees; autonomy becomes the VC's personal fiefdom; ethics becomes enquiry committee weaponisation. NEP 2020 states "faculty will have autonomy to innovate" (Ministry of Education 14) and emphasises "ethics and constitutional values" (Ministry of Education 38) and "gender equity" (Ministry of Education 44). The novel tests these: autonomy becomes VC's fiefdom (Sharma 156), ethics becomes an enquiry weapon (Sharma 238). Sharma's critique is not anti-NEP; it warns that without addressing departmental politics, the flattery economy, and audit culture, NEP will remain an article policy. His novel is thus a policy document in fictional form.

Conclusion

All Her Fires argues that departmental politics is not an aberration in Indian higher education; it is the hidden curriculum. It teaches students like Sanya that networking matters more than knowledge; it teaches teachers like Viren that kindness becomes a burden, and it teaches administrators like Inder that flattery is capital. The *'fire'* in the title is not just ambition or domesticity; it is the fire of audit reports, enquiry committees, sugary emails, and WhatsApp groups that keeps the tyrant university running. Sharma's contribution to the Indian campus novel tradition is that he centres women not as symbols but as strategists navigating both patriarchy and departmental politics, and he centres the department not as a backdrop but as a battlefield. In a politicised department, even kindness becomes a political act, investigated, minuted, and filed. The cost of every flame is thus not personal but institutional — the slow

erosion of academic integrity that NEP 2020 seeks to restore but which *All Her Fires* shows are still burning. This institutional erosion is most visible in Inder Kumar, known in the department for his sycophancy and for institutionalising the flattery economy. His arc—from immoral chatting with Meghna and moral turpitude to his love affairs with his research scholars and students—Chhaya, Nimica, Pallavi, Aastha, Anjali—to the fake, fabricated complaints and conspiracy against Viren by Inder and others—demonstrates what Foucault calls *panopticism* in academia. The narrative notes multiple self-harm attempts when Inder is found guilty (Sharma 399). This is read here only as an indicator of institutional pressure and accountability, without detailing the method. Inder thus becomes the allegory of the NEP-era academic who trades ethics for proximity to power.

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