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Narrative Identity and Moral Inversion: A Study of Selected Works of Indian Crime Fiction

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Abstract: *This paper examines narrative identity and moral inversion in Indian crime fiction, focusing on Archana Sarat's Birds of Prey and Dr. Sohil Makwana's Murdrum. Using McAdams' framework, it analyses how agency and imago operate through nuclear, contamination, and redemption episodes to shape characters' moral and psychological development. Nuclear episodes highlight pivotal achievements or traumas, contamination sequences reveal the subversion of agency, and redemption sequences suggest potential repair and growth. The study shows that narrative identity in these works is dynamic and contested, reflecting how social, cultural, and familial pressures influence moral choices and ethical trajectories.*

Keywords: *Narrative identity, moral inversion, contamination, agency, literature.*

Introduction

In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity. -Erik Erikson

Interdisciplinarity can be defined as the integration of information, approaches, and viewpoints from different academic fields to solve complex issues and themes and to fully comprehend the subject by surpassing the confines of a single discipline. In contrast to conventional methods that prioritise specialisation and academic silos, interdisciplinarity encourages communication and cooperation across fields, which stimulates creativity and a more comprehensive understanding. Interdisciplinarity encourages fluidity between different disciplines such as sciences, humanities and social sciences by challenging the rigidities of established domains. Expressing the same view, Richard Florida states that
"Innovation is fostered by information gathered from new connections; from insights gained by journeys into other disciplines or places; from active, collegial networks and fluid open boundaries."

Literature has always existed as an artistic field of study beyond the confines of narrative and language. It functions as a dynamic location where history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, cultural studies and sciences come together, surpassing the boundaries of mere aesthetic appreciation. Literature's dialogic nature enables it to absorb, reflect and question various facets of human experience, thereby making an interdisciplinary approach

Literary Enigma

ISSN (Online): 3049-2033

The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Special Issue 1 (March 2026)

necessary. Interdisciplinarity in literature emphasises that texts are not solitary artefacts but rather the result of cultural, social and intellectual networks.

This paper examines narrative identity and moral inversion in Indian crime fiction, focusing on Archana Sarat's *Birds of Prey* and Dr. Sohil Makwana's *Murdrum*. Using McAdams' framework, it analyses how agency and imago operate through nuclear, contamination, and redemption episodes to shape characters' moral and psychological development.

Indian Crime Fiction: An Overview

In recent years, Indian crime fiction has emerged as a unique genre that both absorbs and modifies the patterns of world crime literature while concurrently reflecting the peculiar cultural, political, psychological, and social realities of the Indian environment. Since then, the writers have progressively transformed it into a genre that challenges local issues, including gender, caste, class, corruption and dynamics of urban contemporary life.

Early Indian crime stories imitated the western counterparts in terms of mysteries and detectives, frequently reflecting the British concepts. The early Indian detective fiction writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee started experimenting with mystery themes in the late nineteenth century; however, the genre of Indian crime fiction started flourishing after the independence era. Rather than imitating the Western figures, Indian writers wanted to bring a character which felt closer to the Indian milieu. The Indian readers could not relate to the western characters like Sherlock Holmes; hence, the detective character was localised by authors like Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, who presented him in the everyday realities of India through Byomkesh Bakshi novels. Byomkesh was envisioned as a *satyanweshi* (seeker of truth) representing indigenous ethical and cultural ideals in contrast to the distant Sherlock Holmes.

In contemporary times, Indian crime fiction extends its boundaries by taking into account the pressing issues of twenty-first-century society. The authors bring to light the problems pertaining to class, gender, corruption and evolving mentality of the Indian people. The numerous allusions to Indian social norms, customs, lifestyle, rural areas, popular culture and the vast majority of characters who are typically Indian in terms of origin and upbringing are the commonalities that bind the enormous body of work together. Writers such as Kalpana Swaminathan (Lalli series), Vikram Chandra (Sacred *Games*), Madhulika Liddle (the Muzaffar Jang series) and Sharmishtha Shenoy (Vikram Rana series) broaden the genre by fusing narrative suspense with examinations of political violence, cultural and ethnic conflicts, gendered spaces and urban modernity. The rise of *Indian noir*, particularly in the works influenced by popular culture and film, emphasises the themes of moral ambiguities, twisted mindsets, institutional corruption and splintered identities in an increasingly globalised world. RV Raman, in his article "Quo Vadis, Indian Noir?" states that:

> The last decade has witnessed an explosion of sorts in Indian writing. Large numbers have taken to writing all sorts of fiction. Ours is an old civilisation with a very long history of storytelling. What is new now is that people are writing in English. (Raman)

The challenge that Indian crime fiction faces today is the lack of demand from readers. Although the writing's origin dates back a century, the genre still faces a crisis of readership. The dominance of crime fiction from abroad, particularly the popularity of Scandinavian and American writers, has overshadowed Indian writings in crime. Crime fiction is still frequently associated with Western locations, detectives and investigative techniques for many Indian readers. Another reason is that it has been marginalised as 'popular' or less scholarly in the

Indian literary market, which has conventionally given preference to 'serious' or 'realistic' work. Suman Gupta refers to crime fiction and other Indian genre fiction in English, including mythology fiction, campus fiction, and chick lit, as "Indian 'commercial fiction' in English" since their release is reliant on an anticipated "profitable career within the Indian market" (46). Gupta goes into further detail on this distinction, saying that "commercial fiction is the gossipy café of Indian writing in English at home, whereas literary fiction is the respectable face of Indian literature in English abroad and at home" ("Indian 'Commercial Fiction" 47).

Identity and Narrative Identity: A Theoretical Overview

The concept of identity has been a major focus for many disciplines, including philosophy, anthropology, psychology, humanities, as well as political and gender theories. In psychology, identity is a concept that includes social and personal characteristics, cultural narratives, and personal life events. Identity refers to the way an individual defines, comprehends, and perceives themselves. It encompasses social roles, individual traits, and a sense of continuity over time. Identity is shaped by both personal (how an individual perceives themselves) and social (how others perceive the individual) factors. Although belonging to different social groups significantly influences one's identity, it remains ultimately under the individual's control how they define themselves and which aspects they choose to emphasise more than others. This idea is known as personal or individual identity. The concept of identity plays an important role in a person's life, helping them make sense of themselves and their experiences in the world. Expressing his views on why identities matter, philosopher Kwame Antony Appiah says-

> Identities, for people who have them…are living guides. […] Given that we connect these labels with our own behaviour, it's natural to expect other people to do the same…so identities don't just affect our own behaviour; they help determine how we treat other people.

> The formation of identity is based on certain foundations or parameters, such as
- Self-concept: the set of beliefs and knowledge about oneself.
- Self-continuity: a sense of being the same person over time despite certain changes.
- Self-esteem: the interpretive or analytic aspect of self-concept or attaching value to oneself.

There have been multitudes of perspectives regarding the formation of identity within the discipline of psychology itself. Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory suggests that identity is formed through the exploration of different roles, values and beliefs. He believed that identity formation is the task of adolescence, and failure to it leads to instability and confusion. The Social Identity Theory, given by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, has at its core the idea that identity is primarily formed through membership of social groups, be it ethnic, cultural, national, professional or gender based. The acceptance and approval from these groups help the individual to comprehend his identity and sense of belonging. Personal identity theory is concerned with personal traits or concepts that shape identity over time with regard to psychological and situational changes. John Locke (1690) believed that identity formation is closely tied to consciousness and memory. James Marcia (1966) said that identity formation is an evolving process of exploration and not a fixed state. J. P Hewitt defines personal identity

Literary Enigma

The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Special Issue 1 (March 2026)

ISSN (Online): 3049-2033

as "a sense of self built up over time as the person embarks on and pursues projects or goals that are not thought of as those of community, but as the property of person. Personal identity thus emphasizes a sense of autonomy rather than of communal involvement" (93).

Similar to the concept of personal identity is the idea of narrative identity. It postulates the idea that individuals form an internalised life story about themselves based on their past, present and the anticipated future. Narratives about oneself are not just accounts of events that happened in a particular time and place, but they also provide an insight and evaluation of the past events in relation to the self and temporal continuity (McLean 2). The narrative approach is more of a process approach, which believes that narratives can reveal individual differences and traits in the formation of a coherent identity. The key concept of the narrative approach is that, unlike personality traits, which describe an individual as he is, narrative identity captures an individual in time.

Although the roots of this concept go back to narrative psychology and philosophy, the main proponent is considered to be Dan P. McAdams, an American personality psychologist who developed this theory of Narrative Identity in the 1990s. In McAdams' framework of personality, narrative identity forms the third layer, where he attributes the person as the author of the self. According to McAdams, narrative identity represents an internalised personal story of the self and life, which contributes to cohesion, meaning and purpose. During the early formulation of his theory, McAdams defined narrative identity by asserting that, "people construct their identities by creating an autobiographical story of the self that provides their lives with unity, purpose and meaning."

In the psychological periphery, narrative identity is the most integrative layer of personality as it creates a sense of unity over time by providing a framework for goals and decisions. The stories that one constructs about oneself are used to make sense of experiences, especially when they deviate from the desired expectations. In other words, narrative helps an individual to deal with the 'trouble 'in the world. In the process of making sense of the difficulties, the narrative identity starts to emerge as a whole. According to McAdams, identity formation is a continuous endeavour because it continues to be updated. Narrative researchers have thoroughly examined how people evaluate their past experiences to comprehend their present and future. It has been observed that even if a life story extends lifelong, it usually starts to take shape during adolescence because of the demand to establish oneself with respect to profession, relationships and gender.

McAdams identifies the main components of narrative identity as:

- Nuclear episodes: important autobiographical experiences or memories, such as high or low turning points, that influence an individual's self-perception.
- Agency and communion: these are the central motivational themes. Agency signifies achievement and independence, whereas communion emphasises relationship, belonging and love.
- Redemptive and contaminating sequence: these are the patterns of interpreting life events. Redemption refers to negative events turning into positive outcomes. Contamination refers to interpreting positive events or experiences into negative sequences.
- Personal narrative structure: the moral, cultural and religious norms that guide the evaluation and interpretation of events and experiences.

- Continuity and coherence: the temporal and thematic coherence that unifies past, present and projected future in a unified identity.
- Imagery and symbolic content: use of symbols, metaphors, personification and narrative imagery to make life events emotionally charged and comprehensible.
- Future script: imagined life objectives and ambitions that shape the present actions and guide the narrative identity.
- Imago- an idealised and personified self-concept developed during early or mid-adolescence.

Murdrum and Birds of Prey: Outlining the Selected Works

Dr. Sohil Makwana's *Murdrum* series narrates a chilling tale of Nayan, a serial killer on the loose who targets pregnant women and feeds on their newborns. His modus operandi includes luring pregnant women to isolated locations and assaulting them before killing. CBI intern Komal Rathod, while investigating the cold cases, comes across his previous crimes. During the course of her investigation, she finds that Nayan experiences a troubled childhood marked by sexual abuse and trauma. He is physically and sexually assaulted repeatedly by his guardian, Nitinlal. Facing constant trauma, he turns into a sinister killer who mercilessly murders pregnant women because he blames his mother for abandoning him and leaving him in the hands of a man like Nitinlal. He satiates his hunger for vengeance by brutally assaulting and torturing them. He kills at least 24 women during the course of his strategy for revenge and justice.

Birds of Prey by Archana Sarat is a psychological crime thriller that delves into the dark recesses of trauma, vengeance, and justice. Set in Mumbai, the narrative unfolds through dual perspectives: that of ex-ACP Anton Pinto and Swarna, a woman grappling with a harrowing past. The story commences with a chilling prologue where Anton Pinto, a former police officer, is coerced back into service to investigate a series of mysterious disappearances of men from affluent families. The only common thread among the victims is their connection to a prestigious international school in Mumbai. Parallelly, the narrative introduces Swarna, whose childhood is marred by unspeakable horrors. She is constantly abused by her stepfather, both physically and sexually. As part of her journey in being the protector of children who she feels are not cared for by their parents, she starts to kill the fathers. Her journey is one of survival and a quest for justice, leading her to confront the very institution that once shields its perpetrators.

The Shifting Self: Narrative Identity in *Murdrum* and *Birds of Prey*

McAdams, in his early definition of narrative identity, defines it as 'autobiographical story of the self.' He asserts that "if you could see it, it would look like a story. After all, a story potentially integrates different psychological elements, brings a certain kind of narrative order and logic to the chaos of experienced life […]" (McAdams 2018).

The very first component that McAdams mentions in the formation of narrative identity is the nuclear episodes. They are the formative life events that have a direct impact on the self-perception of a person. These can be the high or low turning points in a person's life at any given period. Nayan endures years of humiliation and psychological trauma, as during his adolescent years, his classmates continually mocked his lean figure and absence of facial hair. He is also subjected to constant sexual abuse at the hands of his guardian, Nitinlal. Facing all

these traumatic incidents, he very early in his life forms the opinion that "people are either weak or strong, the strong rule and the weak die" (156). Nayan's childhood alienation and neglect led him to crystallise his identity around a lack of empathy and grievances. He suffers humiliation and ridicule everywhere, whether in school, home or society. He starts avoiding people and spends his time reading books as part of his defence mechanism. His reading choices also contribute significantly to the formation of his identity. "He used to read four to five books a week about detectives hunting the criminals. Killer, murder, rape, hate, envy, sex, fear, blood, crime, knife, lust, weapon, evidence, jealousy, torture, cruelty- that's all his brain became preoccupied with" (215).

In the view of McAdams, experiences or moments of humiliation and neglect often mark a turning point where the self feels stripped of dignity. These episodes lead to the development of a deep sense of inadequacy and fuel a drive for revenge and power. He asserts that, "Nuclear episodes stand out in bold print in life story as narrative high points, low points and turning points, explaining how the person has remained the same and how he or she has changed over time" (McAdams 1985).

A similar kind of nuclear episode of childhood trauma and abuse is observed in the identity formation of Swarna from *Birds of Prey*. The novel portrays the horrifying sexual abuse of Swarna at the hands of her stepfather. During the early years of her life, she witnessed her mother being a victim of constant domestic violence and enduring all the suffering quietly. Her innocence was entirely wiped out after being impregnated by her father twice. When she confronts her mother, she says, "just think of it as something small in return for the safety of this home" (32). Swarna was taught by her mother to stay silent and not retaliate against her father, as he was the 'Superior Being'. "Her father was God in His most scary form, inspiring fear and whose attention you would rather not draw to yourself" (51).

Trauma, especially with reference to sexual abuse, can lead to a fragmented notion of one's identity and self. Swarna's early years were shaped by abuse and disorientation, which proved to be a significant low point of the nuclear episode. Experiences like that of Swarna disrupt the formation of a coherent life story as the survivors experience emotional numbing and dissociation. Such autobiographic episodes lead to a distorted sense of self-perception, which hinders the formation of narrative identity.

McAdams' theory also puts forth the concepts of redemptive and contaminative narratives. The nuclear episodes serve as the 'what' of an individual's story, but 'how' they interpret these episodes is what forms either the redemptive or contaminating narrative. While nuclear episodes are the emotionally intense moments in one's life, contamination occurs when the early positive events turn into something tragic. The connection between the two is that nuclear episodes can also be contaminating, since the most significant events in identity formation are those in which trust is breached, hope is destroyed, and trauma is introduced. McAdams describes it as:

> In contamination sequences, a very good or emotionally positive life scene suddenly becomes very bad or negative, as in stories where happiness is contaminated by disappointment or joy by sadness (McAdams, *The Stories We Live By,* p.85)

In the case of Nayan from *Murdrum,* his victimisation and abuse are the nuclear episodes in this story. However, it is also contaminating, as it changes his perception of relationships and society. Instead of having a normal childhood, it becomes permanently scarred by injustice and trauma. He turns emotionally cold as part of his early exposure to false

Literary Enigma

ISSN (Online): 3049-2033

The International Journal of English Language, Literature and Culture
(Peer-Reviewed and Indexed)
Vol. 3, Special Issue 1 (March 2026)

charges and social marginalisation. His sense of security was all tainted by constant taunts and mockery. As it is mentioned in the novel;

> His story was entirely different. The adolescent boy had to deal with dreadful gossip, teasing, bitterness, anger, hatred, abuse, hurt, refusal, loneliness, insecurity and orphanhood. Because of this constant rejection, he became socially withdrawn and started feeling phobic […] as the summer months passed, he began to understand the subtle difference between being lonely and being alone. He realised that being alone was absolutely enjoying one's company while being in solitude without feeling lonely. To avoid his loneliness, he needed to enjoy his own company. (215)

An analogous type of contamination occurs in Swarna from *Birds of Prey*. She too endures a series of abusive episodes in her adolescence. Her story is saturated with good things turning bad. Relationships that are supposed to be supportive and peaceful become the ground of abuse and exploitation for her. The trauma of constant abuse contaminates Swarna's sense of safety. A relationship or domestic environment that appears nurturing at first later reveals betrayal or exploitation (Sarat). Swarna's view of morality is tainted by apathy and reflection. Swarna sees her mother enduring years of sexual and domestic abuse without ever retaliating. She desperately wants her mother to shield her from the same horrors happening to her; however, she advises her to stay silent instead. Swarna feels a wave of anger and betrayal as she begins to resent her mother for not confronting her father. As the novel illustrates-

> Swarna had not forgotten Amma. She could not forgive her. Swarna had wanted her mother to save her. Most nights, when she cried out loud, she had called out to her. She thought her mother would come rushing into the room and protect her from her father. At least, she could have reasoned with her father to leave Swarna alone, but… (62)

All the betrayals cast a shadow on Swarna's identity, which shatters it even further. She sees her existence as a sequence of contaminations rather than a consistent path of significance. According to McAdams, redemption is generally the process by which negativity is changed into positive conclusions. But sometimes this redemption may not be uplifting or righteous. A dark redemptive arc often results in retaliation, moral inversion and unethical alteration. It imitates the framework of atonement but distorts its meaning by justifying negative actions as a means of self-determination. Swarna begins killing men she believes are unfit fathers. The turning point comes when she sees a child almost fall from a swing while the father drifts about in careless distraction. She saves the child in an instant, and the act floods her with pride. What should have been a simple good deed becomes, for her, a contamination sequence reworked into meaning: she interprets the father's negligence as proof that men are incapable of protecting their children. From then on, she convinces herself that it is her moral duty to rescue all children from their fathers, who, in her story, embody harm rather than care.

Her method grows ritualistic, almost symbolic. She lures men by warning them that their child may be in danger, offering herself as a saviour. Once they follow, she leads them to an isolated house with a deep well—an image heavy with psychological resonance. The well becomes the site where her own buried trauma is re-enacted: she casts the men into darkness and leaves them to starve, their slow deaths mirroring the silent suffering she and her mother once endured. Weeks later, their decomposed bodies are found, stark reminders of her vengeance. She tells the detective Anton that "There is nothing to protect a child from her parents. That's why my job is not over. I'm not scared of death, but I don't want to leave till I

finish the work I was sent to do. […] "I will kill him. Krishna, give me strength to throttle him" (175).

Swarna turns her contamination of abandonment and the powerlessness of her own experiences into a twisted story of redemption. She reinvents herself as an executioner rather than a victim and a protector rather than a defenceless individual. However, her redemption is morally inverted for, in her pursuit of saving children, she becomes the murderer of men. This her narrative identity shows how unresolved trauma can erode moral boundaries and recast violence as a form of justice. Mclean and McAdams suggest that essential negative events are more likely to generate meaning than the positive ones. It has been demonstrated by various research that well-being is predicted by an individual's capacity to interpret, analyse and find redemption in unpleasant situations. They further elucidate-

> Thus, the experience of, reflection on, and resolution of past difficult experiences appears to be a powerful process in identity development and psychological well-being more broadly. It is important to note that the meanings made may not always be positive and growth-promoting. Therefore, this reflective process, difficult as it may be, is the critical component to the emergence of narrative identity, but it may also be risky as we open ourselves up to the vulnerabilities of reflection. (1693)

In McAdams' framework of narrative identity, agency and communion are the two main thematic aspects of personal life accounts. The term 'agency' describes the themes in a person's life narrative that present the individual as a self-governing actor who exerts control, sets objectives, strives for achievement and self-determination. Communion, on the other hand, focuses on developing and fostering relationships, be it love, family or society. A mental representation of an idealised parent or attachment figure that shapes a person's personality and behaviour and relational dynamics is called an 'imago.'

McAdams himself defines the two as:

> People high in power motivation emphasize the agentic themes of self-mastery, status and victory, achievement and responsibility, and empowerment in self-defining memories, and they tend to conceive of the story's main characters (imagoes) in highly agentic terms relative to people low in power motivation. By contrast, people high in intimacy motivation emphasize the communal themes of friendship and love, dialogue, caring for others, and sense of community in the significant scenes in their life stories, and they formulate highly communal imagoes such as personifications of the self as 'the caregiver," "the loyal friend," and "the lover." (*The Psychology of Life Stories* 112)

Nayan's figure from *Murdrum* is a prime example of the intricate relationship between agency and imago in forming narrative identity. He demonstrates agency, which McAdams defines as the ability to take deliberate actions, self-mastery and make moral decisions. He manifests all these through his methodological approach to solving problems and calculated handling of morally ambiguous circumstances. Before being apprehended, he deceives the police and detectives for a considerable amount of time. He joins the forensics team as a van driver and changes his name from Nayan to Harry. This illustrates his calculated plan of staying close to the police; he overhears all of their conversations and is aware of all the advancements they are making. He also tampers with the evidence, having already gathered a great deal of forensic understanding.

McAdams notes that contaminative episodes, where an individual's moral framework is challenged or reversed, often shape agency. Nayan exemplifies agency exercised under morally inverted conditions by indulging in criminal activities. He says, "society is equally responsible as much as the mother for the wretchedness of my life; society should be punished" (252). His choices demonstrate both his dark moral flexibility and his strong self-determination.

In McAdams' paradigm, agency is the degree to which a character perceives themselves as independent and capable of changing their own circumstances. Swarna frequently demonstrates her struggle for independence in a society that restricts women's options. Her choices, particularly pertaining to her identity, reflect times when she attempts to take charge of her life. Her morally ambiguous choice of killing men as part of her 'avenger' imago presents McAdams' notion of agentic responsibility. Her interactions with authoritative figures, such as her father and the police officer, show internalised templates of constraint and betrayal, prompting her to make morally inverted choices. Swarna is compelled to live in a cruel state of exploitation and trauma. Her immediate identity is based on survival, physical resilience and emotional detachment. Anger, moral outrage and desire for justice are the main sources of her imago. She mentally personifies herself as the protector of children and avenger of evil. She is psychologically complex due to her dual imago structure; she represents both the ferocious assertion of justice and the silent persistence of trauma.

In McAdams' framework of narrative identity, agency and imago work in close interplay, shaping how individuals script their life stories. Agency refers to the capacity to act, pursue goals, and exert control over one's circumstances, while imago represents the inner cast of characters—the roles or archetypes such as survivor, avenger, or seeker—that structure identity. The imago provides a narrative role through which agency is expressed, and agency in turn validates the imago by enacting its traits in lived or narrated experience. Ultimately, it is the dynamic relationship between agency and imago that defines the moral and psychological texture of narrative identity, determining whether a life story unfolds toward growth, resilience, or destructive inversion.

Conclusion

The exploration of narrative identity in the selected works shows how the self is constantly created at the nexus of agency, imago and the major narrative incidents that shape meaning. Mcadmas' concept of nuclear episodes emerges as crucial to the character's identity-making process, as sometimes these moments crystallise the conflict between agency and constraint. The contaminating episodes in the lives of these characters significantly give these nuclear episodes a darker trajectory, turning promising moments of potential growth into fragmented stories. The phenomenon of moral inversion occurs precisely here, when a character's agency is twisted into a tool for violence when they use the imago of a survivor or avenger as a rationale for destructive action. Nevertheless, the potential for redemption offers a counterpoint, suggesting that even under morally compromised frameworks, narrative identity has an innate capacity for repair and renewal.

Applying McAdams' narrative identity theory to Indian crime fiction is particularly revealing because it allows us to explore how characters negotiate moral complexity within socially and culturally specific contexts. Indian crime narratives often feature protagonists and antagonists whose choices are shaped by family, community, and societal pressures, making the interplay of agency, imago, and moral inversion especially pronounced. By analysing

nuclear episodes, contamination, and redemption in these texts, we can understand not just the psychological depth of characters like Swarna or Nayan, but also how crime fiction reflects broader questions of justice, ethics, and personal transformation in contemporary India. This approach bridges literary analysis and psychology, showing how deeply personal narratives intersect with culturally grounded moral frameworks.

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