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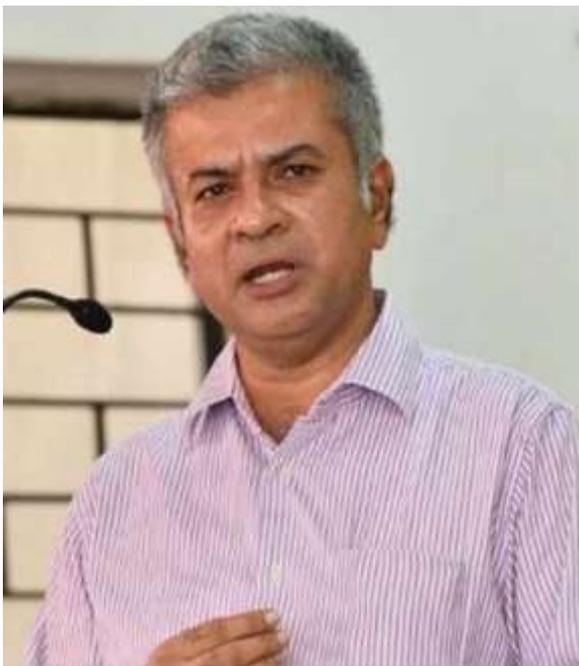
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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

CRIMINAL MINDS AND MORAL DILEMMAS: **A CRIMINOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE** **MOVIE BADLA**

AUTHORED BY - MUSKAN KAUR

ABSTRACT

This research paper offers a criminological analysis of the 2019 film *Badla*, focusing on the motivations behind the criminal actions of the main characters, Naina Sethi and Nirmal Roy. The film explores themes of crime, revenge, and moral ambiguity, with Naina's murder of Arjun driven by psychological strain, fear of scandal, and a desire for self-preservation. In contrast, Nirmal's quest for revenge stems from deep emotional trauma and disillusionment with the justice system. The research paper applies criminological theories, such as Freud's psychoanalytic theory, Merton's strain theory, and Hirschi's social control theory, to understand how social pressures, personal trauma, and societal expectations contribute to criminal behaviour.

KEYWORDS: *Criminological analysis, Badla, Naina Sethi, Nirmal Roy, revenge, psychological strain, strain theory, psychoanalytic theory, justice system, moral ambiguity.*

BACKGROUND

Badla follows Naina Sethi, a successful businesswoman, who is accused of murdering her lover, Arjun. The story begins with Naina meeting her defense lawyer, Badal Gupta, in a closed room. Badal questions her, trying to uncover the truth as Naina insists she is innocent.

Naina explains how she was having an extramarital affair with Arjun and was blackmailed to pay some amount of money otherwise the blackmailer would expose her and because of which both checked into a hotel in a remote location to pay the money. After a fight, Naina was knocked unconscious, only to wake up next to Arjun's dead body with all evidence pointing towards her. Badal challenges her account, revealing multiple inconsistencies. He digs deeper into the disappearance of a young man named Sunny, who had an accident involving Naina and Arjun earlier.

As the story unfolds, layers of deception come to light. Badal uses his sharp questioning to reveal that Naina and Arjun conspired to cover up the accident that led to Sunny's death. In a shocking twist, Badal is revealed to be Sunny's father, seeking revenge. The film ends with Naina being outwitted, as the truth is finally exposed.

CRIMINOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The movie "Badla" when analyzed through a criminological perspective, suggests that both the character's action and their motivations reflect a combination of psychological, sociological, and environmental factors. These elements are crucial to understand the criminal behaviour of both Naina and Nirmal, making it necessary to dive into them in detail:

1. Psychological Influences on Criminal Behaviour

In *Badla*, Naina's murder of Arjun is not an impulsive act but the result of careful planning driven by **psychological strain**. Since Naina is a successful businesswoman, she is faced with the threat of public scandal and the potential destruction of her personal and professional life due to her affair with Arjun, because of which she responded through **reactive aggression**. From a psychological perspective, this act can be seen as one of **self-preservation**.

Nirmal's actions are motivated by deep emotional trauma. The loss of his son and the perceived failure of the justice system increases his need for **retribution**. His behaviour aligns with psychological theories of **revenge** and **justice-seeking behaviour**, where an individual feels driven to restore balance by punishing those they view as wrongdoers.¹ Naina's crime is a **reaction formation**, a defense mechanism where an individual transforms anxiety or guilt into its opposite, often extreme, emotion. To overcome the guilt, Naina redirected her anxiety into violent aggression. The pressure from Arjun's blackmail forces her toward **catharsis**, a release of strong emotions through drastic action to reduce suffering. Naina explains, "*I did it because I had no choice. What was I supposed to do? Let him destroy my life?*" The desperate need to regain control and protect her image is shown here, explaining how psychological strain can justify extreme actions. In contrast, Nirmal's actions reflect a different psychological drive—**thanatos**, or the death drive. Freud's concept of thanatos involves the urge to destroy or harm others when an individual feels wronged. Nirmal's intense desire for revenge overrides moral

¹ Stuckless, N. & Goranson, R., 1992. The Vengeance Scale: Development of a measure of attitudes toward revenge. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality*, 7(1), pp.25–42.

or legal considerations, as he believes his personal sense of justice is more important than societal laws. Nirmal states, *"The law failed me. But I will make sure he pays."* This sentiment clearly depicts his rejection of societal norms and adherence to a personal moral code that justifies deviance.

2. The Influence of Social Expectations and Role Conflict

Women in high-profiling positions like Naina often face double standards, where personal indiscretions are penalized more harshly as compared to men. Here, her affair with Arjun inversely affects her immaculate public image that she is supposed to maintain for her reputation. This pressure can be seen as a significant factor contributing to her criminal behaviour.

Naina's actions also represent *role strain*². She is in a conflict between her private actions and her public role. The strain of balancing these two aspects, combined with the social stigma attached to women who break societal norms, creates an environment for deviance. In this context, her decision to murder Arjun is not just a personal choice but a reaction to the pressures imposed on her by society's expectations of women in positions of power.

Nirmal's actions reflect how personal and societal pressures can influence criminal behaviour. His sense of betrayal from failure of justice system leads him to take justice into his own hands. His belief in his own moral righteousness and the failure of legal institutions push him to engage in vigilantism. As Nirmal states, *"The law didn't give me justice. So I became the law,"* shows how perceived institutional failures can lead individuals to deviate from societal norms and pursue their own forms of retribution.

3. Vengeance and The Breakdown of Social Order

Nirmal's motivation for revenge can be seen as a response to his own moral and social **disintegration** after the loss of his son. When individuals feel disconnected from the social structure and believe that the established systems cannot provide them justice, they may take matters in their own hands. In the present scenario, the failure of the legal system to deliver justice creates a state of **normlessness** or **anomie**, which leads him to take matters into his own hand. His vengeance is not just a personal reaction rather social disillusionment which through

² Merton, R.K., 1938. Social structure and anomie. *American Sociological Review*, 3(5), pp.672-682.

his role as a lawyer also helps him carry out his personal revenge outside the law. This explains the importance of **social cohesion** in maintaining order within the society.

4. Moral Ambiguity and Ethical Relativism

Badla created an environment where it challenges the concept of right and wrong from the viewer's perspective. Naina, though undeniably guilty of murder, is not portrayed as a cold-blooded killer but as a person driven by complex set of circumstances forcing the audience to question whether her actions are truly criminal or response to an unforgiving and unjust society. In a **morally relativistic society**, right and wrong are not fixed but are influenced by context, perception, and personal experiences. For Naina, killing Arjun can be seen as a justified act to protect herself and her career, transforming the crime from a personal moral failing into an act of survival within a competitive world.

Similarly, Nirmal's personal loss, the death of his son, leads him to view the law as ineffective and flawed. As a result, he adopts a self-appointed role as an agent of justice, guided by his own moral code. This raised questions about the legitimacy of personal vengeance and whether individuals are entitled to take justice into their own hands when formal systems fail to deliver.

APPLICATION OF CRIMINOLOGICAL THEORIES

1. Psychoanalytic Theory – Sigmund Freud

The psychological struggle faced by both Naina and Nirmal is interconnected with the psychoanalytical theory. In Frosh's '**A Brief Introduction to Psychoanalytic Theory**'³, he explains that the theory is a therapeutic method, for treating mental disorders by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the patient's mind and bringing repressed fears and conflicts into the conscious mind, using techniques such as dream interpretation and free association⁴. Along with this, Sigmund Freud in his book "**The Interpretation of Dream- Sigmund Freud (1900)**" explains that these characters are not merely individuals who make conscious decisions, rather those influenced by unconscious forces shaping their behaviour.

Freud's theory talks about **id, ego and superego** along with **unconscious desire** and **repressed**

³ Frosh, S., 2012. A brief introduction to psychoanalytic theory.

⁴ Oxford University Press, 2024. *Psychoanalytic*. Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. Available at:

emotions. ⁵Naina's actions can be understood through this lens. The id represents desires like self-preservation and fear of public scandal which is the reason why she killed Arjun. Her affair already shows her id-driven satisfaction in forbidden pleasure which highlights an unconscious desire to go against the societal norms. Her ego helps her to rationalize the murder as an act of survival in a world that would otherwise ruin her. Her superego on the other hand represents her morality and internal conflict. Even though she expressed guilt and fear, her superego wasn't strong enough to prevent her from committing the murder depicting how her unconscious mind allows her to justify the actions.

Nirmal operated under the influence of Thanatos⁶, a Freudian concept which showcases that when one experiences trauma can have the unconscious urge to destroy or harm others. The loss of his son and the perceived failure of the legal system triggered Nirmal's desire for revenge. His unconscious motivation here is to restore the balance by punishing Naina (revenge).

Freud's **theory of repression** also applies to Nirmal. He once wrote, "*the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious*". This dynamic view of mentality, where some mental contents are denied access to conscious thought, became a fundamental tenet of psychoanalysis. Freud declared that the "*theory of repression is the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests*" Nirmal's grief and sense of loss are repressed, leading to a calculated and cold pursuit of revenge. By disguising himself as Badal and manipulating Naina into confessing, Nirmal's unconscious anger and pain leads to a plot to avenge his son's death. His superego justifies his actions to suit his personal sense of justice. This mirrors Freud's idea that unresolved unconscious conflicts can lead to deviant behaviour. Even Naina experience psychological repression of her guilt from her affair, the hit-and-run accident, and Arjun's murder. For her, the act of confessing to the murder represents a **cathartic release**⁷ which brought her hidden guilt and anxiety to the surface. Similarly, Nirmal's exposure of his true identity acts as catharsis which allowed him to release the anger and grief he repressed throughout the film.

⁵ Rennison, N., 2015. *Freud and psychoanalysis: Everything you need to know about id, ego, super-ego and more*. Oldcastle books.

⁶ Lind, L., 1991. Thanatos: The drive without a name: The development of the concept of the death drive in Freud's writings. *The Scandinavian psychoanalytic review*, 14(1), pp.60-80.

⁷ Nichols, M.P. and Efran, J.S., 1985. Catharsis in psychotherapy: A new perspective. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 22(1), p.46.

2. Strain Theory

According to Merton, individuals are driven by crime when they cannot achieve societal goals through legitimate means which leads to deviant behaviour as a way to cope with this 'strain'.⁸ Since Naina is a high-profile businesswoman, she is under immense pressure to maintain a good reputation within the society and her affair represents a deviation from societal norms and its potential disclosure creates strain for her because of which she committed murder. Merton has laid down five modes of adaptation to strain⁹:

- A. Conformity
- B. Innovation
- C. Ritualism
- D. Retreatism
- E. Rebellion

Naina's decision to kill Arjun comes under the ambit of **innovation** where an individual accepts the societal goals but rejects the legitimate means and use illegal or unethical alternatives. Her dialogue, "*I did it because I had no choice. What was I supposed to do? Let him destroy my life?*" shows that she finds herself trapped between the societal expectations and potential disclosure of her affair. She rationalizes this act by stating that it was crucial to protect her public image.

*Nirmal's actions can also be interlinked with Merton's Strain Theory. Him seeking revenge for his son's death align with **rebellion** and **innovation**. Nirmal's decision to take the law into his own hands after the legal system fails to provide justice represents his rebellion against the societal norms. His main goal to obtain justice for his son remains but he rejects all the legitimate means and instead replaces them with his own moral code and vigilantism. He also exhibits innovation by manipulating the events and disguising as Badal Gupta to get revenge from Naina. In the last scene he says to Naina, "You killed my son, now I will take everything from you", which explains how he innovatively turned to deviance, operating outside the law and transformed his grief into a rationalization for his criminal actions which he justifies as morally righteous.*

⁸ Murphy, D.S. and Robinson, M.B., 2008. The Maximizer: Clarifying Merton's theories of anomie and strain. *Theoretical Criminology*, 12(4), pp.501-521.

⁹ Featherstone, R. and Deflem, M., 2003. Anomie and strain: Context and consequences of Merton's two theories. *Sociological inquiry*, 73(4), pp.471-489.

General Strain Theory – Robert Agnew

On the basis of Merton's theory, Robert Agnew expanded the theory and created a General Strain Theory (1992) where he emphasized on the role of negative emotions i.e. anger, frustration, depression as critical factors that can lead to deviant behaviour.¹⁰ He argued that strain is not just about failing to achieve societal goals but also about the negative experiences that individuals go through which produce emotional strain that can push them toward crime.¹¹

For Naina, the emotional strain of being blackmailed and fear that her affair will be disclosed created a combination of anger, anxiety and desperation. She confesses, *"I had no way out... I was losing everything,"* which indicates that her actions were emotionally charged.

Nirmal's behaviour on the other hand fits even more explicitly under GST. His son's death and the failure of justice system led to anger and grief. This emotional turmoil made him take the decision seeking revenge. Nirmal stated, *"The law didn't give me justice. So I became the law."* This statement explained Agnew's idea that emotional strain and institutional failures can lead individuals to deviate from societal norms. His feeling betrayed by the legal system, combined with his emotional pain, create the perfect conditions for him to resort to criminal behaviour as a form of justice. Nirmal's vigilantism can be interpreted through **frustration-induced criminality**. Nirmal's pursuit of revenge against Naina is his response to the strain caused by his son's death and the failure of society's legal mechanisms to hold her accountable.

3. Social Control Theory – Hirschi

Hirschi explains that individuals having strong social bonds in family, school and community are less likely to engage in criminal behaviour.¹² His theory is based on the assumption that people are naturally inclined to act delinquent, but social control and bonds prevent them from doing so since they have to maintain status quo and vice-versa.¹³

Naina's social bonds initially seem to be great since she is a successful businesswoman, a wife and a mother. However, as her extramarital affair was about to get disclosed her social bonds began to become weak. This **weakening of societal ties** led to her decision of killing Arjun.

¹⁰ Brezina, T., 2017. General Strain Theory. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Criminology and Criminal Justice*.

¹¹ Blake, C. and Carey, T., 2021. *Agnew's General Strain Theory*. University of Illinois Springfield.

¹² Hirschi, T., 1969. *Causes of delinquency*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹³ Hirschi, T., 1969. *Causes of delinquency*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers.

She didn't feel compelled to conform to the societal expectations because the very institutions who once used to support her success were now threatening to expose her failure.

In Nirmal's case, he lost trust in the legal system when it failed to give him justice. This made him feel disconnected from society, leading him to take justice into his own hands. His actions reflect the idea in **social disorganization theory**, which suggests that when community systems break down, people are more likely to break the rules.¹⁴

4. Labelling Theory

Labelling theory indicates that society's assigning of labels to individuals have an effect on their behaviour. This theory, in relation to sociology, criminology, and psychology, explains that labelling someone as a criminal can lead to bad conduct. The theory purports that society's establishing someone as a criminal based on deviant behaviour (action perceived to violate society's normal standards) may lead others to mistreat the person labelled as a criminal¹⁵.

Schrag explains various assumptions about this theory including that no act is intrinsically criminal it is only by designation of criminality by authorities and "getting-caught" and the decision making in the criminal justice system are a function of offender as opposed to offense characteristics, etc.¹⁶

Naina and Nirmal become **victims of labelling**. Naina's public labelling as a "murderer" pushed her towards further deviance. Her entire identity is shaped by this label which led her to act in a way that fulfil the expectations of society about her criminality. Naina said, "Everyone thinks I am a killer. Maybe I am. But it's too late now. It's over." This internalization of the label as a murderer pushes her deeper into the role of a criminal.

Similarly, Nirmal's societal identity as a "grieving parent" led him to seek revenge. His further deviance can be seen as a response to the label placed upon him as a "victim of institutionalized failure".

¹⁴ Kubrin, C.E., 2009. Social disorganization theory: Then, now, and in the future. In *Handbook on crime and deviance* (pp. 225-236). New York, NY: Springer New York.

¹⁵ **Study.com**, 2024. *Labeling theory and crime: Stigma, retrospective and projective labeling*.

¹⁶ **Wellford, C.**, year. *Labelling theory and criminology: An assessment*. Florida State University.

5. Conflict Theory – Karl Marx (1884)

Conflict theory is a social theory that views crime as a result of social conflict which is caused by various factors like class conflict, capitalism, frustration, anger and need of individuals.¹⁷

The crime committed by Naina reflects a power struggle where societal expectations of gender and success pushed her to act in ways that violate the laws. Her affair with Arjun and the blackmail represents a power imbalance in a society where women in business are held to higher standards and any perceived lapse in morality threatens to destroy her career.

Nirmal's decision to take matters into his own hands also reflects the **power dynamics**. His belief in the **failure of the justice system** shows the tension between the powerless individual and the powerful institutions that perpetuate inequality. *"The system is broken, but I can fix it,"* Nirmal says, expressing his desire to correct an unequal system through deviance.

6. Cognitive Dissonance Theory – Festinger (1957)

Cognitive Dissonance is a psychological phenomenon which occurs when beliefs of a person are in contrast to their actions. People experience discomfort with this kind of tension which they then try to reduce by changing their beliefs, actions, or how they perceive their actions.¹⁸ Naina's behaviour is in conflict between her guilt (of having the affair and subsequently killing Arjun) and her desire to maintain her career. Instead of admitting to her guilt she opts for violence as a form of control. This reaction stems from a **fear of social ostracism** and **loss of professional credibility** through which she tries to justify her actions.

Nirmal, who went against his own morals and ethics tries to reason his act of conduct by blaming the judicial system and grief instead of accepting the fact that what he did was wrong thereby changing his beliefs.

7. Differential Association Theory – Edwin Sutherland (1939)

Differential Association Theory explains how people learn criminal behaviour through social interactions. Sutherland explains that criminal behaviour is learned i.e. through nurture in

¹⁷ Sedek, N.F.B.M., 2018. Marxist Conflict Theory as a Theory of Crime. *Academia: Accelerating the World's Research*

¹⁸ Harmon-Jones, E. and Harmon-Jones, C., 2012. Cognitive dissonance theory. *Handbook of motivation science*, 71.

interaction with other persons through communication specifically within intimate personal groups. This learning includes techniques and specific direction of motives, drives, realizations and attitudes.¹⁹

Naina learns criminal behaviour not just through exposure to Arjun but through her interactions with him. Arjun manipulates and blackmails her, where she resorts to murder as a means of protecting herself. Her transformation from a businesswoman into a murderer can be seen as a process of learning deviant behaviour through her interactions with Arjun.

8. Anomie Theory – Durkheim (1897)

Durkheim in his theory believes that anomie is a state of **social disintegration** that can occur when the old institutions are no longer functioning, or when people cannot expect to be rewarded for conforming to the standards. He explained that anomie can lead to crime since people might not be properly socialized into a society's shared values and norms.²⁰

Naina's fear creates a state of normlessness where the usual moral constraints that guide behaviour were no longer relevant to her. Similarly, Nirmal's actions also showcase how he felt disconnected from the societal norms after the failure of legal system representing a form of anomie.

CONCLUSION

"Badla" explores the psychological, sociological, and criminological dynamics behind criminal behaviour, particularly through the complex characters of Naina and Nirmal. The film highlights the multiple pressures individuals face—ranging from social expectations to personal trauma—that shape their actions and decisions. Naina's crime, driven by psychological strain, fear, and the desire for self-preservation, illustrates how societal pressures on women in powerful positions can lead to extreme measures when one is cornered. On the other hand, Nirmal's pursuit of vengeance, fueled by the grief of losing his son and the failure of the justice system, demonstrates how personal tragedies and disillusionment with societal structures can push an individual toward deviance.

¹⁹ Sutherland, E.H., 1947. *Principles of criminology*. 4th ed. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, pp. 89-90.

²⁰ Marks, S.R., 1974. Durkheim's theory of anomie. *American Journal of Sociology*, 80(2), pp.329-363.

The criminological theories applied to "Badla," such as strain theory, psychoanalytic theory, and social control theory, provide deeper insights into the motivations behind criminal behaviour. Both Naina and Nirmal's actions can be seen as responses to a breakdown in social order, where the inability to achieve justice through conventional means leads them to take matters into their own hands. The film challenges traditional notions of morality, presenting characters whose actions, while criminal, are rooted in complex emotional and societal struggles.

Ultimately, "Badla" invites the audience to question the nature of crime and justice. It explains how personal and societal conflicts, when left unaddressed, can lead to catastrophic consequences. The moral ambiguity presented in the story forces us to confront difficult questions about the justice system, the social structures that govern behaviour, and the psychological forces that drive individuals to deviate from the norms. Ultimately, the film demonstrates that crime is not simply a violation of the law, but a symptom of deeper emotional, social, and institutional fractures.

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