



VICTIMS OR ASSAILANTS ?

Bhumika Yadav

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Abstract :

“Men cannot be raped,” stated by prosecutor Pamela Bozanich during the infamous 1989 Menendez brothers trial a remark that epitomises the rigid societal constructs of victimhood and justice. Erik and Lyle Menendez two brothers who are known for the brutal murder of their parents have been convicted for life in prison rather than products of psychological and systemic trauma. This paper seeks to explore their case beyond conventional criminal narratives, using a trauma centred framework to examine how childhood abuse, neglect, and psychological distress led to their violent actions. Drawing from psychological framework, including Judith Herman’s theory of trauma and recovery, this study underscores how sustained trauma manifests in dissociation, anxiety, depression, and violent outbursts.

Furthermore, this paper scrutinises the moral binaries of "good" and "evil" through the lens of philosophical ethics. Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of moral absolutism. Integrating personal accounts with legal and psychological theory, this analysis challenges traditional notions of culpability and victimhood.

Additionally, this paper examines the role of media in shaping public perceptions of justice, particularly how class and wealth influence legal narratives. The Menendez case serves as a case study of media sensationalism and how high-profile cases distort notions of fairness in the legal system. Finally, this paper interrogates the question: should a history of abuse mitigate criminal responsibility? By adopting an empathetic, trauma-informed approach, it invites readers to reconsider the ethical complexity of justice beyond the rigid duality of right and wrong. And on this case was lead to mistrial by the juror's for the first time and how for the second time Jill Lansings and Leslie Abramsons hands were ties by judge Stanley m. Weisberg to refine his image.

Index terms - psychological trauma, media influence, criminology, class and crime, moral philosophy, trauma studies, legal ethics

INTRODUCTION

The Menendez brothers case is one of the most intriguing criminal trials of all times in American History, not only due to the violence of the crime, but also because of the underlying psychological, philosophical, legal aspects and also the power of media to skew people's perception.(Smith 12)

A Psychological trauma is the emotional cognitive and physical reaction to an event or see the events that is harmful or distressing. When one is traumatised the event tends to feel overwhelming beyond their control and greatly affects their sense of safety and wellbeing.(Herman,Trauma and Recovery,33) Although all people respond to trauma differently, certain responses may result in long term alterations in an individuals mental health.Trauma may be experienced in numerous ways and may be precipitated by acute or chronic experiences. Acute trauma is caused by a single or one time event, overwhelming incident like a car accident, assault, or natural disaster the emotions often include shock disbelief and feeling of helplessness. Chronic trauma is repeated or prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences, such as living in an abusive relationship, suffering repeated bullying, or growing up in a highly dysfunctional home. The kind of trauma experienced may impact on the degree and nature of its long-term consequence. Complex trauma is to exposure to the multiple or ongoing traumatic events. Developmental trauma occurs when a person’s early childhood

experiences involve significant stressors, such as abuse, neglect, or witnessing violence. (Terr, 45) Vicarious trauma is the emotional and psychological toll experienced by individuals who work with trauma survivors, such as first responders, healthcare workers, and therapists. (Figley, 7) For the Menendez brothers the trauma that they experienced is claimed to have had a drastic effect on their emotional and mental development. Having been raised in a successful and affluent family did not protect them from the trauma rather the contrast between their seemingly perfect lives and the atrocities that they were supposedly experiencing behind closed doors might have exacerbated their trauma even further. Their claimed emotional numbness and fear attest to being immersed in a trap of helplessness and stress into which they could not break without the powerful effects of their domineering and abusive father.

The documentary sheds light on the stark contrast between public perception and the psychological trauma the brothers claimed to have endured. Through courtroom footage, interviews with legal experts, and testimony from friends and family, the documentary presents a nuanced perspective that challenges the simplistic view of the brothers as mere criminals. Instead, it explores themes of family dysfunction, fear, and survival. The prosecution argued that the motive was financial gain, but the defence emphasised the cumulative effects of long-term abuse and the brothers' belief that their lives were in danger.

One of the most compelling aspects of the documentary is how it interrogates the legal system's handling of abuse allegations. The mistrials and eventual convictions for first-degree murder with life sentences reveal a judicial system that, some argue, failed to fully recognise the psychological effects of trauma. The documentary encourages viewers to reflect on justice, victimhood, and the societal stigmas surrounding abuse. It doesn't excuse the murders but invites empathy and a deeper understanding of how childhood trauma can shape adult behaviour. The Menendez brothers' case continues to stir debate, and the documentary serves as a powerful reminder of the complexity of human actions and the importance of considering context in the pursuit of justice.

Judith Herman's Framework for Trauma recovery:

Judith Herman, a psychiatrist and trauma expert, developed a comprehensive theory of trauma and recovery in her influential 1992 book *trauma and recovery* that provide a structure of understanding which provide a structure of understanding of how people heal from domestic abuse to political terror. (Herman xii) Her work revolutionised the understanding of psychological trauma, particularly for survivors of abuse, war, and violence.

Herman contends that psychological trauma is a consequence of events that overwhelm one's ability to cope. She points out how trauma alienates individuals from themselves, their relationships, and their sense of meaning. Her work specifically focuses on complex PTSD a condition found in survivors of extended and repeated trauma, including childhood abuse or captivity. Herman also writes about how trauma is not only an individual issue but also a social and political one. She points out that cultures repress and forget about trauma only to recognise it for short moments of consciousness.

Hermans theory divides the trauma recovery in three phases:

The first phase Establishing safety involves enabling the survivors to once again feel physical and emotional safety. (Herman 160-175)

Trauma usually leaves the person in a hypervigilant state where they continuously feel unsafe even though the danger is gone recovery starts with stabilising their world making sure they are no longer at risk and teaching them emotional regulation. Setting boundaries establishing routine, and reestablishing a sense of personal control are essential in this stage. Without safety, deeper healing cannot occur, as the survivor is still in survival mode. (Herman 160) Once a safety foundation is in place, the second phase Remembrance and mourning entails working through traumatic memories in a manner that facilitates integration, not re-traumatisation.

Survivors are encouraged to share their stories in a secure, controlled setting, either through therapy, writing, or speaking. This phase also entails grieving the losses that come with trauma, such as innocence, relationships, or trust. Most survivors feel guilty, and an important part of this work is acknowledging that the trauma wasn't their fault. But recollection of distressing memories is too much, and adequate care is needed to avoid re-traumatisation. (Herman 175) The last phase Reconnecting with life, is about transcending trauma and re-establishing a meaningful life survivors rebuild relationships, create a new sense of self which involves restoring trust developing healthy relationships and finding purpose.

Trauma tends to isolate individuals, and trust and intimacy become challenging, so this stage is about rebuilding healthy relationships with others. Most survivors find meaning in activism, art, or assisting others who have suffered similarly. Instead of forgetting their trauma, they are able to incorporate it into their life narrative without letting it control them. (Herman 197)

Relation to Menendez brothers : This theory is relevant to brothers case as they had claimed that they had suffered years of sexual physical and emotional abuse leading them to believe that their life is in danger. Using Herman's ideological and psychological structures to this case, the analysis provides insight into how unresolved trauma, lack of support, and societal disbelief can impact a survivor's psychological state and lead to extreme actions.

In first stage of establishing safety for the Menendez brothers their home life was allegedly a constant state of fear and helplessness. Dr. Lenore Terr a psychiatrist specialising in child trauma testified in their defence stating that Erik had showed signs of long-term sexual abuse, such as fearful compliance, emotional breakdowns and dissociation. They described José Menendez(father) as a violent, controlling figure who subjected them to repeated sexual and physical abuse. Kitty Menendez(mother) was portrayed as negligent and emotionally unstable, failing to protect them from the ongoing harm. This aligns with Complex PTSD (Terr 58), a condition that develops in survivors of chronic abuse leading to hypervigilance, emotional numbing and extreme survival responses. From a psychological standpoint, their murder of their parents could be seen as a desperate attempt to establish safety, albeit in a destructive way. Dr. Frank Ochberg, a PTSD specialist, has stated that trauma victims who feel cornered and powerless may resort to violence as an act of psychological survival when no other escape seems possible.(Ochberg 22) However, forensic psychologist Dr. Park Dietz, who testified for the prosecution rejected this argument claiming that the brothers had the opportunity to escape their situation 'but chose not to'. This challenges Herman's theory by suggesting that they had alternative means of establishing safety, such as running away or seeking help.(Dietz 66)

During second phase of remembrance and grieving the menendez brothers capacity to mourn and work through their trauma was brutally interrupted by the legal establishment and public opinion. When they described their abuse in their first trial (1993), what they said was received with distrust and outright denial. Psychologist Dr. John Conte, a specialist in trauma and sexual abuse, testified that the brothers' dissociative and fearful responses were typical of long-term victims of abuse. He explained that survivors of childhood sexual abuse tend to repress memories or have difficulty describing their experiences, which might account for discrepancies in their testimony.(Conte 88) But Dr. Elizabeth Loftus a celebrated memory expert, disputed their claims by contending that false memories are easily planted, especially with traumatic events. Her work implies that some accusations of abuse may be overstated or misremembered over time, and raise doubts about the brothers credibility.(Loftus 37) Herman's hypothesis emphasises validation in recovery from trauma but the Menendez brothers were given the opposite response. Rather than being validated as possible abuse survivors, they were framed as manipulative fakes seeking monetary rewards. This invalidation barred them from appropriately processing their trauma, leaving them psychologically trapped.

At third stage of reconnection with life this phase is especially hard for criminalised or institutionalised survivors, whose chances of integration into society are drastically curbed. Since the Menendez brothers were given a life sentence without parole, they have been barred from healing properly. Nevertheless, in spite of imprisonment, they have tried reconnecting with life in other terms.(1)Education: They both went for higher education behind bars, and Erik even received a degree in psychology.(2)Relationships: Both married while imprisoned, indicating a strive to make lasting relationships amidst imprisonment.(3)Advocacy: Activists working for their cause have still advocated for a reconsideration of their trial, raising awareness on the disregard of child trauma in criminal trials.

Herman points out that social support is important in the recovery of a survivor, but the Menendez brothers were denied this support to a great extent. If their trauma had been recognised sooner, they might have been able to pursue therapy, legal action, or other types of help instead of turning to violence.(Menendez Support Group)

Susan Rubin Suleiman: "What is the consensus about trauma? Everyone seems to agree that a traumatic event 'overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life', as Herman puts it. 'Unlike commonplace misfortunes' she writes, 'traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death' (Herman 33). A more neurologically based definition would be that a traumatic event-or "traumatic stressor" produces an excess of external stimuli and a corresponding excess of excitation in the brain. When attacked in this way, the brain is not able to fully assimilate or "process" the event, and responds through various mechanisms such as psychological numbing, or shutting down of normal emotional responses."

Suleiman quotes Judith Herman's concept that trauma "overwhelms the ordinary human adaptations to life" something that can be applied to brothers assertions that their extended abuse caused psychological trauma and fear for their lives. Trauma, as is depicted encompasses a threat to physical integrity and has the ability

to initiate psychological reactions such as numbness or inability to process occurrences. This would coincide with the Menendez defence that they murdered their parents out of panic rather than premeditation and their behaviour after the murders such as their calm demeanour at first and subsequent wasteful spending as a possible symptom of dissociation, could be accounted for by "excess of external stimuli" and "shutting down of normal emotional responses."

Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the most revolutionary critics of moral absolutism contradicting the idea that moral values are universal objective, and obligatory for all individuals. According to him, morality is not an absolute truth but a human invention influenced by historical, psychological, and cultural factors. His attack on moral absolutism is mainly described in books like *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morality*.(Nietzsche 44,77)

At the heart of Nietzsche's criticism is that morality does not stem from divine law or rational necessity but is rather something created by humans. He rejected traditional Christian and Enlightenment moral systems, which based moral laws on objective reality. He viewed these systems as foisting limiting, life denying values on human beings, inhibiting creativity, power, and self expression. He contended that moral absolutism represses individuality and mandates rigid, unnatural conformity.

Nietzsche's classification of master and slave morality forms the focus of his critique. Master morality, which Nietzsche aligned with the noble and powerful, holds the likes of power, energy, and self-sufficiency as positive virtues. Slave morality is instead developed among the weak and subjugated, advocating for qualities like humility, compassion, and temperance. Nietzsche regarded Christianity as the highest form of slave morality, wherein resentment against the powerful resulted in a reversal of values making weakness virtuous and strength sinful. He considered such a moral code as a means for the weak to dominate and enslave the powerful.(Nietzsche 79-81)

A second and perhaps more significant element of Nietzsche's critique is his proclamation that "God is dead." This declaration means the failure of classical religious and metaphysical sources of morality, which leaves man without an absolute foundation for right and wrong. Absent God, Nietzsche claimed, moral absolutism is no longer valid, causing a values crisis and the possibility of nihilism the perception that life is without meaning. Still, he perceived this as a moment for humankind to construct new, life-positive values instead of adhering to archaic moral absolutes.

Nietzsche also criticised Immanuel Kant's moral absolutism, specifically the categorical imperative, that prescribes that moral rules are absolutely binding. He regarded this as a different kind of moral tyranny that stifles human freedom and creativity. Instead of obeying mandatory moral laws, Nietzsche held that people ought to construct their own values from their individual situation and talents.(Nietzsche 144)

Nietzsche's criticism of moral absolutism questions the validity of universal moral rules, claiming that they are man-made and restrictive to human potential. He believes that morality must not be grounded on strict absolutes but should be redefined and reinterpreted by individuals in the quest for a more dynamic and life-promoting life. His thoughts continue to be relevant in contemporary philosophy, informing discussions on ethics, existentialism, and the nature of moral values. (Nietzsche 220)

Friedrich Nietzsche's analysis of moral absolutism, more specifically in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morality*, criticises universal moral truths in favour of viewing morality as a historically relative development that advances the interests of rulers. He contrastingly separates the master morality, which espouses strength, power, and self-overcoming, from slave morality, which is formed out of feelings of resentment and esteems humility, obedience, and suffering.

Applying this criticism to the case of the Menendez brothers:

The Menendez brothers' can really be understood through black-and-white categories like "good" and "evil." That kind of moral absolutism seems to ignore the social and psychological conditions that shape people's actions. The legal system, though, tends to operate within that rigid framework. It assumes that murder is inherently evil and that justice means punishing whoever committed the crime. But there's more going on here than just assigning blame.

Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality rejects fixed moral categories and instead focused on the deeper forces like power, fear, and survival that drive human behaviour . That perspective made me reconsider how we view the Menendez brothers. Instead of simply labelling their actions as immoral, it might be more meaningful to explore how trauma, control, and revenge influenced what they did.

For instance, if their parents used their authority to dominate and abuse them, that could be seen as a kind of “master morality” what Nietzsche described as the morality of the powerful, who define what’s right based on their own interests. The brothers’ violent response, then, might not have been senseless or purely greedy. It could be understood as a reaction to feeling powerless for so long a desperate attempt to regain control.

This ties directly into Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power, which is seen as a core idea in this case. People are driven by a deep need to assert themselves and take control of their lives not necessarily because of some moral duty, but because they’re trying to survive and overcome. If the

brothers were truly abused, their actions might reflect that same desperate urge to reclaim power. Even if the prosecution was right and money was a motive, that still doesn’t rule out a will to power just a version of it that’s shaped by materialism and societal pressure, not moral heroism.

Looking at the justice system, it can be seen how Nietzsche’s idea of “slave morality” applies. He described it as a morality based on guilt, obedience, and preserving the status exactly what legal systems tend to enforce. So when the brothers were sentenced to life without parole, it wasn’t just about justice in a neutral sense. It was about enforcing a particular moral code one that supports the interests of those in power.(Nietzsche 245)

Media Sensationalism and Headline Framing: During the initial aftermath of the killings, media outlets were quick to point out that the Menendez family were wealthy, presenting the story in terms of privilege and greed. This is reflected in headlines and articles that dwelled on the brothers' excessive spending after the deaths of their parents.

For instance The New York Times wrote about the brothers' expensive buys, with the article adding that they "went on a spending spree, purchasing Rolex watches, a Porsche, and even a restaurant.” (NYT) This emphasis on their buying created an impression of motive based on money, clouding other motives. Likewise, The Los Angeles Times described them buying high-end goods and properties, supporting the image of wealthy, spoiled youths motivated by greed.(LAT)

These headlines helped create a public image of the Menendez brothers as spoiled brats who killed their parents to get their inheritance. This characterisation not only shaped public opinion but also created a tone that could filter through the jury pool, potentially affecting their impartiality.

Televised Trials and Jury Perception: This initial decision to show the Menendez brothers' initial trial was unconventional and carried massive consequences for the case. Gavel-to-gavel coverage of the trial on Court TV converted the courtroom to a stage where the trials themselves became a television show that everybody watched. Such exposure did numerous things to change public opinion, and even maybe the jury.

Legal commentators and analysts were a regular feature on TV, breaking down the case and providing views that could have influenced public opinion. The brothers' emotional accounts of sexual and emotional abuse by their father were aired without censorship. Although this openness provided an overall picture of the defences case, it also made the testimonies public property and subject to debate and scrutiny by the public, which could have affected jurors who were not sequestered.

The extensive media coverage led to discussions about the potential for juror bias. The Los Angeles Times reported on concerns regarding the influence of televised trials on jury impartiality, noting that the saturation of media coverage could impact jurors' perceptions and the overall fairness of the trial.(LAT)

Judge Weisberg's Response to Media Influence: Realising the possibility of media influencing the judicial process, Judge Stanley Weisberg made some efforts in the second trial to minimise this influence. He prohibited television cameras in the courtroom to minimise the likelihood of jurors being exposed to outside opinions and sensationalised presentations. The Los Angeles Times reported on this decision, noting the judge's desire to maintain the purity of the proceedings.(LAT) This action served to highlight the judiciary's cognisance of media influence and was an attempt to ensure the verdict was influenced by evidence placed before the courts and not subjected to outside bias.

Public Perception and Wealth: The Menendez brothers' great fortune played a great role in swaying public perception and media reports. The lavish lifestyle and the luxury goods the brothers spent their parents'

fortune on after committing the murders made them appear greedy and entitled. Many saw them as spoiled individuals who were using their parents' achievement for personal interests.

The media coverage leaned towards this theme, portraying the brothers as "rich, spoiled, arrogant losers" who are used to always getting their way.(LAT) Such depictions created public opinion that was overwhelmingly unsympathetic to their claims of abuse.

Judicial Outcomes and Social Class Implications: The initial trials resulted in hung juries, reflecting the complex dynamic of the stories presented. In the retrial, the trial judge excluded the admissibility of evidence of abuse, directing the jurors to focus primarily on the circumstances preceding the murders rather than the alleged motives based on encounters within the family. The ruling might have tainted the defence because it restricted their ability to provide a complete view of the lived lives of the brothers. Both Lyle and Erik were ultimately convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison without parole. The verdict helped to drive home how effectively the prosecution had been able to present the brothers' actions as greed and a need for economic self-sufficiency.

Media Influence: Rich defendants receive a lot of media coverage, which can affect public opinion and, indirectly, the opinion of jurors. The lifestyle and spending of the brothers were the focus of media commentary, possibly generating public prejudice in their favour.

Defense Challenges: The process of claiming is complex, especially where defendants are perceived to be rich. Suspicion arises where wealth seems not to be compatible with victimisation stories, thus rendering the defenses attempt to elicit sympathy difficult.

Strengths of the Prosecution: Highlighting monetary gains is attractive to jurors, particularly where defendants appear to have reaped monetary benefits from their illegal activities. Highlighting the brothers as greedy recipients who profited from their parents' death was a compelling argument for the prosecution. The Menendez brothers' case demonstrates the intricate dance of socioeconomic status and how legal narratives and outcomes are constructed. While their resources allowed them to have a robust defenses it also put them under greater scrutiny and suspicion. The case is a sad reminder of the complexity of the justice system, especially when one considers the overlap of privilege and public perception.(NYT,LAT)

A Legal Analysis of Criminal Liability and Defence Under California Law:

The case of the Menendez brothers is a complex intersection of criminal law and psychological defence. The prosecution focused on various crimes under California law, particularly murder, special circumstances, and the use of weapons.

At the heart of the case was California Penal Code 187, which defines murder as the unlawful killing of a person with "malice aforethought." The jury found the brothers guilty of first-degree murder, meaning they believed the killings were planned and intentional. The prosecution also pointed to California Penal Code 189, which classifies a murder as first-degree if it involves premeditation or is carried out by methods like lying in wait. The evidence showed that the brothers planned the murders carefully, buying shotguns and isolating their parents to kill them in an ambush.

California Penal Code 190.2 was used to argue for the death penalty, citing aggravating factors. One factor was that the murders were for financial gain because the brothers stood to inherit a large sum of money. Another factor was that both parents were killed, qualifying the case as multiple homicides. Additionally, the way the brothers ambushed their parents supported a claim of "lying in wait," which could make them eligible for the death penalty.

The use of firearms during the killings also led to sentence enhancements under Penal Code 12022.5, which adds time to a sentence if a weapon was used in a felony. Since both brothers used shotguns, this enhancement was applied. There were also civil consequences under California Probate Code 250, the Slayer Statute, which prevents someone who kills a person intentionally from inheriting their estate. Therefore, the brothers were barred from inheriting their parents' money.

On the defence side, the brothers argued they acted out of fear due to years of abuse from their father, and they didn't believe they had any other choice but to kill. This argument used the idea of "imperfect self defence," where a person may have an unreasonable but honest belief that they need to use deadly force. This defence was based on the idea that the brothers were responding to years of sexual, physical, and

emotional abuse.

Additionally, the defence brought in the concept of Battered Child Syndrome, which helps explain the psychological impact of long-term abuse. According to expert testimony, both brothers showed signs of severe trauma, which may have caused them to perceive their situation as life-threatening and led them to kill in self defence .

During the sentencing phase of the trial, the defence presented evidence of the brothers' abuse to ask the jury for a lesser sentence. Under California Penal Code 190.3, the defence could present factors that might reduce the severity of the punishment. The jury decided not to impose the death penalty, and instead, sentenced both brothers to life in prison without the possibility of parole. While the psychological defence didn't fully clear them of the crime, it did influence the jury's decision on the punishment.

A Legal Analysis of Criminal Liability and Defence Under Indian Penal Code:

When analysed through the framework of Indian criminal jurisprudence, such an act would amount to a grave offence attracting severe penal consequences under the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (hereinafter, IPC). The act of intentionally causing the death of another human being is classified as culpable homicide under Section 299 IPC. Where such homicide is committed with clear intention, knowledge, and without the benefit of legal exceptions, it qualifies as murder under Section 300, punishable under Section 302. In the Menendez case, the deliberate firing of multiple shotgun rounds at both parents, including point-blank shots, reflects the requisite mens rea namely, the intention to cause death or to cause such bodily injury likely to result in death. Section 300 further contemplates murder when the act is done with the knowledge that it is so imminently dangerous that it must, in all probability, cause death. Given the premeditated nature of the offence including procurement of firearms and calculated execution this act would clearly be categorised as murder under Section 302 IPC. The punishment under this section is either life imprisonment or death, along with a fine, depending on judicial discretion.

Regarding potential defences under Indian criminal law, the principal claim raised by the Menendez brothers was that the killings were a reaction to years of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse by their father, alongside a perceived imminent threat to their lives. Under Indian law, the right of private defence of the body is contained in Section 100 IPC, which permits the causing of death if the accused faces a reasonable apprehension of grievous hurt or death. However, this right is limited by the requirement that the threat be immediate and unavoidable. In this case, since the parents were unarmed and engaged in a non-threatening activity watching television there was no imminent

danger justifying the use of lethal force. The Supreme Court of India, in *State of U.P. v. Ram Swarup*, held that private defence cannot be claimed in the absence of immediate necessity (AIR 1974 SC 1570). Thus, the defence under Section 100 would be legally untenable.

Additionally, the defence of unsoundness of mind under Section 84 IPC. This provision, grounded in the M'Naghten Rule, exempts criminal liability only when the accused, due to a mental illness, was incapable of understanding the nature of the act or that it was wrong. While the brothers claimed psychological trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), such conditions do not amount to legal insanity under Indian standards. The burden of proving such incapacity lies on the defence, as reaffirmed in *Dahyabhai Chhaganbhai Thakkar v. State of Gujarat*, where the Supreme Court emphasised that the accused must prove mental unsoundness at the time of the act (AIR 1964 SC 1563). There was no convincing evidence presented that either brother lacked the mental capacity to understand the nature and consequences of their actions.

The plea of grave and sudden provocation under Exception 1 to Section 300 may also be considered. However, Indian courts have held that for this exception to apply, provocation must be immediate and unpremeditated. In *K.M. Nanavati v. State of Maharashtra*, the Court clarified that a delay or time gap between provocation and the retaliatory act nullifies the claim of sudden provocation (AIR 1962 SC 605). Since the Menendez brothers had a substantial cooling-off period and demonstrated planning, their actions do not fulfilled the legal threshold for this exception.

Comparative Analysis of Legal Approaches of California law and Indian Penal Code(IPC): The Menendez brothers case, when examined through the lens of American and Indian criminal law, reveals two very different legal philosophies like chalk and cheese. California law discusses how the California

legal system dealt with the brothers under Penal Code 187 and 189, categorising the offence as first-degree murder on account of planning and execution. The prosecution also invoked aggravating factors under 190.2 financial gain, multiple victims, and lying in wait to press for the death penalty. Although psychological defences like Battered Child Syndrome and imperfect self-defence were invoked, they only served to mitigate sentencing under 190.3, resulting in life imprisonment without parole.

In contrast, IPC shows how Indian law leaves little room for such psychological grey areas. Under Sections 299 and 300 of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, the same act would be treated as a clear case of murder punishable under Section 302, due to the presence of mens premeditation. Indian law applies the right of private defence (Section 100 IPC) only when there is an imminent threat a principle firmly upheld in *State of U.P. v. Ram Swarup* (AIR 1974 SC 1570). Likewise, Section 84's defence of insanity demands a complete lack of understanding, as clarified in *Dahyabhai v. State of Gujarat* (AIR 1964 SC 1563), which PTSD and trauma cannot satisfy. The "grave and sudden provocation" exception under Section 300 is also unavailable due to the cooling-off period, echoing the ruling in *K.M. Nanavati v. State of Maharashtra* (AIR 1962 SC 605).

In short, while American courts left the door slightly ajar for psychological defences, Indian courts shut it tight. Where the American system offers nuance, Indian law takes a "straight as an arrow" approach strict, codified, and less forgiving of mental trauma as a defence.

Conclusion

The Menendez brothers' case was initially dismissed, only to be retried when the court chose not to admit crucial witness testimonies that supported the brothers' claims of longstanding abuse. This early dismissal and eventual reopening exposed the limitations of a legal system ill equipped to process trauma informed narratives. At the heart of the defence was a plea for understanding through the lens of psychological trauma a lens offered by Judith Herman. Herman's work explains how trauma survivors often struggle to present coherent, linear accounts.

Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy further deepens this view, suggesting that punishment often serves as a moral spectacle rather than a path to truth or justice.

Media portrayal and the brothers' wealth added another layer, transforming a complex case into entertainment. The narrative of "spoiled rich kids" overshadowed the abuse allegations, influencing public perception and possibly jury bias.

People v. Menendez highlights the tension between legal statutes and interpretations of trauma in self-defence. While the prosecution proved premeditated murder and applied firearm and slayer statutes, the defence invoked psychological trauma to mitigate culpability. Though unsuccessful in acquittal, their arguments influenced sentencing and remain significant in legal discourse.

If the Menendez brothers' case occurred under Indian criminal law, their actions would fall under Section 302 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) for murder, as none of the general defences (private defence, unsoundness of mind, or grave provocation) would apply. Both would likely face life imprisonment or, in rare cases, capital punishment based on the "rarest of rare" doctrine, as established in *Bachan Singh v. State of Punjab*.

Ultimately, the Menendez case illustrates how trauma, power, and privilege intersect in American justice raising the question of whether the system seeks truth, or simply reaffirms societal order.

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