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Constructing the Self through Falsehood: A Psychological Study of Sanya in *All Her Fires* by Vikas Sharma

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Abstract: Pathological Lying or Pseudologia Fantastica is a psychological condition in which a person tells elaborate lies and makes delusional situations their reality, it is used by many a characters of Vikas Sharma, one such character is Sanya in *All Her Fires*, her character shows many psychological faults and conditions that need to be studied in depth like Compulsive Self-mythologizing, habitual dishonesty, narcissistic behaviour, and basic psychological instability, her character is deeply rooted in self-preservation, and in this research paper, one of these psychological conditions that is, Pathological Lying (Pseudologia Fantastica, in medical terms) or Mythomania and Antisocial Personality Disorder will be explored in the context of the character Sanya in Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires*. The Research Paper tends to explore the self-mythologized image of herself she has formed, whether it is delusional or just pure self-advancement. The Research paper also tries to analyse the basic psychological condition of Sanya and the reasoning behind the behaviour or particularly the lies told by her.

Keywords: Psychological Issues, Pathological Lying, Self-mythologizing, Pseudologia Fantastica, Antisocial Personality Disorder.

Introduction:

Vikas Sharma's *All Her Fires* explores the relationship that a Professor shares with multiple people around the campus of a University, like his students, his colleagues and even his superiors. The novel revolves around the life of Viren, who is presently working in the Department of English, in the University of Maharashtra, and his struggles with his students, especially focused on Sanya, his colleague in the Department, Inder and the Vice Chancellor of the University and how he tries to manage the conflicts from all aspects of his life. As said by the novelist in his interview with Tushar Kumar,



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“The University of Mayarashtra is not just a place for studies- it is like a small version of society.”

Even though considered a Campus novel, there are several speculations made by critics that the novel is based on real life incidents, Dr. Vishal Redhu in his research paper has claimed “The novel is widely seen as autobiographical, closely paralleling Sharma’s experiences, though he has not confirmed it.” (Redhu, 466) which makes the psychological aspect of the novel much more interesting as it shows the reality of the psyche of the present generation enrolled in the University, but the research paper intends to be focused on the character of Sanya, who is a self-proclaimed epitome of GenZ, as the novelist has said:

“Sanya was the archetype. Sharp, cynical, impatient-ready to call life a ‘Soap-Opera’, unwilling to be tied down by kindness or sacrifice.” (Sharma, 21)

But, that is not the reality, it is a figment of her reality, she has made for herself to justify the means to her end. She sees women as her competition to be disregarded as mere things, she often treats interpersonal relationships instrumentally, viewing them primarily in terms of personal advancement, everyone around her either wants to be her, or wants to be with her. But, this reflects a self-aggrandizing worldview that shapes her perception of reality.

Pseudologia Fantastica:

Pseudologia Fantastica, or commonly known as Pathological Lying is a concept that was introduced by the German Physician Anton Delbruck in his work “Die Pathologische Lüge und die Psychisch abnormen Schwindler” (Pathological Lying and Psychically Abnormal Swindlers), back in 1891, where he studied individuals who created elaborate stories, not to an end, but as a habitual pattern of behaviour. He wrote in his work that Pathological Lying:

“is the chronic behaviour of compulsive or habitual lying without an apparent benefit or justification, unlike telling the occasional white lie to avoid stress.....Additionally, its persistent characteristic, which is distinctive, is almost an identifier of personality.” (Hekim,71)

Sanya, had a tendency to lie, rather make an aura of grandiose around her, she came from a very simple family, living in a small house, on a small street, in a small town, like



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any other lower middle class young woman, studying in a University to fulfill her ambition, her ambition that is where the complexity of her character arises, though taught to fly high lie any other individual grown up in a small household, unchecked ambition has always been cautioned against, seen time and time again how that just leads to downfall, like Icarus, that is the tale of Sanya too.

As said by Dr. Vandana Sharma in her research paper:

“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.” (Sharma, a779)

Sanya did not like the fact that she was seen as a middle class girl, she was hungry for an aura of richness and westernization around her, so rather than trying to earn that, she resorts to self-mythologization rather than social mobility through conventional means. She lied about every aspect of her life, from family to her love life, it was as if it has become a part of personality, like the oxygen she breathed.

The lies began at home, she used to show off to her classmates and in general the world, her father was some big shot in the army who spoke better English than the Professors at JNU, and her mother was a cultured woman, who apparently looked like a foreigner. As said by the writer:

“In conversation with peers, her parents were transformed: her father became a high-ranking army officer, her mother a refined woman of culture who quoted poets and attended soirees. When she spoke of them, her voice grew warmer, confident as though she truly believed in these imaginary figures.” (Sharma, 136)

Was she doing all this on purpose too deceive everyone or she just at this point had become a victim of her delusional psyche, could she even tell the difference anymore between the fiction and the reality of her life, that is what is questioned by the writer and that is the first and the most important aspect of Pseudologia Fantastica, as said in the word itself, and shown in the behaviour of Sanya, the fantasy was her reality. But the reality was something else:

“Her parents- simple, provincial, unpolished - seemed unbearably small in her eyes. Her father worked long shifts at the army’s wireless office as technical support, her mother



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spoke hindi in a bhojpuri accent and dressed in synthetic sarees, far from the image Sanya constructed.” (Sharma, 136)

As said by Dr. Srinivas Rajkumar in his article:

“Delusions are disturbances in experiences of reality, not just errors in belief....held with extraordinary conviction...impervious to counter-argument...content is impossible.” (Dr. Rajkumar, 1)

Her lies went to the point, where the grandiose of her family was to the equivalent of some ruler, with her grandfather owning a haveli in Banaras and being respected enough to become some sort of unlawful judge of the place, that people came to him with their problems to be solved, part of the problem came from her double standards, not just with the status of her family but her beliefs as well, which changed according to her own advancement, when it suited her, she claimed affiliation with notions of Aryan superiority and looked down upon other castes, which is not the thing of the present, hence, making her traditional in her views, when suited her, other times she became a feminist, saying, its my life, my body, my rights, no one should interfere, but when it came to the rights of other women, she was as patriarchal as one can be. As said by the novelist:

“Her meglomania fed her lies. She told herself she was sculpting her life like an artist chiseling marble, erasing the ugly edges and polishing the masterpiece beneath.” (Sharma, 136)

According to her, elements that conflicted with her desired self-image just became those ugly edges that needed to be chiseled, hence she was not actually living the reality of the situation but rather a world made by her own hands like an artist.

According to Dr. Shrinivas, the clinical implications of these pathological lies, leads to people believing “they are being watched”, certain of them seen it as anxious suspicion, whereas the others saw it as delusional certainty, Sanya was the proponent of the latter, according to her every boy wanted to be with her, and every woman wanted to be her, even in a conflict with her guide while doing her Ph.D., she said:

“Or maybe she is a lesbian because she is obsessed with me.” (Sharma, 367)



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According to her, she is never at fault, everyone around her is. And she did all of with the mindset to be on the top of her class, of the women around her, of the world in general, no matter what it takes to get there, according to her, ends justify the means in every scenario.

When she came to do her M.A. to the University of Mayarashtra, she came with the only motive of walking out of there, not with just a gold medal but a sure shot ticket to her future, which she saw in Prof. Viren, who she treated as a mere stepping stone, to reach to his level, in order to surpass him eventually, she was told by her friends Shubham and Chandan that:

“Viren was a career maker and if she wanted to make something of herself, all she had to do was to get on his good side. Well, she didn’t became an opportunist overnight. She had been like this forever. So, to get Viren on her side, she employed the trick of pretend admiration and publicly expressed her fondness for Viren.” (Sharma, 66)

And when he was in her corner, he quickly turned into one of those ugly corners, she wanted to get rid of too, as he was sensible, and saw a potential in the girl to be great, but in her Gen Z feminist voice, a man telling her what to do, is controlling her, telling her what she is doing wrong, is suppressing her voice and telling her how she can reach greatness, is “trying to be her baap” she said to Prof. Viren:

“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. Those bitches are complaining about me now? Those ugly, good-for-nothing, bitches would tell me how I should behave? I don’t think so, I will do whatever the fuck I want and whenever I want. Who are you to order me round? Don’t try to be my baap, Professor Sharma.” (Sharma, 120)

So, if something hindered her desires, her sexual tendencies, they were just an unwanted stone in her path to be removed, but at the same time, her unstoppable ambition made it impossible for her to get Prof. Sharma go, because he was a valuable professional resource, and as soon as she realized that she changed her tone within a few hours and she subsequently returned in a conciliatory manner, she came back apologizing, with her pretend admiration, claiming to be Prof. Sharma’s Arjun. Even though her behaviour was horrendous, she was extremely delusional about her own self-importance, in a conflict with her classmate, Priya where her behaviour was not just anti-feminist but rather inhumane,



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plain and simple. She still had the audacity to claim that the official complaint made against her was not a consequence of her behaviour but rather a personal attack on her because she is a target of jealousy and hatred. She wrote in an official letter, justifying her behaviour:

“Ever since, I have joined this course I have been an eyesore to many. I have been a target of jealousy and hatred. I can’t help that I come from a privileged background or that I am beautiful as well as smart. I was raised to speak confidently and dress nicely.....the girls who complain about my behaviour re the ones who repeatedly mock me that I act superior or being a show off. They hate me for my confidence, for the way I talk, my appearance and because I belong to a higher caste.” (Sharma, 239)

The delusion ran so deep, that she herself, didn’t ever seem to have any faults but rather always a victim of her peers’ hatred, Korensi in his research paper on Pseudologia Fantasia has said “ In addition to the duration of the lying, the content in PF is distinct in that it may appear to be fantastic and extreme in nature to the extent that it may be perceived by the subject within the realm of the possibility, while to the observer it will seem highly implausible.” (Korensi, 18)

The question arises though was she the victim of her psyche, because of certain traumatic experiences that might have happened to her, or was she so manipulative that she spun an exemplary number of lies to get every men around her to favour her, Chandan, Shubham, Abhay, even Prof. Sharma, with his decades of experience, fell prey to her lies. Another web of lies she spun was trying to portray that Chandan and she were just friends, even though her classmates and everyone in the department were privy to their private matters made public, because in her own GEN Z words, “doing it all in the open...has always been one of my fantasies” (Sharma, 75). Everyone knew, the relationship was widely recognized by her peers, even Prof. Sharma was informed by multiple sources of her being seen in indecent positions publicly with Chandan, when both of them were inquired, where there was no need to lie, she still hid her affair with Chandan, she said:

“We are just friends....she grabbed Chandan’s hand stealthily and passed a mischievous smile, hidden from the gaze of Viren.”



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And behind the back of Chandan, she was even badmouthing Chandan, calling him a “time-pass”. There is absolute disregard for any individual, be it her lover, her friend, her classmates or her Professor.

There is another Psychological condition that the personality of Sanya exhibits signs of, that is Antisocial Personality Disorder, which is defined by National Library of Medicine, USA as:

“ASPD is an adult diagnosis characterized by a persistent pattern of disregard for and violation of others’ rights and feelings...Individuals with ASPD often manipulate others for personal gain, lack empathy, and seldom feel remorse for their actions. They struggle to develop stable interpersonal relationships and experience significant impairments in social and occupational functioning throughout their lifetime.”

(Fisher, 2)

The individuals with these characteristics, are often in common language termed as sociopaths, who have utter disregard for others’ feelings and demonstrates a lack of empathy, and rather, either just discard people around them as instruments for achieving personal goals as if they don’t hold any value in world unless they are important for the advancement of that particular individual, they also tend to discard those people that were once advantageous to them after their purpose is fulfilled, and so is seen as Sanya’s character in the entire novel, one incident after another, from using Prof. Viren for her career, to using Chandan for her pleasures, to using Shubham as a side piece, to disregarding feelings of Priya, to not even being a decent human being to her Ph.D. Guide, she uses all these people in her path and then distances herself from them once their perceived utility diminishes, when she stops seeing a use for them, as if they are just a ladder for her to climb, and never to look back, and in this process, she just doesn’t spoil the reputation of Prof. Sharma as well as her guide, Dr. Nirmala, also spoiled her career, as well as gave an emotional blow that all these people would remember as trauma for their life, this is the destructive path that is forged by an ASPD individual like Sanya, burning everyone around her, in her path without a regard for all that has been done for her by all these people, who take care of her and help her in advancing her career.

When Disha came to her with her problems, thinking she could learn to be strong from her, she didn’t know she was in for a surprise, what she got was not strength but rather mocking and apathy from Sanya, she said:



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“ Bencho, people carry tragedies like handbags these days.” (Sharma, 3), while laughing at the whole situation. These are the classical signs of ASPD. In another incident, while talking about her Classmate, Nistha’s fiance, she said:

“Look at him! Balding already, and those acne marks-oh my god. Out of shape, ugly. How is Nistha going to sleep with someone like that? Her voice carried the confidence of someone who believed she had the right to pass judgement.”

(Sharma, 216)

On one hand, she claimed herself to be a feminist, and on another, she was talking about women with absolute disrespect, this is what is termed as pseudo-feminism, the contradiction reveals a selective application of feminist principles, which the novel presents as inconsistent and self-serving which only worked when it was about her, but otherwise she frequently perceives other women through a competitive lens and often objectifies them. As said by the author in an interview with Poorvi Garg:

“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.”

Conclusion:

Vikas Sharma in his novel *All her Fires*, has focused particularly on the Gen Z and their actions in everyday life, Sanya is a representation of a particular strand of their thinking, one where individuals suffer from multiple psychological issues. Sanya is a complex character whose actions are shaped by an intense desire for self-fulfilment and advancement. She has shown significant flaws in her character, not just morally but psychologically, from the perspective of Pseudologia Fantastica, she fantasies an entire world around her built on the blocks of lies, from presenting herself as an admirer of Prof. Sharma, to lying about her family to her peers in order to portray a reality that is far more superior than what the actual picture looks like. She forms her entire personality on lies, from one to another.

At the same time, her interactions with others demonstrate traits commonly associated with Antisocial Personality Disorder, particularly manipulation, lack of empathy, disregard for the feelings of others, and the tendency to view people as instruments for personal gain. Whether dealing with her classmates, romantic partners, professors, or



mentors, Sanya repeatedly prioritizes her own ambitions over ethical considerations and human relationships.

The study therefore argues that Sanya's character functions as more than an individual psychological case. She represents a broader crisis of identity in which self-worth becomes dependent upon performance, appearance, and social validation. Her compulsive self-mythologizing ultimately isolates her from genuine human connection, while her manipulative behaviour leaves emotional destruction in its wake. Through Sanya, Sharma offers a compelling exploration of the psychological consequences of unchecked ambition, fragile self-hood, and the relentless pursuit of self-invention in contemporary society.

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