

Performing Victimhood, Practising Domination: A Critical Study of Inder's Character in Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires*

Kamal Kant Sharma 

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Gauri Shanker Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Bulandshahr, Uttar Pradesh, India.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57067/ir.v3.i8.660>

Abstract

Being a victim of discrimination, oppression, or harm is one of the greatest social injustices. Many people and sections in India have to go through these discriminations and oppressions daily, and they have to work twice as much to attain the same social standing as the privileged sections have. In such situations, it is logical that the real victims should be awarded extended opportunities and an easier playing field in comparison to the privileged, so that they can arrive at a place where they can see themselves as equal to the dominating people or sections. It is the only way they can relieve themselves of their victimhood. But does this victimhood leave even after attaining everything? This is the question this paper discusses in relation to the character of Inder in All Her Fires, the latest novel of Professor Vikas Sharma. Inder, even after being a professor in a state university, playing political games against Viren, and standing as a power figure in the department, is a victim. He begs when he is in a problem, and when he gets relieved of those problems, he starts plotting against his enemies by keeping the weapon of his victimhood at the forefront. This paper critically analyses the character of Inder, where hypocrisy lives in abundance, and also discusses the role of victimhood as a tool of vengeance, which is affecting the Indian society from within.

Keywords: Victim, Discrimination, Victimhood, Privileged, Oppression, Vengeance.

“Victimhood comes from the inside. No one can make you a victim but you.” (Eger) This quote by Edith Eger aptly describes the character of Inder in *All Her Fires* by Vikas Sharma. His acts of animosity against Viren Sharma, the protagonist of the novel, showcase the curious nature of his character. The analysis of his character requires a multifaceted approach. Strategic essentialism, Campbell and Manning's Victimhood as Moral Capital, Du Bois's Double Consciousness, etc, are all at play here. The character of Inder is very complex and exhibits opposing personalities throughout the narrative, defining himself as a villain quite different from the traditional villain we have seen.

Inder comes from a category of castes that has been historically marked as the victim

of oppression. He himself has endured the social evils of poverty and marginalisation because of his caste status. In fact, he owes his life to a lot of struggles, as implied in the text. Under such conditions, he rises to the position of a professor in a state university. His life has been full of such hardships that would make any man tremble at their sight. Still, he can do the unthinkable and reach one of the highest positions in the world of academics. But even after achieving all this, he is unable to shake his past away.

Inder came from an SC family that had seen days of absolute poverty. Therefore, he was self-conscious about both his caste and the financial conditions of the past. (Sharma 34)

To analyse this character, it is necessary to discuss all the traits it possesses individually.

Double Consciousness

His stance against Viren is solely based on this social reality. He is hyper-aware of his caste and social standing and sees the appointment of Viren at the University of Maharashtra as an onslaught of casteism. The narrative clearly suggests that the trauma of his past still lives in his heart, and his education has even provided a direction to it. Being a professor, he is well aware of the social history of India. He knows that the oppression and marginalisation is not recent but a historical phenomenon. This information leads him to forget his individual identity and forces him to be a part of the collective consciousness he shares with the category he is born into.

The first thing that triggered Inder was the privileged family background of Viren. Viren was a Brahmin and came from a family of professors. His familial and social conditions had been the complete opposite of Inder's. And Inder hated Brahmins and Kshatriyas alike because he believed that these upper castes were responsible for the marginalisation of SCs. (Sharma 34)

Under the effect of this double consciousness, he leaves no stone unturned to stop Viren from ever coming to the university.

So, then began the conspiracies of Inder. As soon as he got the information about Viren's application, he hatched a conspiracy to use student leaders and the students of his own caste from the SC hostel of the university. He directed them to stage a protest against Viren on the University premises, in front of the vice chancellor's office. (Sharma 33)

Du Bois's concept of Double Consciousness comes into play here. He is not only aware of his own consciousness, which rages to fight

the oppression of ages, but also of the consciousness that lives deep inside him, providing the oppressor's perspective on him and on how he sees him.

By standing against Viren, Inder does justice to the hate he has for those he deems as oppressors, and he also tries to evade the renewal of his inferiority complex that his second consciousness has bestowed upon him. Just like he has forgotten his individual identity for the sake of his community and has taken the persona of its representative, he also sees Viren as the representative of the category of oppressors. In essence, he forces a collective identity on Viren and justifies himself as a fighter against injustice.

Though he was a professor now, he still felt oppressed in front of people of these castes. So, there was an inferiority complex in Inder that pushed him to go to any length to stop Viren from joining the University. (Sharma 34)

Strategic Essentialism

The theory of strategic essentialism was given by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to demonstrate one of the ways marginalised groups use to put up a united front to fight for equal rights. They temporarily align themselves with a collective identity to achieve their goals. In the case of Inder, Strategic Essentialism stays in play for almost the whole of the narrative. But instead of fighting for equal rights, he uses this method to gain an upper hand on those he sees as privileged and save himself from the renewal of the feeling of inferiority.

Though he is in continuous alignment with his identity, which shows his status as a victim, he reserves this alignment for public use only. In reality, he remains in a constant struggle to denounce the tag of caste imposed on him since he was born. His actions suggest that he longs for an existence that is not determined by his birth.

His love for elitism was also well known as he used to watch English web series in an effort to identify himself with the English elite class and denounce the caste hierarchy of Hinduism, (Sharma 36)

Still, his need to survive and thrive in front of the society that, according to him, favours the privileged makes him rely on the strategic use of his victim status or his identity of victimhood. Though the author describes this as an opportunistic tendency of Inder, this particular habit somehow seems like a psychological ambiguity to some extent. The author describes it in these words, “but his acceptance of his caste status in times of need proved that he was nothing more than a two-mouthed serpent.” (Sharma 36) Yes, there is opportunism in Inder’s nature, but that opportunism also feels like a result of his continuous need to leave his predetermined status. He does things in a way that an elite might do, that is, without worrying about the consequences. But when there are consequences, he is forced to revert to his identity as a victim to save himself. Here, the strategic essentialism is a desperate need instead of a pre-planned voluntary action.

When his chat with a girl goes viral, and the university starts an inquiry against him, he again resorts to revert to his victim

identity. He says that everything is happening with him because come from the SC category.

The Brahmins and OBCs are trying to sabotage me because I am a Dalit. They cannot digest the fact that a Dalit became an English Professor and that’s why they are doing these things to me. It is a conspiracy and I will not bend the knee. (Sharma 47)

Every time he plays the ‘dalit card’ is due to his tendency to roam into the elite realm. However, it cannot be denied that he is used to this move and knows it can save him from any repercussions.

Borrowed Pride

Inder feels that he has nothing to be proud of. Therefore, he has created a sense of pride in his scholarship in the English language. It can be assumed to be his weapon against the ‘elites’. The only superiority over Viren he considers in himself is his prowess in speaking better English than Viren. He employs his victimhood here as well. By proving that he is a better professor than Viren, who is a Brahmin, he tries to suggest that the lower castes could have been better at education-related fields in comparison to the elites if they were provided with chances to study in the past.

And the last reason was his pride. He somehow created a belief in his subconscious that Viren was not as good an English speaker as he was. He judged Viren’s plain language and his knowledge in some specific areas in an attempt to prove that he was superior to him. (Sharma 35)

The inferiority in Inder is ingrained at a very subconscious level, and he does all these things as a result of that. Inder's pride is a borrowed pride that has been granted by his inferiority, and he seeks chances to show off that pride and shake the label of caste away from himself.

Attacking the Dominant Culture to Impose Domination

If someone wants to exterminate an ideology, the culture that harbours it should be destroyed first. Inder follows this wholeheartedly and does whatever he can to attack the dominant culture. But he doesn't want change here. Instead, he wants to insert his own domination into the system. His protest doesn't demand equality. Instead, it demands his own rise to the dominant status. To further this purpose, he targets the core texts of Hinduism like the Ramayana, which he thinks are the pillars on which Brahminism stands.

He used to say 'The person who abandoned Sita, his wife, based on social whispering, how can he be the Lord?' Everything about him felt like he was trying to sound more and more rational to counter the spiritual ideology on which the culture of Brahmins stands. (Sharma, 36)

Love as a Protest against Discrimination

Inder's psychology shows a complex human being throughout the text. He is hyper-aware of his situation as a person from a lower caste. And that hyper-awareness never lets him rest easy. He does everything to counter what he considers his fate. And all the tools he applies to fight that fate also have 'Love' as

one of their constituent. He believes that having a marital relationship with a higher-caste girl can help him escape the prison of caste he is born into. The 'free' can make him 'free'.

Many of the girls he loved were from homes that moved through the world with fewer locks on their doors: higher caste, better connected, voices that sounded at ease wherever they walked. (Sharma 153)

He remains so grounded in the injustice he has faced and the need to escape his caste boundaries that he considers the break-ups from these short affairs as an injustice by the same upper castes. He can't even consider that the relationship could end without caste playing any role in it.

not because they loved someone else but because the world they belonged to had taught them to step away from someone like him. (Sharma 153-54)

So the "love" is nothing but an agenda for him that has been granted to him by his years of suffering and the inferiority complex that bred with it.

The episode with Chhaya proves that. A girl who used him to complete her dissertation somehow gets branded as a casteist in his psyche. He never stops to consider that a person can betray someone else according to their own discretion. "To him, she was the rawest proof that his place in the world was still conditional, expendable." (Sharma 161)

To Inder, everyone else has their agendas against him, but he never considers that his own life is fuelled by agenda itself. His pattern for only falling in love with upper caste girls and completely ignoring the girls of his

own caste feels to him as a struggle against the social norms. Though it is his choice to love whomever he wants, the pattern attracts the attention of the reader, and his constant blaming of the caste system for his ruined love affairs brings forward the agenda he is working with. If the caste system is so prevalent, why would a girl start a relationship with him in the first place? And that too in front of the whole university? He loves not because his heart tells him to; he loves because he wants to destroy the system. This pattern is seen in his other love affairs as well.

There were others too – Shraddha, Aastha, Anjali, Nimica, Pallavi. Each entered his life with softness: a hand on his arm in the library, a confidant's smile, the careful flattery of someone who seemed to admire him. They made him feel whole, even cherished. For a while, he let himself believe that love could exist in these exchanges. But when the chapters were finished, the jobs secured, the degrees in hand, they all receded – kind words at first, then silence, and finally absence. (Sharma 161)

Another part seethed with hatred, convinced that nothing good could ever come from people who carried centuries of entitlement in their blood. (Sharma 162-63)

This infatuation with caste describes his whole life. The subconscious agenda he lives with has rendered him loveless. His desire for acceptance has changed into thwarting societal rules. His actions slip away from the original demand for equality and shift toward forced entry into the dominant section. This desire also changes his perspective from wanting equality for the whole community to

considering only himself as the victim of injustice.

His successes never quieted the old voice inside, the one that said he was unworthy. Every rejection by a woman of a higher caste seemed to confirm that voice. (Sharma 163)

Victimhood as Moral Capital

Campbell and Manning gave this idea to suggest that the oppressed sections heavily rely on their victim status to achieve their goals in life. They use their victimhood as a form of capital to attract support from third parties and gain success based on that. Their status is built on being oppressed rather than on strength. Inder's character aptly justifies this idea. His whole life revolves around him being the victim of oppression. He weaponises this capital against Viren to get rid of him once and forever. He stages an attack against himself to make his victim status even bigger and trap Viren by getting the sympathetic alignment of others.

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)

Here, Inder's use of his victimhood to get rid of Viren and even cost him his career thoroughly weaponizes the moral capital of Inder. He not only aims to get rid of Viren from the university, but also to send him to the clutches of the law. Though he is not successful, he shows that he is capable of using his victim identity to destroy someone's life. His victimhood gives him a pass to accept that

he is always going to be morally right and also provides him with the power to judge others.

Opportunistic Tendencies of Inder

The character of Inder becomes interesting when his self-preservation becomes even more important than his fight against the oppression he has been a victim of. Inder's acts are mostly influenced by his psychological conditions resulting from his continuously feeling inferior and his struggles to attain the status of a superior. To that aim, he also utilises his collective identity and victim status. But when he encounters problems, he forgets everything that he stands for. At the end, it is only self-preservation that matters for him.

When he finds no solution to his predicament after his chats with a girl go viral, he is advised by his friends to seek the help of Viren. He accepts their suggestion, as for him, saving his job is more important than continuing with his mission. He forgets everything he did to Viren to save himself. Even he forgets the pride he takes in identifying with the pains of his community. During this whole ordeal, he only considers saving himself from the impending doom. He even apologises to Viren in the most pitiful fashion ever.

This will never happen again, Doctor Sahab.” Said Inder, “If I ever commit such a mistake, you can slap me as an elder brother. I will do whatever you want. If you want, I can even touch your feet. I will lie down at your feet but please save me. Please, Doctor Sahab.” By now he was almost in tears. (Sharma 55-56)

Even after enduring all the things Inder did to him, Viren melts after seeing his condition. He gets rid of the case against Inder, and both make up. Inder even tries to touch Viren's feet after the problem is solved. But soon after, Inder returns to his old shenanigans and starts plotting against Viren again. His opportunism knows no bounds.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the character of Inder in *All Her Fires* is a combination of victimhood, power struggle, and psychological conflict. He has indeed endured discrimination due to his caste status, but instead of denouncing this evil, he thrives on his identity as a survivor. He rose from discrimination and poverty to become a professor, but instead of being proud of his efforts and enjoying the present, he lives in the past and defines himself on its basis. He can neither accept his success nor can he forget his sufferings. This is what shapes his character in the novel, where he is trying to make sense of his success by acting in a way that suggests he is avenging his past.

Even after achieving what most people dream of, Inder stays in a constant agony that he has created himself. His individualistic tendencies and his constant blaming of the caste system for his suffering always keep him in a state of deprivation of happiness. What he believes to be a fight against the system is nothing more than his fight to help himself attain a dominant status in society. Throughout the novel, he is motivated only by his selfish tendencies and nothing else. He sits in a position from which he can fight the injustice

in a very efficient way, but he chooses only to blame others and glorify his suffering.

Throughout the narrative, Inder repeatedly uses his identity as a victim not only as a shield but also as a weapon against those he perceives as representatives of historical privilege. At the same time, his opportunistic behaviour contradicts his ideals that he publicly claims to defend and his personal motives. Most of his actions are driven by his personal motives, and his persona of being a champion of the marginalised is just a facade. He uses his victimhood to dominate others morally and attain success as a sympathetic gesture. In short, he is a character who lives only for himself and believes in using others to further his own purposes.

UP, 1988, pp. 3–32. Oxford University Press.

Works Cited:

- Campbell, Bradley, and Jason Manning. *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Springer Link. \
- Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*. 2nd ed., A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924024920492>.
- Eger, Edith Eva. *The Choice: Embrace the Possible*. Scribner, 2017. Internet Archive, <https://archive.org/details/choiceembracepos0000eger>.
- Sharma, Vikas. *All Her Fires: Every Flame She Lit Had a Cost*. Ukiyoto Publishing, 2026.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography." *Selected Subaltern Studies*, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Oxford