

**The Fire of New Era: A Critical Study of Gen Z Realities in Vikas Sharma's
*All Her Fires***

Poorvi Garg

Research Scholar, Department of English, CCS University, Meerut

Article Received: 29/02/2026

Article Accepted: 30/03/2026

Published Online: 31/03/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.03.711

Abstract:

Generation Z is often described as the most digitally immersed and socially aware generation. Unlike earlier generations marked by collective idealism or revolutionary optimism, Gen Z is frequently characterized by pragmatic survival strategies, heightened self-awareness and an uneasy negotiation with ethical values in an increasingly transactional world. This paper offers a sustained examination of Generation Z as represented in *All Her Fires* by Vikas Sharma which focuses on the character of Sanya as a symbolic Gen Z figure. The novel presents contemporary youth not as idealistic rebels but as individuals shaped by scarcity, competition, emotional fatigue and ethical uncertainty. Through Sanya's language, relationships and moral decisions, the narrative exposes a generation that is highly aware of power structures yet increasingly disconnected from empathy. Using close textual analysis and direct quotations, this paper argues that *All Her Fires* presents Generation Z as a generation that survives intelligently but lives uneasily. The paper further examines how the novel deploys contrasting figures like Shivani's compassion and Disha's helplessness to map the full spectrum of young womanhood under pressure. The paper concludes on a worrisome note, suggesting that Sanya's unresolved psychological state mirrors a broader generational crisis marked by burnout, moral fragmentation and the dangerous equation of efficiency with wisdom.

Keywords: Generation Z, Emotional Detachment, Ethical Uncertainty, Power Structures, Survival Ethics

Introduction

Generation Z exists in a particularly fragile position within contemporary society. This generation grows up in a world already shaped by economic instability, digital monitoring, limited opportunities and a culture that rewards performance and visibility.

As a result, Gen Z inherits urgency instead of optimism. Unlike earlier generations that could develop slowly and patiently, young people today constantly receive the message that delay means failure. Because of this pressure, many of them become highly aware of social inequalities and skilled in the language of self-expression and self-advocacy. At the same time, they often remain distant from the slower and more complex emotional work required for genuine human empathy.

In *All Her Fires*, Vikas Sharma places young characters within university spaces that function less as places for moral learning and more as competitive arenas. The novel suggests that students in the modern academic environment often “learn ambition before empathy and survival before solidarity” (Sharma, 14). This observation establishes the ethical atmosphere in which the characters operate. Among them, Sanya stands out as the most striking representation of contemporary youth. She does not appear confused or rebellious. Instead, she is intelligent, emotionally guarded and carefully strategic. Rather than drifting through life, she actively navigates it. She uses charm, intellect and calculated behavior with the precision of someone who believes that complete self-reliance is the safest emotional position.

Through Sanya’s character, *All Her Fires* raises important questions about what Generation Z is becoming and what the cost of this transformation might be. By placing Sanya beside characters such as Shivani, who represents older traditions of compassion and resilience and Disha, who symbolizes vulnerability within the same generation, the novel avoids presenting a single simplified image of youth. Instead, it offers a complex and uneasy portrayal of a generation undergoing transition. This generation often replaces emotional openness with strategic thinking and substitutes warmth with protective emotional armor. Therefore, this paper interprets *All Her Fires* as an extended moral exploration of the tensions that define Generation Z. These tensions exist between intelligence and empathy, freedom and fragmentation, and survival and meaningful human connection.

Generation Z as a Universal Psychological Condition

One of the most important contributions of *All Her Fires* to contemporary Indian fiction is that it does not treat Generation Z as merely a sociological label or demographic category. Instead, the novel presents the generation through concrete experiences and everyday situations. By doing so, it highlights Gen Z as a psychological condition shaped by particular historical and social circumstances. Through the character of Shivani, who later becomes a professor after being a student herself, Sharma offers an insightful description that resembles an academic analysis of the generation.

Shivani observes:

“Gen Z is not one thing, not a single face—it’s a collage of contradictions shaped by geography, class and opportunity. In the cities, Gen Z carries smartphones like a second skin. They are fast, sharp, endlessly scrolling—plugged into global trends, K-pop, podcasts, start-up 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, 20)

This passage appears within one of Shivani’s research papers in the narrative. It functions not only as commentary but also as an early signal of the ideas the novel later explores through its characters. The qualities that Shivani describes like speed, impatience and resistance to hierarchy are not presented as purely positive traits. Instead, they are observed with a sense of caution and uncertainty. The author seems to recognize that these characteristics reflect deeper social changes that even the generation itself may not fully understand.

Shivani further complicates this description by showing how Generation Z differs across regions and social backgrounds. She points out that urban Gen Z experiences the world through rapid digital connections and global cultural influences. In contrast, small-town youth live between traditional expectations and modern ambitions. Rural Gen Z, on the other hand, interacts with the same digital environment but often through the limitations created by poverty, caste structures and lack of resources. Despite these differences, Shivani emphasizes that certain common features unite them.

As she notes:

“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)

The phrase “sometimes ruthless” is particularly significant here. It points to the darker side of ambition that the novel gradually reveals. The desire to succeed can become so intense that it begins to weaken the ethical values that usually give success its meaning.

The epigraph from Dostoevsky that opens the novel’s first chapter deepens this concern:

“The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular.” (Sharma, 1)

This statement introduces one of the central paradoxes of the novel even before the narrative begins. In Sharma’s portrayal, Generation Z strongly supports universal ideals such as equality, justice and inclusivity. However, they often struggle to practice these ideals in real human relationships—in difficult conversations, personal responsibilities and emotionally demanding situations. The gap between the ideals people claim to support and the actions they perform in real life becomes the central moral tension of the novel.

Sanya as the Urban Gen Z Archetype

The character who most clearly represents the contradictions of Generation Z in the novel is Sanya. The narrator describes her with a mixture of admiration and caution:

“Sanya was 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).

The use of the word “archetype” is important. It suggests that Sanya is not an unusual or extreme character. Instead, she represents a recognizable type of young urban individual that many readers may encounter in contemporary society. Sharma therefore presents her not simply as a personal story but as a reflection of a wider generational attitude.

Sanya’s intelligence is never questioned in the novel. She is perceptive, widely read and capable of making strong intellectual arguments. One of the most revealing scenes occurs when she challenges Professor Viren’s admiration for Shakespeare during a conversation in his office:

“Every play we read—it's the same. Obsession, betrayal, downfall. Beautiful words, yes, but doesn't it feel like... theatre for misery's sake? Like its purpose is to make the audience weep. Camus would've cut through it in two sentences... The Myth of Sisyphus. The absurdity of existence. At least he's honest—no grand speeches, no tragic stages. Just a man pushing a rock, endlessly. That feels closer to life than Lear in a storm.” (Sharma,128)

Her reference to Camus is significant because it reveals the philosophical foundation behind her thinking. Absurdism argues that life does not possess an inherent meaning and that individuals must face this reality honestly. Sanya’s attraction to this idea explains much about her behavior. She is not passively hopeless or indifferent. Instead, she deliberately constructs a worldview that frees her from emotional obligations. If existence itself is absurd, then feelings like guilt or responsibility become optional. In such a framework, empathy begins to appear like a luxury that one cannot always afford.

However, the same scene also exposes another important aspect of Sanya’s personality. Immediately after presenting her confident intellectual argument, the narrator notes that she “softened her voice, to sound unsure and confused, like she needed direction” (Sharma, 129). Her confidence quickly turns into a performance of uncertainty. This shift from boldness to vulnerability becomes a key part of her personality. The narrator makes this point clear:

“She wasn't just the girl who fluttered her eyelashes and asked dumb questions for attention. She was clever. She was well-read. She could dismantle the syllabus if she wanted. But then she softened her voice.” (Sharma, 128)

This moment reveals that Sanya’s intelligence and her performance are not separate qualities. Instead, they work together as tools that she uses depending on the situation. She knows when to appear strong and when to appear vulnerable and both strategies help her maintain control over social interactions.

The novel further deepens our understanding of Sanya by presenting aspects of her past. It becomes clear that her emotional distance does not come naturally but develops as a survival strategy. Over time she learns that manipulation and strategic behavior often receive greater rewards than sincerity or emotional openness. As the narrative observes: “Since then she had taught many, the art of lovemaking, honing her own talents along with them. From then on, she collected favours the way other girls collected friendship bands.” (Sharma, 29)

The expression “collected favours” is particularly revealing. It suggests that relationships in Sanya’s world function less as emotional bonds and more as transactions. For her, human connections resemble agreements based on benefit rather than genuine attachment. These relationships can be formed and abandoned whenever their usefulness ends.

Importantly, the novel does not present this behavior as an inherent quality of Generation Z. Instead, it shows how such attitudes emerge when individuals repeatedly experience environments where strategic thinking is rewarded more than sincerity. In such conditions, emotional detachment becomes a learned method of survival rather than a natural personality trait.

Through Sanya’s character, *All Her Fires* therefore portrays the psychological condition of many young urban individuals. They are intelligent, observant and capable of navigating complex systems of power. Yet their success often depends on maintaining emotional distance and prioritizing personal advancement over traditional moral values.

Sanya’s Language as a Gen Z Manifesto

One of the clearest ways to understand Sanya’s generational identity in *All Her Fires* is through her language. The way she speaks reflects the attitudes, frustrations and values that shape her worldview. A particularly important moment occurs when Disha, one of her classmates who is trapped in an abusive marriage, approaches Sanya hoping to receive

emotional support. The conversation that follows becomes one of the most revealing scenes in the novel.

At first, Sanya reacts with visible impatience and even contempt. She dismisses Disha's suffering by asking sharply, "So? You want a medal?" (Sharma, 2) Her response appears harsh and insensitive. However, she then offers advice that is both blunt and practical:

"Listen, Disha. You're strong enough to sit in this class with all your mess and score well. That's already more than half these idiots here can manage. But don't expect me to be your therapist. I don't do sympathy." She stood, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "If I were you, I'd leave that fucking man, focus on my degree and show him he's the one who got left behind. But that's me. I don't cry—I fucking fight." (Sharma, 3)

In some ways, Sanya's advice contains a form of strength. She encourages Disha to focus on her independence and education instead of remaining trapped in a destructive relationship. Her perspective refuses to romanticize suffering or helplessness. However, the most significant part of her statement is her refusal to offer sympathy. When she says "I don't do sympathy," she turns empathy into something that can be switched on or off like a service. The use of the verb "do" is particularly important here. It suggests that sympathy has become a kind of activity rather than an emotional response. In Sanya's thinking, empathy is not a natural human reaction but a choice that one may decide to provide or withhold. This language reveals how she sees herself—as a resourceful individual who must carefully manage emotional involvement in order to survive.

After leaving the conversation, Sanya mutters sarcastically, "Bencho, people carry tragedies like handbags these days" (Sharma, 3), which makes her friends laugh. The joke is disturbing because it reduces human suffering to something fashionable or performative. Pain becomes something people display rather than something they genuinely experience. The laughter of her friends shows that this attitude is not limited to Sanya alone. Instead, it reflects a broader culture within her social circle where emotional distance and irony replace compassion.

Sanya's language becomes even more revealing when she confronts Shivani, who is trying to offer genuine emotional support to Disha. Sanya questions Shivani's concern by saying:

“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 useful.” (Sharma, 7)

This statement clearly expresses Sanya’s ethical philosophy. For her, kindness and moral greatness are not admirable qualities but weaknesses that allow others to take advantage of a person. The word “mahaan” (great or noble) becomes something she uses almost sarcastically. Instead of aspiring to moral goodness, she prefers to be “useful.” This distinction between being good and being useful reveals a major shift in values. Sanya measures worth not by moral virtue but by practical advantage. However, this idea also contains a hidden irony. By choosing usefulness over goodness, she begins to treat herself as an instrument within the same transactional system she criticizes. In trying to avoid exploitation, she risks reducing her own identity to a tool for success.

Through Sanya’s language, *All Her Fires* therefore captures the emotional and ideological tone of a generation that often values strength, independence and self-protection over vulnerability and empathy. Her words reflect a worldview shaped by competition and survival, where emotional detachment becomes a form of defense against disappointment and betrayal.

Moral Fragmentation

One of the most troubling questions that *All Her Fires* raises about Generation Z is not simply their ambition but the weakening of their moral framework. The novel suggests that the real crisis lies in how ethical principles are gradually being questioned, modified, or even abandoned. Through Sanya’s character, Sharma shows how morality itself begins to appear outdated within a highly competitive and transactional environment. Sanya openly expresses this attitude in her conversations with Chandan, her classmate and occasional collaborator. At one point she remarks:

“It is easy,” she said, “if you stop caring about outdated things like morals.” (Sharma, 131) The word “outdated” is crucial in this statement. Sanya does not necessarily argue that morality is wrong. Instead, she treats it as something that belongs to an earlier time and therefore has little relevance in the modern world. In her perspective, ethical rules appear like old systems that no longer function effectively in contemporary life.

This belief becomes clearer in the way she approaches her relationship with Professor Viren. The narrator carefully explains how Sanya plans to influence him emotionally in order to gain academic advantage:

“She wasn't about the book. It was about him. About planting herself in his mind as the student who noticed, who appreciates. Viren gave a modest laugh, but she saw how his

shoulders eased, how the lines on his forehead smoothed out. Praise works like perfume—it lingers.” (Sharma, 130)

This moment reveals Sanya’s sharp psychological awareness. She carefully observes how people respond to praise and attention. Her understanding of human emotions is not weak; in fact, it is very precise. However, she uses this understanding not to build genuine connections but to create strategic advantage. The metaphor “praise works like perfume—it lingers” shows her ability to recognize subtle emotional reactions and use them deliberately.

Life as a Marketplace

Sanya’s internal thoughts further explain her reasoning. When she reflects on her own actions, she interprets them not as manipulation but as intelligent adaptation:

“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, 132)

The comparison between life and a marketplace is one of the most philosophically significant metaphors in the novel. It reveals the fundamental shift in how Sanya perceives human existence. In a marketplace, every interaction is governed by exchange. Value is determined not by intrinsic worth but by supply, demand and the ability to negotiate. When Sanya equates life with a marketplace, she is not merely describing her approach to education or career. She is articulating a complete worldview in which every relationship, every conversation and every gesture becomes a potential transaction. Love, friendship, mentorship and even academic achievement are stripped of their traditional meanings and reframed as commodities that can be acquired, traded or discarded depending on their usefulness.

This marketplace philosophy permeates Sanya’s thinking at every level. She views her own qualities like beauty, charm, intelligence, timing not as personal attributes to be valued for their own sake but as “currencies” to be deployed strategically. The narrator captures this mindset with devastating clarity when Sanya reflects on her classmates: “She thought of her classmates, scribbling notes, underlining passages like their futures depended on it. Fools. In ten years, no one would remember how they got their marks, only where they stood. Gold medalist, topper, winner—those words would last. Not the hours spent bleeding over Shakespeare” (Sharma, 132). For her, the process of learning has no inherent value. Only outcomes matter. Only results count. The marketplace does not reward effort. It rewards positioning.

The metaphor extends further when Sanya muses: “Life was short. Why play fair when the crooked road led faster to the crown?” (Sharma, 132). This rhetorical question encapsulates the moral danger embedded in the marketplace worldview. If life is merely a bazaar, then fairness becomes an unnecessary constraint, honesty becomes a strategic

liability and ethical behavior becomes indistinguishable from inefficiency. The “crooked road” is not a deviation from the path but a shortcut within a system that only measures arrival, never the journey.

Sharma deepens this critique through a remarkably telling episode later in the novel when Sanya, now working as a lecturer at a private university, sets her sights on Mayank Aggarwal, the son of the university’s owner. Her ambition is no longer confined to academic success or romantic conquest. It has evolved into a calculated pursuit of institutional power and social capital. The narrator observes that “Rahul was never the destination—only a stop along the way... She had her eyes set on Mayank Aggarwal, the son of the university’s owner. Wealthy, well-connected, cushioned by family power—he was the kind of man who could open doors she had only dreamed of walking through. Rahul, for all his smooth talk, was just a placement coordinator. Mayank was legacy, inheritance, and prestige. Sanya knew the difference” (Sharma, 176). Here, human beings are ranked and categorized with the cold precision of a market analyst evaluating investment opportunities. Rahul is a “stop,” Mayank is a “door worth unlocking.” Each person is reduced to what they can provide.

It is her colleague Priyanka who provides the most direct moral challenge to this transactional philosophy. When Sanya asks Priyanka for an introduction to Mayank, framing her request as simply being practical—“Opportunities don’t come knocking every day. He’s powerful, connected. A girl like me has to think ahead, no?” (Sharma, 176)—Priyanka responds with blunt clarity: “Sanya, this is a university, not a bazaar. You can’t just use people like rungs on a ladder. I won’t help you with this. It’s wrong” (Sharma, 176).

Priyanka’s response is crucial for several reasons. First, her choice of the word “bazaar” directly confronts and negates the very metaphor through which Sanya understands the world. Priyanka insists that a university, a space designed for learning and intellectual growth, cannot and should not operate according to the logic of the marketplace. By calling it a “bazaar,” she names what Sanya has been doing all along that is treating every institutional space as a trading floor. Second, the phrase “like rungs on a ladder” exposes how Sanya’s transactional approach necessarily involves the dehumanization of others. People cease to be individuals with their own dignity and become mere instruments for Sanya’s ascent.

Sanya’s reaction to Priyanka’s refusal is equally telling. Rather than reflecting on the moral substance of the criticism, she dismisses it with characteristic ease: “Don’t be so judgmental, yaar. Everyone uses everyone in this world. I’m just being honest about it. Anyway, if you won’t help, I’ll find another way” (Sharma, 176). This response reveals one

of the most dangerous aspects of the marketplace worldview that is the belief that universal cynicism justifies individual exploitation. By claiming that “everyone uses everyone,” Sanya transforms her personal ethical failure into a supposed universal truth, thereby absolving herself of moral responsibility. Her claim to “honesty” is also ironic. She frames manipulation as authenticity, as though being openly exploitative is somehow more virtuous than concealing it.

The Mayank episode thus functions as a critical extension of the marketplace metaphor that first appears in Sanya’s student days. What begins as a private philosophical justification gradually develops into a lived reality in which every person, every institution and every opportunity is evaluated solely in terms of transactional value. Priyanka’s refusal and her pointed use of the word “bazaar,” stand as one of the few moments in the novel where another character directly names and resists the moral corrosion that Sanya represents. The fact that Sanya dismisses this resistance without a moment’s reflection shows how deeply entrenched her transactional worldview has become.

Importantly, this perspective does not completely reject morality. Rather, it replaces traditional ethical values with a new system based on efficiency and personal benefit. In such a system, relationships resemble economic exchanges and emotional intelligence becomes another strategic tool.

The most uncomfortable examples of this moral shift appear in multiple episodes throughout the novel where Sanya’s loudly proclaimed feminist ideals collapse the moment they threaten her personal advantage. The novel presents at least three distinct instances of this pattern, each revealing a deeper layer of hypocrisy and moral inconsistency.

The first and most public instance occurs during the university cultural festival when Sanya confronts Zoya Khan, a young woman deeply hurt by Chandan’s betrayal. Throughout the novel, Sanya frequently presents herself as a supporter of feminist ideas and women’s independence. However, when Zoya’s public pain threatens Sanya’s own position, she responds very differently. Zoya appears at the festival, sees Chandan with Sanya, and cries out in anguish: “Chandan! This is what you’ve been doing? After everything? After all the things we did together, all the promises? I gave you everything—even my body. I trusted you. And now this?” (Sharma, 143). Sanya’s reply is immediate and merciless:

“It’s not his fault. You both did ayyaashi together. You enjoyed it too, didn’t you? So why cry now? Be mature—move on.” (Sharma, 143)

The narrator immediately highlights the contradiction in her behavior:

“The same Sanya who lectured about feminism, was now dismissing another woman’s hurt as if it were childish. Her feminism bent and broke when it threatened her position.” (Sharma, 143)

This moment becomes one of the novel’s most powerful critiques of generational morality. The ideals that Sanya publicly supports like feminism, solidarity, justice disappear when they begin to challenge her personal advantage. In other words, principles remain important only as long as they do not require sacrifice.

The second instance of Sanya’s pseudo-feminism surfaces during the Ritu molestation case and it is arguably even more disturbing than the Zoya incident because it involves the dismissal of a much graver violation. When Ritu, a fellow student, files a formal complaint alleging that Chandan molested her during a departmental trip to Jaipur, Sanya’s response reveals the full extent of her selective morality. Instead of supporting a woman who claims to have been sexually violated, Sanya immediately positions herself as Chandan’s defender and systematically attacks Ritu’s credibility and dignity.

In Viren’s office, before any facts can be examined, Sanya launches into a calculated dismissal: “Sir, you know how ridiculous this is, don’t you? Why would Chandan even look at Ritu? She’s not even... well, you know... she doesn’t stand anywhere. And besides—Chandan has many girls crazy for him” (Sharma, 143). The cruelty of this statement is layered. By suggesting that Ritu is not attractive enough to be molested, Sanya reduces sexual assault to a matter of physical desirability and implies that only women who meet a certain standard of beauty can legitimately claim to be victims. This reasoning directly contradicts the core feminist understanding that sexual violence is about power, not attraction.

When other students demand justice and insist that action must be taken, Sanya’s dismissiveness deepens. She responds with a tone that borders on mockery: “Molested? Really? That’s quite a word. Aren’t we all exaggerating a little?” (Sharma, 143). Here, Sanya weaponizes the very language of reasonableness to undermine a serious allegation. Her rhetorical strategy is to make Ritu’s complaint appear hysterical and disproportionate.

Only when Devanshu, a male student, steps forward as a corroborating witness does Sanya’s confidence falter. The narrator observes the shift with devastating precision: “For the first time, Sanya’s smirk slipped. Sanya hated the way the room tilted against her when Devanshu spoke up as a witness. Till then she had fought for Chandan with all her breath, brushing aside Ritu’s words as exaggeration, even jealousy. But once a man stood with Ritu, Sanya felt the ground shift. Alone, Ritu could be dismissed. With support, she became

dangerous” (Sharma, 143). The implication is profoundly ironic. Sanya, who claims to believe in women’s empowerment and independence, only acknowledges the weight of Ritu’s accusation when it is validated by a man. A woman’s word alone is insufficient; male endorsement is what makes the accusation “dangerous.” This detail exposes the hollowness of Sanya’s feminist posturing with surgical precision.

The narrator reflects on this contradiction directly: “She put on a mask of calm, nodding as if she too saw reason, though in her chest she seethed... her feminism was hers alone. It never stretched far enough to cover another woman, especially not someone like Ritu” (Sharma, 143). This observation captures the essence of what the novel identifies as pseudo-feminism that is a version of feminist language that is invoked to protect one’s own freedom and advantage but is never extended to defend other women, particularly when doing so might require personal cost. “If protecting Chandan meant cutting down another girl, Sanya would have done it without shame. She nearly did. Because to her, it was never about sisterhood or principle—it was about her right to live unchallenged” (Sharma, 144). The sentence “If I don’t dominate, I will be dominated” becomes the unspoken axiom of her existence, a creed that makes genuine solidarity impossible.

The third and most extreme instance of Sanya’s moral collapse occurs in her confrontation with Priya, a classmate who belongs to the Scheduled Caste community. This episode reveals that Sanya’s selective morality extends beyond gender into the deeply entrenched fault lines of caste which exposes a layer of prejudice that no amount of progressive language can conceal.

The confrontation begins with a mutual exchange of provocations. Priya makes an insinuating remark about Sanya’s closeness to professors and Sanya responds with escalating verbal aggression. As the argument intensifies, Sanya’s words take on a specifically sexual cruelty. She tells Priya: “You think anyone would even look at you that way? Keep dreaming. No one would fuck you even if you pay them” (Sharma, 145). This statement is significant because it deploys the same logic Sanya used against Ritu—the idea that a woman’s worth, her right to be desired or even to be considered a valid participant in intimate life, is determined by her physical appearance and social standing. For Sanya, desirability is a currency and she appoints herself as the sole authority on who possesses it.

But the confrontation does not stop at sexual humiliation. When Priya refuses to back down and retaliates with her own insults, Sanya’s mask of progressive modernity disintegrates entirely. The narrator describes the moment in stark terms: “Her reply came like venom. The words were cruel, personal tainted with the kind of prejudice that left

everyone stunned into silence. It wasn't just anger anymore. It was hatred, raw and ugly" (Sharma, 145). Sanya shouts: "You black bitch, Chamari! Fuck Ambedkar!" (Sharma, 145). In a single outburst, she invokes skin colour, caste identity and a direct attack on the foundational figure of Dalit emancipation. The narrator adds: "She went for the one thing that couldn't be changed—Priya's skin, her background—as if humiliation could somehow make her powerful" (Sharma, 145).

This moment functions as the definitive unmasking of Sanya's carefully constructed persona. The young woman who speaks the language of equality, inclusivity and women's empowerment reveals herself to be carrying the same casteist prejudices that she would publicly condemn in any other context. Her feminism, her progressivism, her demands for freedom—all of it collapses when tested against a woman from a marginalized community. The Priya episode demonstrates that Sanya's principles were never truly principles at all. They were strategic positions, adopted when convenient and discarded when threatened.

The aftermath of this confrontation is equally telling. The narrator observes that "Priya felt something collapse inside her. It wasn't just the insult—it was the way everyone heard it and said nothing. The way the silence around her agreed with Sanya" (Sharma, 145). This silence of the bystanders functions as a broader indictment—not only of Sanya but of the social environment that enables such behavior. When Priya runs to Professor Inder, an SC professor she has long admired and regarded as a role model, he refuses to help her. "I don't want to get dragged into this nonsense. Go now," he says, avoiding her eyes (Sharma, 146). Sanya's laughter echoes down the corridor: "Even your favourite sir doesn't want to help you" (Sharma, 146). The betrayal Priya experiences is therefore doubled—first by a peer who deploys caste hatred as a weapon and then by a community figure who chooses self-preservation over solidarity.

Taken together, these three episodes—the Zoya confrontation, the Ritu molestation case and the Priya caste abuse—form a devastating triptych of Sanya's pseudo-feminism. In each case, the pattern is identical. Sanya publicly embraces the language of women's rights, equality and freedom. But the moment another woman's claim to justice or dignity conflicts with Sanya's own interests, those principles are abandoned without hesitation. With Zoya, she dismisses emotional betrayal as immaturity. With Ritu, she trivializes sexual assault to protect her boyfriend. With Priya, she weaponizes the most violent forms of caste and sexual humiliation to assert dominance. The progression itself is significant: each successive episode reveals a deeper layer of moral failure, moving from dismissiveness to complicity to active hatred.

Through this pattern, *All Her Fires* raises a deeply unsettling question about the nature of progressive values among contemporary youth. When principles are adopted as performance, they become not merely useless but actively dangerous. They provide a veneer of moral authority that can be deployed selectively, shielding the individual from criticism while offering no protection to those who genuinely need it. Sanya's pseudo-feminism is not an aberration in the novel's world; it is presented as a recognizable and increasingly common phenomenon within a generation that has learned to speak the language of justice without necessarily bearing its costs.

Professor Viren, who often serves as a moral counterpoint to Sanya, senses the danger of this attitude. Reflecting on his relationship with her, he feels both frustration and sadness:

"He always wondered why the wheel of fate had to force him to live through the hell that her unchecked ambitions created for him. And he was even more surprised by the fact that he couldn't stop trying to persuade her to give up the ways that could hurt others as well as herself." (Sharma, 30)

Viren's continued effort to guide Sanya shows that the novel does not completely abandon hope for moral reflection. Even though Sanya remains confident in her choices, the narrative repeatedly suggests that her actions also cause damage to herself. Her intelligence allows her to navigate systems of power successfully, yet it also distances her from deeper emotional understanding.

Through this exploration of moral fragmentation, *All Her Fires* raises a troubling question about contemporary youth culture: when success becomes the highest goal, what happens to the ethical values that once shaped human relationships?

The Shivani Counter-Narrative and the Cost of Hardening

All Her Fires does not present Generation Z only through the character of Sanya. The novel introduces Shivani as an important counter-figure who represents a very different ethical outlook. At the beginning of the narrative, Shivani stands in sharp contrast to Sanya. She is compassionate, community-oriented and willing to share the emotional burdens of others. However, the novel gradually traces her transformation and shows how even someone deeply committed to empathy can slowly become hardened by experience.

When Shivani first encounters Disha's painful situation, her response differs greatly from Sanya's. Instead of dismissing Disha's suffering, she offers genuine support and understanding. She tells Sanya:

"Not everyone can fight alone, Sanya. Some of us need someone to stand with us, at least for a while." (Sharma, 7)

This statement reflects an older moral perspective that values collective care and emotional solidarity. For Shivani, vulnerability is not a weakness but a fundamental aspect of human life. People sometimes need the support of others in order to face their struggles, and compassion becomes a necessary element of social relationships.

However, the narrative does not reward Shivani for her kindness. Her decision to become deeply involved in Disha's domestic crisis eventually leads to serious consequences in her own personal life. The emotional conflicts, betrayals and misunderstandings that follow gradually force Shivani to reconsider her belief in unconditional compassion. The experiences teach her a difficult lesson, one that resembles Sanya's more pragmatic outlook. At one point the narrator explains Shivani's changing perspective:

“It was not cruelty; it was clarity. She had lived the story, she had felt the pain, she had survived—and she knew that sometimes, survival meant walking on, letting the chaos exist without trying to curb it. We need to fight our own battles.” (Sharma, 22)

This realization marks a crucial shift in Shivani's character. Her change does not arise from cruelty or selfishness but from exhaustion and emotional disappointment. After experiencing betrayal and loss, she begins to believe that constant compassion may expose a person to unnecessary harm.

The novel illustrates this transformation most dramatically in its closing scenes. During a wedding gathering, Shivani encounters Disha again. Disha appears emotionally broken and continues to struggle with the same difficulties. In earlier moments of the narrative, Shivani would certainly have stopped to comfort her. Yet now she simply walks past her without offering help and quietly remarks, “A soap opera.”

These words are deeply significant because they echo Sanya's earlier language. The same phrase that once represented Sanya's cynical attitude now emerges from Shivani as well. Through this moment, the novel suggests that the harsh environment of modern life can gradually reshape even the most compassionate individuals.

This development carries an unsettling implication. Sharma does not claim that Sanya's worldview is correct or morally superior. Instead, he suggests that the conditions of contemporary society often produce such attitudes naturally. In other words, Sanya's emotional self-sufficiency may not simply be a personal flaw. It may be an adaptation to a world that repeatedly punishes vulnerability.

The narrator reflects on this irony with thoughtful clarity:

“But life has its own irony. For every Sanya, there is a Shivani—someone who began with kindness, listening to old Hindi songs, believing in loyalty and quiet endurance, only to be hardened by betrayal. While Disha is stuck wanting to be free like Sanya or strong like Shivani but lacking the courage to be either. And somewhere between these extremes lies the truth of this generation: shaped by speed, by ambition, by disappointment and by the constant question of whether compassion is strength or weakness.” (Sharma, 21)

This observation highlights the three central female figures of the novel as symbolic positions within the same generational landscape. Sanya represents strategic strength and emotional independence. Shivani embodies compassion that slowly transforms into guarded realism. Disha occupies a more fragile space between these two extremes.

Disha neither possesses Sanya’s calculated confidence nor Shivani’s inner resilience. Instead, she remains emotionally exposed and uncertain about how to respond to the pressures surrounding her. Her attempts to imitate other women like borrowing clothes from Preeti, using makeup she cannot afford, trying to appear stronger than she feels reveal her struggle to find stability within a confusing social environment.

Through Disha’s character, Sharma shows how some members of Generation Z absorb the message that survival requires self-commodification, yet lack the emotional defenses necessary to succeed in such a system. Disha attempts to play a game whose rules she only partially understands and the result is a painful sense of instability and vulnerability. Together, the experiences of Sanya, Shivani and Disha create a complex portrait of young womanhood in contemporary society. Rather than presenting a single interpretation of Generation Z, the novel reveals multiple responses to the same pressures like strategic detachment, wounded compassion and uncertain imitation.

Conclusion

In the end, *All Her Fires* presents Generation Z neither as villains nor as helpless victims. Instead, the novel portrays them as a generation living in uncertainty and emotional instability. They develop powerful coping strategies in order to survive in a world that offers very little structural or emotional support. However, these strategies often come with a psychological cost. Through the character of Sanya, Sharma shows how survival in such an environment may require intelligence, calculation and emotional distance, but it can also create loneliness and moral confusion.

Sanya ultimately succeeds in navigating the competitive world around her. She remains sharp, confident and strategically aware. It is very likely that she will achieve the academic success she desires, including the gold medal she constantly strives for. Yet the

novel encourages readers to question what this success truly means. What does it cost Sanya personally and what effects does it have on the people around her?

Professor Viren's description of Sanya as his "only failure" is therefore deeply meaningful. His disappointment does not arise because she lacks intelligence or ability. On the contrary, Sanya possesses remarkable intellectual strength. The real tragedy lies in how that intelligence is directed. Instead of being used to build understanding and connection, it becomes a tool for manipulation and self-protection.

At the same time, the novel makes it clear that Sanya is not incapable of empathy. She demonstrates genuine intellectual insight when she reads Kafka, she carefully notices Viren's emotional loneliness and she even offers practical advice to Disha about leaving her abusive marriage. These moments reveal that she has the capacity for emotional understanding. The difference is that she chooses not to rely on that capacity because she believes empathy creates vulnerability in a harsh world.

This deliberate decision is what makes Sanya such a powerful symbol of Generation Z. Her actions are not careless or impulsive. They are calculated responses to the environment she inhabits. She believes that emotional distance and strategic thinking are necessary for survival. Yet this very strategy slowly isolates her from deeper human connections.

Importantly, Sharma's novel does not provide a comforting resolution to these tensions. Sanya does not experience a sudden moral transformation, Shivani gradually loses the compassion that once defined her and Disha remains emotionally trapped between strength and vulnerability. The story ends without a clear sense of redemption or closure.

The final images of the narrative emphasize continuation rather than resolution. Life moves forward: conversations end, heels echo on marble floors and the metaphorical "soap opera" of human struggles continues without anyone stepping in to change the script. By refusing a traditional redemptive ending, the novel presents its own ethical argument. It suggests that the crisis facing this generation remains unresolved and ongoing.

Ultimately, *All Her Fires* portrays Generation Z as a generation burning without anchors. These young individuals are intelligent, ambitious and full of energy, yet they often navigate a world where traditional systems of moral guidance—community, mentorship, and collective responsibility—have weakened or disappeared. In their place emerge competition, performance and constant self-presentation.

Sanya's "fires" therefore symbolize both power and danger. Her intelligence, determination and refusal to remain invisible are genuine strengths. Yet fire without direction does not simply illuminate. It also consumes. Through this powerful metaphor, Sharma asks an urgent question: in a world where ambition burns intensely but moral anchors are fading, who will remain standing after the flames finally settle?

Works Cited

Sharma, Vikas. *All Her Fires*. Ukiyoto Publishing, 2026.