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Maternal Ecologies and Masculine Precarity: Gendered Survival in Prasad Kumar Mandal's *The Father and the Mother*

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Abstract

The article is an endeavor to offer a feminist, ecofeminist, and intersectional reading of Prasad Kumar Mondal's *"The Father and the Mother"*, situating the story within the ecological and social precarity of the Sundarbans. It argues that the narrative moves beyond a surface contrast between masculine bravery and feminine endurance to construct a layered meditation on gender performance, environmental custodianship, and intra-community hierarchy. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the essay interprets Bhulu Gayen's bravado as a stylized repetition of courage—an identity sustained through public risk yet rendered fragile before erosion, corruption, and infrastructural decay. In contrast, Kushi's subjectivity, read alongside Simone de Beauvoir, emerges through waiting, service, and relational care, transforming domestic immanence into ethical attentiveness.The paper further employs the ecofeminist insights of Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies to interpret Kushi's defence of wetlands as a politics of custodianship grounded in reciprocity rather than ownership. Her metaphor of the marsh as "mother" challenges developmental logics that commodify commons. At the same time, invoking Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the paper examines how Kushi's plea remains mediated within male-dominated political structures, revealing the constraints on subaltern female speech. Finally, through Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, the essay highlights how caste and class stratifications complicate gender solidarity and distribute ecological vulnerability unevenly.Ultimately, the story foregrounds a gendered environmental consciousness in which sustained ethics of care, rather than spectacular heroism, become crucial for imagining just and sustainable futures in the Sundarbans.

Keywords: Gender Performativity; Ecofeminism; Subaltern Speech; Intersectionality; Sundarbans Ecocriticism

Introduction

Prasad Kumar Mandal's short story *"The Father and the Mother"* unfolds within the volatile ecological and cultural terrain of the Sundarbans—a deltaic world shaped by tides, mangroves, embankments, deities, storms, and precarious livelihoods. The narrative moves between conversations on tiger attacks, river erosion, corruption in development projects, subsistence practices, and the looming threat of land auction. Yet beneath these ecological and political anxieties lies a subtler, pervasive structure: gender. The story juxtaposes two worlds—

the forest-bound masculinity of men like Bhulu Gayen and the domestic, devotional, yet politically perceptive interiority of women like Kushi. While men dramatize confrontation with tigers, embankments, contractors and destiny, women negotiate absence, waiting, hospitality, food, ritual and care. The masculine narrative is one of heroic struggle; the feminine narrative is one of endurance and ethical guardianship. This article argues that *"The Father and the Mother"* articulates a gendered ecology of the Sundarbans in which women become custodians of life, memory, and environmental ethics, even as they are confined within patriarchal structures. Through the lenses of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of gendered subjectivity, Judith Butler's concept of performativity, ecofeminist thought (Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of subalternity, the story reveals how femininity in the Sundarbans is simultaneously marginalized and morally central. The maternal figure—embodied in Kushi—becomes the ethical core of the narrative, challenging state-capitalist development and masculinist heroics.

Gender as Performance: Masculine Bravado and the Theatre of Risk

The early sections of the story foreground a distinctly masculine rhetoric of fearlessness. Bhulu Gayen repeatedly asserts his indifference to danger, boasting that *"*a tiger is nothing before a man who knows the forest*"* (Mondal 33). He dismisses snakes and speaks of death as destiny, claiming that he *"*enjoys the fight with the jungle*"* (34). His language is exaggerated, defiant, almost theatrical. The forest becomes a stage upon which masculinity must continually prove itself. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides a crucial interpretive lens. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame" (45). Masculinity, therefore, is not innate but constituted through reiterated acts—speech, posture, risk-taking—that conform to social expectations. Bhulu's repeated declarations of courage function as precisely such stylized acts. In the Sundarbans, where death by tiger or snake is a quotidian threat, masculinity demands visible indifference to fear. To admit vulnerability would destabilize one's claim to manhood within the community's regulatory frame. Yet Mandal complicates this spectacle. While Bhulu proclaims mastery over animals, he remains powerless before structural forces—erosion, contractor corruption, embankment collapse. The narrator notes that *"*the ghol had begun to eat away at the base of the dam, silently and without warning*"* (Mondal 39). This hidden erosion metaphorically mirrors the fragility beneath masculine bravado. Raewyn Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity deepens this reading. Connell defines it as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy" (*Masculinities* 77). Bhulu's performance legitimizes a patriarchal order in which men confront visible dangers while women remain within domestic confines. However, this hegemonic model proves unstable. It cannot halt land loss or prevent political manipulation. Even the public meeting regarding the ring dam unfolds as theatre: *"*men shouted, snatched the papers, and pushed one another near the embankment*"* (Mondal 40). Masculine agency manifests as volatility rather than constructive resolution. In this sense, Mandal portrays masculinity as reactive and spectacular—dramatic in gesture yet limited in transformative capacity. Beneath the bravado lies vulnerability, a truth the eroding delta quietly exposes.

Woman as Relational Subject: Waiting, Service, and the Ethics of Care

In stark contrast to masculine mobility stands Kushi's suspended existence. Her husband and son have been absent for nearly a year, lost to the uncertainties of forest labour. Yet she continues to wait in unwavering devotion. The narrator observes that *"*each evening she lit the lamp at the tulsi altar and waited for footsteps that never came*"* (Mondal 35). Waiting becomes ritualized time—cyclical, repetitive, sustained by fragile hope. Despite her private grief, she prepares food and receives guests with composure. When Raghu arrives, *"*she spread a mat, washed his feet with water from the pitcher, and asked him to sit as Narayan*"* (37). Her gestures enact reverence, service, and relational ethics. Simone de Beauvoir's foundational assertion that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex* 283) resonates profoundly here. Kushi's womanhood is produced through socially sanctioned acts of patience, fidelity, and caregiving. She becomes "woman" through the repeated performance of waiting and nurturing. De Beauvoir further argues that patriarchal societies construct woman as the "Other," defined relationally rather than autonomously (xxii). Kushi initially appears circumscribed within such relationality—wife, mother, devotee—confined to what de Beauvoir terms "immanence," a sphere of repetition and enclosure, as opposed to masculine "transcendence," characterized by mobility and risk (29). Yet the narrative complicates this binary. Kushi's relationality becomes the ground of ethical expansion rather than mere confinement. Her service to Raghu is not servility but sacred hospitality. The domestic interior transforms into a spiritually charged space. Moreover, through food preparation—*"*water-lily seeds, wild greens, and a pinch of coarse salt from the earthen jar*"* (Mondal 38)—she displays intimate ecological knowledge. Her kitchen is not simply a site of reproductive labour; it is a repository of environmental intelligence shaped by subsistence living. Thus, what appears as immanence subtly converts into ecological transcendence. Her bond with land and water is intimate and sustaining, unlike Bhulu's volatile confrontation with forest dangers. Kushi's waiting is not passive stagnation but disciplined endurance—an affective labour that maintains communal continuity in a delta where men regularly vanish into tides and tiger territories. Her relational subjectivity, far from diminishing her agency, becomes the moral anchor of the narrative.

Ecofeminist Custodianship: Wetlands as Mother and Commons

The narrative's most significant gendered intervention occurs when Kushi pleads against the proposed auction of the marshlands—Bok Char, Shona Jheel, and Jonka Bil. Confronting the impending enclosure, she declares, *"*These marshes are our mother; they have fed us since childhood*"* (Mondal 41). The metaphor is not ornamental. It is ontological and material. The wetland sustains everyday life, providing *"*fish, crabs, wild greens and fodder for cattle*"* (42). Survival is woven into the ecology of the commons. Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies argue in *Ecofeminism* that capitalist patriarchy advances through the simultaneous exploitation of women and nature, insisting that modern development "is based on the colonization of women, nature and colonies" (Mies and Shiva 14). The businessmen who arrive to measure and demarcate the wetlands embody precisely this colonizing logic. Commons are redefined as property; subsistence economies are displaced by market rationality. In *Staying Alive*, Shiva further observes that women in subsistence communities develop intimate ecological knowledge through daily interaction with soil and water (61). Kushi's warning that *"*once the marsh is taken, the sweet water will turn brackish*"* (Mondal 43) reflects such experiential epistemology. Her understanding of salt intrusion is not abstract environmentalism; it arises from embodied

familiarity with tidal rhythms and freshwater dependence. Significantly, Kushi is childless, yet she speaks in the register of motherhood. Motherhood here signifies ethical relation rather than biological function. She worries not only for her household but for the fishermen, the residents of Bagdi Para, and the marsh gleaners who depend most directly on these waters. If the marsh is "mother," humans are positioned as children bound by reciprocity and care, not ownership. This reorientation directly challenges the masculinist developmental logic that treats land as commodity. Her rejection of monetary compensation reinforces this stance. She recognizes that *"*money will divide brothers and bring blood to the village*"* (44). The insight links commodification to social fracture. By refusing monetization, she symbolically resists the enclosure of the commons and the moral corrosion it entails. Thus, Mondal constructs Kushi as an ecofeminist custodian whose politics emerge organically from lived ecological experience. Her plea is not sentimental excess but a reasoned defence of reciprocal survival in a fragile deltaic world.

Subaltern Speech and Mediated Political Voice

Despite her moral clarity, Kushi lacks direct access to state power. She urges Raghu to intervene on her behalf, saying, *"*You must explain it to the government people; tell them what will happen to us*"* (Mondal 40). Her appeal cannot move directly into the sphere of authority. It must travel through a male mediator. This dependence underscores her structural exclusion from formal political discourse. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—becomes particularly resonant here. In her essay, Spivak argues that the subaltern woman is positioned in such a way that her speech is either erased or ventriloquized within dominant systems of representation (Spivak 308). Kushi's voice, though articulate and ethically incisive, remains confined to the domestic interior. The public discussion surrounding the ring dam unfolds as a male-dominated assembly; as the narrative notes, *"*the men gathered near the embankment to discuss the auction, while the women listened from the courtyards*"* (Mondal 39). Women are present as listeners, not participants. Kushi's speech therefore occupies a paradoxical space: emotionally charged yet politically marginalized. She articulates ecological foresight—warning that "*once the marsh is taken, the sweet water will turn brackish*" (42)—but institutional structures deny her a legitimate platform. At the same time, Mondal does not render her silent. Her plea is preserved within narrative memory, granting literary visibility even if the state refuses recognition. Literature becomes the medium through which subaltern ecological consciousness circulates. Spivak cautions against romanticizing subaltern authenticity, and the story similarly avoids idealization. Kushi retains caste-inflected prejudices and internalizes aspects of patriarchy. Yet her trembling appeal is not irrational sentiment; it is grounded in experiential knowledge and subsistence logic. The male leaders debate in abstractions, but she speaks from embodied vulnerability. Thus, Mondal dramatizes both the limits and the necessity of subaltern female articulation in moments of environmental crisis. Kushi may not command the meeting, but she voices the truth of ecological precarity—an insight that outlives the assembly itself.

Intersectionality: Caste, Gender and Hierarchies within Marginality

While the story foregrounds gendered vulnerability, it simultaneously reveals intra-community stratifications that complicate any homogeneous idea of marginality. Kushi marks a cultural distance between herself and the inhabitants of Buno Para and Bagdi Para. She notes with quiet disapproval that *"*they survive on snails from the marsh and drink toddy at dusk*"* (Mondal 36), a remark that subtly encodes caste-inflected disdain. In contrast, she maintains what she considers moral and cultural propriety—*"*drawing the end of her sari over her head, she withdrew inside the courtyard*"* (38)—a gesture that signifies modesty, domestic containment, and social differentiation. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality insists that oppression cannot be understood along a single axis. In "Mapping the Margins," she argues that systems of power overlap and produce layered forms of exclusion (Crenshaw 1245). Kushi is subordinated as a woman within a patriarchal order, yet she also participates—consciously or not—in caste-coded hierarchies that marginalize others. The gleaners of Buno Para and Bagdi Para depend most directly on the marsh commons for subsistence; their vulnerability is not merely ecological but structurally tied to caste and class location. The proposed auctioning of wetlands would affect them most immediately and most severely. Although Kushi ultimately speaks in defence of the wetlands on behalf of the wider community, her earlier differentiation exposes the persistence of inherited hierarchies. Mandal thus avoids reductive binaries of oppressor and victim. Gendered subordination coexists with caste prejudice; ecological solidarity remains shadowed by social stratification. Intersectionality allows for a nuanced reading in which Kushi's ethical expansiveness—her plea to protect shared ecological resources—cohabits with deeply sedimented social boundaries that she does not entirely transcend.

Conclusion

The Father and the Mother reveals its full complexity when read through feminist, ecofeminist, and intersectional frameworks. What begins as a contrast between fearless men and waiting women unfolds into a meditation on performance, ecology, power, and hierarchy. Read alongside Judith Butler, masculinity appears as reiterated display—public risk and declarative bravado that secures social legitimacy yet proves fragile before erosion, corruption, and infrastructural decay. Spectacle cannot resist tidal collapse. Kushi's subjectivity, illuminated by Simone de Beauvoir, is socially produced through waiting, service, and relational care. What seems like immanence becomes ethical attentiveness: to hunger, water, and communal continuity. Her defence of Bok Char, Shona Jheel, and Jonka Bil, clarified by the ecofeminist insights of Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, articulates custodianship rather than ownership. The marsh as "mother" signifies reciprocity and sustenance, countering a developmental logic that commodifies land. Yet moral clarity does not ensure political agency. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reminds us, subaltern speech is often mediated and structurally contained. Kushi's plea resonates narratively but remains precarious within institutional power. Moreover, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality underscores that caste and class complicate gender solidarity; ecological precarity is layered and unevenly distributed across communities such as Buno Para and Bagdi Para. Ultimately, the title gestures toward two modes of inhabiting vulnerability: the father confronts visible dangers through outward performance, while the mother perceives slower threats—erosion of commons, monetization of subsistence, corrosion of bonds. In a delta marked by tides and privatization alike, survival depends less on spectacular heroism than on sustained ethics of care. Kushi's plea is not sentiment but foresight. By centring

her embodied ecological wisdom, Mandal foregrounds a gendered environmental consciousness essential for imagining just futures in the Sundarbans.

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