

THE DEPICTION OF GEN Z IN ALL HER FIRES BY PROFESSOR VIKAS SHARMA

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Abstract

These days, a new term is trending - Gen Z! What exactly is this term, and what does it represent? Is it the last generation, or is it the final step in the decline of traditional values and culture that we Indians have cherished and preserved to pass on to the next generation with pride and confidence? Or is it a term that signifies the future, where ethics, values, tradition, and respect have no value?

But there's another side to the picture. Gen Z represents a new generation with high IQ, confident, tech-savvy, and challenging religious dogmas and hypocrisy. They are moving with the fast-paced, progressive world. Whenever we discuss cultural values, we feel a sense of pride. Professor Vikas Sharma's characters often seem to lead a dual life, wanting to be modern while staying connected to their roots. That's why we see them participating in religious, social, and family values. However, the modern Gen Z prefers to be themselves, free from these values and rituals, embracing their true nature with simplicity.

What's the reality? To understand this, a thorough analysis of Prof. Vikas Sharma's latest novel, *All Her Fires*, is necessary, and this research paper is an attempt in that direction.

Keywords: Gen Z, modernity, Society, Sexual Desires, Immorality.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of a “generation” extends beyond mere chronological classification; it represents a collective shaped by shared socio-cultural experiences, ideological formations, and political and economic conditions. Generational identity, therefore, is not simply a function of age but reflects what Karl Mannheim terms “generational consciousness,” wherein individuals situated within a particular historical moment respond to common stimuli in varied yet structurally comparable ways. From the Silent Generation (1925–45) and the post-war optimism of the Baby Boomers (1946–64) to the pragmatic outlook of Generation X (1965–80) and the technologically transitional character of Millennials, each cohort demonstrates a distinct mode of engaging with socio-economic and cultural realities. Within this continuum, Generation Z emerges as a particularly significant cohort, defined by its complete immersion in a digitally mediated environment. This condition not only shapes their modes of interaction and perception but also necessitates closer critical attention, as the complexities of their consciousness continue to inform ongoing debates about identity, behaviour, and their role as a prominent force in the contemporary workforce.

Designated as “digital natives,” Generation Z is the first generation to grow up entirely within a hyperconnected digital world, where the internet is not an addition to life but its constant background. For many of them, spending four to five hours online each day is almost routine, and this continuous engagement shapes how they see themselves and the world around them. Being exposed to endless streams of information, which is often contradictory and overwhelming, makes it difficult to form stable beliefs or find a clear sense of purpose. At times, this leads to a quiet feeling of confusion or even meaninglessness. Social media further complicates this experience, as constant comparison with carefully curated lives of others can create a sense of inadequacy and

distance from one's own reality. Alongside this, academic pressure, social expectations, and increasingly fast-paced lifestyles leave little room for rest, reflection, or simple physical activity. Even daily tasks, now made instantly accessible through technology, reduce opportunities for real-world engagement. As a result, many individuals within this generation experience anxiety, loneliness, and emotional strain, revealing a deeper struggle to find balance and belonging in an always-connected world. Digital Age, Climate anxiety, shifting financial landscape, COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, and Artificial Intelligence are some of the influences that shape the traits of this generation.

The Novel, *All Her Fires* (2025) by Professor Vikas Sharma, depicts a stark portrayal of the realities of Gen Z, drawing upon the author's decades of experience in academia. Among the many themes of the novel, such as caste prejudice, University politics and misuse of AI, the growing realities and anxieties of this generation are one of the central themes. The novel is more than just campus fiction. Professor Sharma has very skillfully employed this Gen Z theme in the novel, constantly engaging with the characters through Professor Viren's regular encounters with these Gen Z students. As it is evident through Professor Viren's voice, "This generation, Gen Z carry the hunger to excel, to rise, no matter the cost. They don't care about hierarchy, don't bow to age. They talk of inclusivity, justice, equality—and they mean it. But they also want instant gratification. A dangerous mix. You need to learn to change and keep up with the times." (Sharma 20)

However, the term "Generation Z" should not be reduced to a rigid stereotype or treated as a fixed and universal category. Much of the discourse surrounding Gen Z is shaped by Western frameworks, which often overlook the layered and uneven realities within India. In the Indian context, the generation is not uniform but deeply fragmented along lines of geography, class, and access, making it necessary to approach it with nuance rather than generalization. Professor Vikas Sharma captures this complexity with striking clarity in *All Her Fires* when he observes and writes through the narrative of Shivani's research paper, "Gen Z is not one thing, not a single face—it's a collage of contradictions shaped by geography, class, and opportunity." (Sharma 20) This idea of a "collage" becomes central to understanding Indian Gen Z, where differences are not exceptions but the very structure of the generation itself.

The diversity within Gen Z becomes particularly visible when one considers the contrast between urban and non-urban experiences. Sharma writes,

In the cities, Gen Z carries smartphones like a second skin. They are fast, sharp, endlessly scrolling—plugged into global trends, K-pop, podcasts, and startup culture. They speak a language of hashtags and reels, impatient for success, unwilling to wait for age or seniority. Hierarchy irritates them—they want results, not rituals.

(Sharma 21)

Here, urban Gen Z appears confident, globally connected, and impatient with traditional hierarchies, reflecting a mindset shaped by constant digital exposure and access. Yet this is only one layer of the generation. As Sharma moves to smaller towns, he notes, "They balance between aspiration and tradition. They scroll TikTok and Instagram, yet touch their parents' feet before leaving for exams. They dream of getting out of big jobs, big cities, big salaries, but are still pulled back by family expectations. Their rebellion is cautious, their inclusivity tentative, like a door half open." (Sharma 21) This shift in tone is significant; it suggests that while the desire for change exists, it is tempered by cultural expectations and familial responsibilities, creating a space of negotiation rather than outright rejection.

The contrast deepens further in the rural context, where access itself becomes a defining factor. Sharma observes,

In villages, Gen Z wears another face altogether. Access is thinner—patchy internet, fewer colleges, tighter family control. But even here, there’s restlessness. They see the world through borrowed screens, compare their fields and narrow roads to skyscrapers and highways on Instagram. They are impatient too, but their paths are harder, knotted with caste, poverty, and patriarchy. For them, instant gratification may mean a secondhand bike, or the thrill of data packs, not international travel or branded sneakers.

(Sharma 21)

This depiction highlights that aspiration is not absent but constrained, shaped by structural limitations that make the journey toward opportunity far more difficult. Perhaps the most striking insight comes when Sharma remarks, “A rich Gen Z’er in Delhi is closer in mindset to a teen in New York than to someone her own age in a village in Uttar Pradesh.” This observation disrupts the idea of generational unity and instead foregrounds class as a more powerful determinant than age itself.

Through these layered observations, Sharma ultimately suggests that while Gen Z in India is divided in experience, it is not entirely disconnected. As he concludes,

A middle-class boy in a small town navigates between being “modern” and “respectful,” both, at once. A girl in a village fights to study past school, while her cousin in a metro city debates which MBA to apply for.

Yet across these divides, certain threads bind them: social consciousness—at least in words, if not always in actions; inclusivity, a belief that labels and categories must fall away; and a hunger, sometimes ruthless, to excel at any cost.

(Sharma 21)

This shared urgency, despite differing realities, becomes the subtle thread that holds the generation together. Thus, Gen Z in India cannot be understood as a singular entity but must be read as a complex, evolving formation simultaneously fragmented and connected, shaped as much by its differences as by its common desires.

Having established a broad context for Gen Z, the character of Sanya in *All Her Fires* emerges as an embodiment of this generational consciousness. She is not merely a fictional character, but a lived articulation of the tensions, aspirations and contradictions that define Gen Z. Her personality reflects a generation shaped by visibility, constant connections, ambitions and search for identity. The fact that Sanya is not entirely a fictional character but a lived encounter of the author within the university space. This makes Sanya deeply rooted in lived experiences. Professor Vikas Sharma, in conversation with Poorvi Garg, explicitly validated this perspective,

“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.”(Garg 2)

This connection to reality lends a sense of authenticity, allowing her to function not simply as a fictionalized character but as a representation informed by observation and engagement. As a result, Sanya becomes a bridge between fiction and reality, embodying not only the theoretical features of Generation Z but also their lived complexities, making her an especially resonant and credible figure through whom the novel explores the shifting contours of contemporary youth identity.

This representative quality is explicitly foregrounded in the narrative, where Sanya is described as “the archetype. Sharp, cynical, impatient—ready to call life a ‘soap opera,’ unwilling to be tied down by kindness or sacrifice. She carried the hallmark Gen Z traits of cities: bold speech, instant judgments, and intolerance for what she saw as weakness” (Sharma 21). This description is significant not merely as a characterization but as a conceptual framing of Sanya as a generational type. The terms “sharp” and “cynical” suggest a consciousness shaped by exposure and disillusionment, while her impatience and refusal to be “tied down” reflect a resistance to traditional values of endurance, sacrifice, and emotional obligation. Her tendency to dismiss life as a “soap opera” further indicates a distancing from seriousness, as though reality itself is filtered through a performative or mediated lens. At the same time, the reference to “bold speech” and “instant judgments” captures the immediacy and assertiveness often associated with urban Gen Z, where expression is direct but not always reflective. Through this portrayal, Sharma not only defines Sanya but situates her within a broader cultural pattern, allowing her to function as both an individual character and a recognizable generational figure.

At the centre of her characterization lies a strong sense of ambition, though this ambition does not align with traditional markers of success. Rather than being oriented toward stability or gradual progression, her aspirations are shaped by a desire for visibility, self-expression, and immediacy. This reflects a broader generational impulse that resists delay and questions hierarchical structures. Her drive suggests not only a hunger to succeed but also a rejection with systems that demand time and conformity.

Sanya’s ambition is not aligned with conventional ideals of hard work, patience, or ethical progression; rather, it is shaped by calculation, immediacy, and a willingness to strategically navigate power structures. This becomes evident in her own articulation of success, when she remarks, “Opportunities don’t come knocking every day... A girl like me has to think ahead” (Sharma 314). The statement reflects a self-conscious awareness of her position and a determination to move beyond it, even if it requires unconventional means. Her ambition, therefore, is not passive but actively constructed, driven by foresight and a refusal to remain limited by circumstance. This is further reinforced in her candid assertion that “Everyone uses everyone in this world. I’m just being honest about it” (Sharma 315), which reveals a significant shift in moral perception. Here, ambition is no longer separated from ethics but exists in tension with it, where pragmatism overrides idealism. Sanya does not perceive her actions as manipulative or morally questionable; instead, she reframes them as strategic and necessary within a competitive world. In this sense, her ambition reflects a broader generational tendency to prioritize outcomes over processes, and success over prescribed notions of right and wrong, thereby challenging traditional moral frameworks while simultaneously exposing the anxieties and pressures that shape such a mindset.

Sanya’s rejection of traditional norms resituates her within the Gen Z framework, as she resists established expectations surrounding relationships, morality, and social roles. However, this resistance is not always accompanied by clarity; instead, it often manifests as a restless search for alternatives, reflecting a broader generational discomfort with rigid structures. Her intellectual inclinations, particularly her engagement with existential thinkers like Franz Kafka and Albert Camus, are especially significant, as they mirror her inner struggle with meaning, absurdity, and the fragmentation of self. Her obsession with these writers suggests that her worldview is not only shaped by contemporary digital culture but also resonates with deeper philosophical anxieties and the alienation of this generation.

Another significant aspect of *All Her Fires* is its engagement with Artificial Intelligence, which functions not only as a technological reality but also as a symbolic framework for understanding contemporary youth culture. Through the depiction of AI and its use within the university environment, Sharma explores how technology increasingly shapes the attitudes, aspirations, and ethical choices of Generation Z. The novel presents a generation accustomed to instant access, rapid results, and technological convenience, where efficiency often becomes more valuable than patience or reflection.

This concern acquires deeper significance through the character of Sanya. Throughout the novel, she displays a highly pragmatic and result-oriented approach to life, prioritizing achievement and personal advancement over emotional considerations. In an interview with Poorvi Garg, Professor Vikas Sharma explicitly links this tendency to the functioning of Artificial Intelligence, observing that some members of Generation Z are "efficient but not empathetic" and "practical but not compassionate" (Garg 6). This observation illuminates Sanya's characterization, as she frequently approaches situations through calculation and strategy rather than emotional engagement. Consequently, AI emerges as a powerful metaphor for a section of Gen Z whose pursuit of success risks reducing human relationships to transactions and efficiency to the highest value. Through this symbolic use of AI, Sharma raises important questions about the future of empathy, morality, and human connection in an increasingly technology-driven world.

Alienation of this generation is also a subject of discussion. The confusion regarding life, its uncertainties and contradictions is the very reason for the alienation and moral conflict of this generation. The current generation is living in a world surrounded by people, yet remains isolated, constantly engaging with social media, yet not practically engaging in conversations and socializing. Dr. Vishal Redhu aptly puts it, "The Focus is on an individual's struggle for meaning in an absurd world. Like the existentialist hero of Camus and Sartre, Sanya seeks authenticity but does not achieve emotional fulfillment. The novel reflects the existential crisis of contemporary life."

At the absolute center of the novel's generational divide is the volatile dynamics between Professor Viren and Sanya. Viren represents the institutional anchor—committed to merit, slow progress, and ethical boundaries, while Sanya represents pragmatism, strategies, results and immediacy. Sanya, serving as a striking archetype for a cynical subset of Gen Z, completely rejects this slow-paced worldview. She operates on the firm belief that in a broken system, manipulation works faster than merit. This creates a deep-rooted conflict where the older generation tries to instill foundational values, while the younger generation seeks to dismantle those very boundaries for rapid personal gain. This outlook is clearly reflected in Sanya's understanding of success and achievement. Rejecting traditional notions of hard work and merit, she views life as a competitive marketplace where appearance, influence, and strategic thinking carry greater value than intellectual labour. The narrator observes that while others continued to "slog through books" and depend upon merit, Sanya believed that "looks, charm, timing" were the real currencies of success (Sharma 117). Her dismissal of classmates who devoted themselves to study further reveals her impatience with conventional pathways to achievement. For Sanya, recognition and outcomes matter more than the process through which they are attained. This emphasis on visibility, success, and immediate results reflects a broader generational tendency toward instant gratification and pragmatic decision-making. Sharma uses Sanya's character to explore how contemporary youth, shaped by competitive social and professional environments, often prioritize achievement over the traditional values of perseverance, discipline, and ethical self-development.

Professor Viren attempts to correct Sanya's ways, reflecting the older generation's desire to guide and regulate the behaviour of Gen Z individuals according to established social norms and values.

Professor Viren thought of her as a lost soul who needed a morally ideal and intellectual guide like him, but that was all in dismay as her moves were always calculative and selfish. She even vented her anger on him without even considering his position. She shouted, “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.” (Sharma 107). She asserted that who is he to order her and stay out of her way. However, *All Her Fires* does not reduce Generation Z to the figure of Sanya alone. Through the contrasting characters of Shivani and Disha, Sharma presents a more nuanced picture of contemporary youth. While Sanya embodies ambition and ruthless pragmatism, Shivani represents empathy, balance, and moral resilience. Disha, positioned between these two extremes, reflects the uncertainty and confusion experienced by many young people. As Sharma notes in his interview with Poorvi Garg, these three characters together represent "the variety" and "the truth of this generation" (Garg 4). The novel, therefore, challenges simplistic stereotypes and portrays Generation Z as a diverse and internally contradictory generation rather than a homogeneous social group.

CONCLUSION

Professor Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires* presents a nuanced portrayal of Generation Z and its complexities within contemporary Indian society. Through characters such as Sanya, the novel explores the aspirations, anxieties, moral ambiguities, and search for identity that characterize this generation. Sharma demonstrates that Gen Z cannot be understood through simplistic stereotypes, as its experiences are shaped by diverse social, economic, and cultural realities.

The conflict between Sanya and Professor Viren further highlights the tension between traditional values and emerging perspectives, reflecting broader generational shifts in contemporary India. Rather than condemning or celebrating Gen Z, the novel presents its strengths and contradictions with remarkable realism. Ultimately, *All Her Fires* serves as an important literary exploration of youth identity in the digital age and offers valuable insights into the changing social landscape of twenty-first-century India.

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