

# Territorial Denial and Biosocial Harm: A Case Analysis of Chronic Spatial Instability and Masculine Identity Formation

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## Abstract

Chronic spatial instability, which may be defined as the cumulative effect of repeated disruptions to territorial anchoring within domestic, institutional and communal spaces, has yet to be studied as a separate pathway of embodiment within Nancy Krieger's ecosocial paradigm. The current research explores the potential of identifying biosocial effects as a result of three particular forms of disruption — namely, severed domestic bonds, institutional incarceration and territorial dislocation — on marginalised males, along with compensatory behaviours that could serve as adaptations in this regard. The study is based on a qualitative behavioural case analysis with an application of spatial mapping in combination with the theoretical frameworks of Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory, Hamilton's (1964) kin selection theory, as well as the ecosocial- biosocial synthesis by Krieger (2011). The study is based on Nandha (2001), a realist cinematic document of marginalised masculine development in Tamil Nadu, South India. Findings have demonstrated that these three forms of disruption act collectively to impair elements of social bonding and result in hypervigilance, attachment dysregulation and identity dislocation in the male subject. The compensatory adaptive mechanism in question included surrogate kinship and spatial mobility as biosocial substitutes for denied territorial and relational anchoring. These outcomes provide theoretical support for the hypothesis that chronic spatial instability may function as a distinct pathway of embodiment within Krieger's ecosocial framework.

## INTRODUCTION

Biosocial perspectives suggest that gendered behavioural identity is influenced by access to stable territory, secure family structures, and functional social bonding and attachment, not just by social hierarchies and cultural norms. Paul Rabinow (1992) was the first to discuss the concept of biosociality to describe the dynamic, bilateral relationship between biological processes and social environment that helps understand how biological classifications result in the creation of new identities. The concept has been then theorised across multiple disciplines. For this study, Nancy Krieger's (2011) ecosocial theory has been used as the operative framework. Rabinow's study focused mainly on how genomic knowledge reshaped social categories. Meanwhile other earlier biosocial theorists such as Wilson (1975) claimed that behaviour was anchored in genetic and evolutionary determination. But Krieger's study added another perspective to the same concept:

how do social conditions enter and alter the body itself? She states that the human body is not a fixed biological substrate onto which external social experience is applied, but instead a living archive of social conditions that an individual has encountered and absorbed throughout the course of their life.

These conditions can include inequality, violence, deprivation and displacement. Similar biosocial approaches have also been applied in public health research to examine how social environments become biologically embodied through disease processes and structural inequalities (Gomaa et al., 2016). Krieger (2011, p.214) argues that bodies tell stories about the condition of their existence even if these stories are never verbally told. This concept diverges from the purely sociological accounts of identity that treats the human body as a passive surface. It is a departure from purely biological accounts that treat behaviour as genetically

pre-determined. Krieger's concept of biosociality insists that the human body and social environment are inseparable and mutually constituting: Social disruption results in biological disruption and biological vulnerability shapes social outcome.

The existing biosocial theories of masculinity, kinship cooperation, spatial identity and institutional behaviour have been studied separately. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was developed by Connell (1995) based on social stratification, however, spatial instability as a biological phenomenon was not considered. Both Hirschi (1969) and Goffman (1961) highlighted the way institutional settings affect the social order; however, the problem of adaptive reconstruction among disadvantaged men has been overlooked. Kinship cooperation as an evolutionary process was studied by Hamilton (1964) and Van den Berghe (1981); however, the topic of surrogate kinship as a reaction to biological kinship breakdown has not been touched upon yet. Finally, despite the numerous applications of the ecosocial theory to public health in regard to cholera pandemics and vulnerable individuals affected by displacement events (Yamada & Palmer, 2007), this theory has not been explored within case studies of male identity development in South Asia (Krieger, 2023).

The current study is based on the assumption, formed in the context of medical humanities and cultural studies, that realistic movies are able to be used as narrative structures that reflect biosocial processes in life experience. The works of Kleinman (1988) and Frank (1995), among others, have revealed the role of narrative as the means by which embodied social experiences are expressed and comprehended. Given that the cinema of Bala is well-known for its documentary style and real-life experience of socially marginalized people in Tamil Nadu, it constitutes a convenient narrative space for analysis. Since this framework allows the analyst to identify social events as agents of biological behaviour alteration, it helps in studying masculine identity under conditions of displacement and chronic stress.

Nandha, the protagonist, moves through different spatial sites without ever attaining a stable spatial anchoring. His identity is shaped by the social situations and realities around him, which he cannot deny. His identity is a result of his experiences in prison due to his act of patricide, maternal rejection and his later attempts to make a living in the society that rejects him. Nandha treats specific social events, such as parental violence, institutional confinement and kinship collapse, as agents rather than just contextual background. Nandha's behavioural trajectory is best understood through Krieger since it is not just the story of a man shaped by hard circumstances. It is the story of a human body that has absorbed these social circumstances into its very capacity and incapacity to form an identity, bond with others and inhabit social space. Drawing on Krieger's theory, which she terms as 'ecosocial theory', this work explores how chronic spatial instability becomes a distinct lived pathway shaping the embodiment of health

disparities (Krieger, 2011). Though Krieger points out space as an analytical tool, the paper tries to see how space becomes a chronic lived condition of harm including displacement, confinement and exclusion. Taking the character of Nandha as a case study, the paper explores how sustained spatial instability is internalised as a cumulative embodied adversity.

The study hypothesises that chronic spatial instability, through processes of fractured domestic relations, institutionalization, and spatial dislocation, represents a unique biosocial embodiment pathway for socially marginalized males, leading to certain identifiable adaptive behavioural mechanisms such as surrogate kinship and spatial mobility.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative biosocial textual analysis framework. This is because Bala's cinematic portrayal of masculine identity primarily relies on non-verbal spatial and behavioural dimensions, including character movement through institutional, domestic, and communal environments, patterns of social bonding and rupture, and kinship formation under displacement, that call for interpretive analytical techniques rather than quantitative measurement. It is essential to understand the epistemological framework within which this study will operate. In other words, this study will be a proof-of-concept investigation rather than a validation exercise. No one case can validate a novel biosocial pathway from the clinical or epidemiological perspective. What this study attempts to examine is whether the underlying mechanisms and consequences of chronic spatial instability as seen in this particular documented behavioural case, fit Krieger's (2011) established theoretical model. To that end, the film *Nandha* (2001) will be considered as a behavioural case document in that it offers a series of responses by a male subject to successive spatial settings over time. The film is treated as a cultural-behavioural case study that reflects observable biosocial processes of identity formation among spatially displaced male subjects. Nandha's chronic spatial movements across different social locations is thoroughly analysed in order to examine the effect on his identity that the chronic spatiality has on the protagonist. The paper then traces how the spatial movements accumulate across his life, accounting to the instability in his behaviour and identity in turn, which the film showcases at various points.

The primary data source is *Nandha* (2001) directed by Bala. Among Bala's films, *Nandha* presents the most structurally suitable narrative of masculine identity formation under conditions of chronic spatial displacement. By tracking the protagonist's journey through dysfunctional family environment, institutional confinement, family breakdown, attempted community reintegration and surrogate kinship formation, the film provides a structural narrative suitable for biosocial analysis. Secondary data to support this study consist of

existing academic and peer-reviewed literature on Krieger's ecosocial theory, hegemonic and biosocial masculinity studies, kinship adaptation frameworks, social bonding theory, and institutional behaviour research.

Four analytical procedures have been applied in this study to the primary text. Spatial behavioural analysis examines the protagonist's environmental transitions and identifies the behavioural consequences of each movement – institutional, domestic and communal – on his masculine identity. Hirschi's (1969) framework of four binding elements – attachment, commitment, engagement and belief – is used to show how biosocial vulnerability is produced. Hamilton's (1964) kin selection framework is implemented to understand the kinship mapping that shifts from biological networks to surrogate kinship as compensatory adaptive responses. Finally, these findings are synthesized within a unified biosocial framework using behavioural interpretation to understand spatial mobility as an adaptive identity response.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Biosocial Disruption Across Spaces

Three cumulative disruptive mechanisms have been identified in the behavioural case study, across five sequential spatial environments, each producing observable biosocial consequences in the male subject. The initial ecosocial disruption in Nandha's identity formation occurs within the childhood domestic space. This space becomes a site of psychological violence and hierarchical dysfunction instead of functioning as a stabilizing kinship environment. Studies pertaining to mental health have consistently shown that children and adolescents across all cultural contexts struggle with psychological problems, that go unrecognised and unsupported (Harikrishnan et al., 2017). Similarly in Nandha (2001), repeated exposure to paternal abuse directed toward his mother produces hypervigilance and premature role adoption in the male protagonist. This forces the child subject into adult protective behavioural patterns before normative development is possible (Bowlby, 1982). The spatial arrangement of the home becomes a confined interior that traps family members in cycles of subjugation. The exposure to abuse further intensifies this disruption by eliminating the possibility of emotional refuge within the kinship environment.

Analyzing this domestic environment from Krieger's (2011) terms highlights it as the kind of social condition that does not remain outside the body but rather enters it. The parental violence child Nandha witnesses is absorbed into him as a biological event. This chronically activates his stress-response systems in an environment that offers no safety, no emotional regulation, and no secure attachment. This produces what Krieger describes as embodied inequality, where the body is shaped from within by the social conditions it cannot escape. His

hypervigilance, his premature protective behaviour toward his mother, and his emotional constriction are not personality traits but rather his body's record of what the domestic space has repeatedly done to it.

The male protagonist performs the act of patricide in an attempt to protect his mother. This incident permanently transforms the domestic space from a site of kinship bonding into a site inscribed with violent memory. This rupture eliminates the domestic space as a viable anchor for masculine identity development. Thus, it initiates the protagonist's condition of chronic spatial displacement. Nandha is subsequently transferred to a juvenile correctional facility. This transfer constitutes a total institution in Goffman's (1961) sense – an environment characterised by high structural hierarchy, behavioural surveillance, and systematic mortification of prior identity. This institutional confinement simultaneously severs all four of Hirschi's (1969) social bonding elements – attachment through isolation from family and community; commitment through the elimination of conventional social investment; involvement through enforced institutional routine that replaces voluntary social engagement; and belief through sustained exposure to an environment that operates outside normative social value systems. This leads to the development of a biosocially destabilized male subject whose identity formation has been structurally deprived of the kinship and territorial resources that are necessary for conventional masculine development.

Looking at the juvenile correctional facility through Krieger (2011) reveals it as a second layer of social inscription on an already damaged biological subject. It begins with the home writing violence and instability into Nandha's body in his initial years, and later the institution writing surveillance, hierarchy, and the systematic erasure of autonomous identity into the same body. By the time Nandha exits institutional confinement, his body biosocially carries the accumulated physiological record of two chronically stressful social environments. This explains Krieger's argument that bodies tell stories about the conditions of their existence. In the context of this study, Nandha's body, his behaviour, his relational incapacity, are that story made visible.

### Fractured Domesticity and Kinship Collapse Post Incarceration

Nandha attempts reintegration into his biological domestic space, upon release from institutional confinement. This attempt reveals the extent to which kinship collapse has rendered that space biosocially uninhabitable for him. On his return, his mother closes the door against him, and positions him as an intruder within his own biological kinship environment. This rejection is emotional, spatial and behavioural. It confines the protagonist to threshold and courtyard spaces such as doorways, courtyards, and liminal zones,

reflecting his structurally ambiguous biosocial status that is neither fully included nor fully excluded from the biological kinship group.

The mother's behavioural response signifies kinship severance which is biosocially significant beyond its emotional dimension. According to Van den Berghe (1981), biological kinship networks function as the primary evolutionary basis for cooperative social behaviour and identity stability. Severing this network without an alternative support structure for social bonding creates acute biosocial vulnerability. The reconfigured fragile domestic equilibrium created by his mother and sister excludes the protagonist. This reinforces the territorial displacement produced by institutional confinement.

As per Krieger's (2011) reading, this threshold positioning is deeply significant. The doorway in which Nandha stands is the spatial externalization of biosocial status, not merely a cinematic image of rejection. This represents a body that has been shaped by social conditions of exclusion that is now literally occupying the boundary between inclusion and exclusion at the doorstep. He cannot cross the threshold into his biological home since the biological kinship environment at home did not preserve a biological or social space for him. His body that is already carrying the embodied record of violence and institutional mortification, finally encounters here the last confirmation that the primary social environment responsible for male identity formation has no place for him.

Krieger (2011) argues that in moments when the social environment that should sustain biological development starts to foreclose it, the cumulative weight of embodied social injury becomes most legible. The mother's closed door does not only wound Nandha emotionally but also confirms biosocially that the social conditions necessary for normative masculine development were never made available to his body and the retrospective access to them is denied now. The same thing was already inscribed in him by the domestic space, the institution, and the history of paternal violence. As a result, the domestic space fails to provide the attachment, hierarchical stability, or territorial belonging necessary for masculine identity formation.

### **Surrogate Kinship Formation as Adaptive Behavioural Response**

The protagonist develops surrogate kinship networks in absence of biological kinship anchoring as a compensatory adaptive behavioural response. Krieger's (2011) framework illuminates that this adaptive redirection is not a free choice made by an undamaged subject. It is the response of a body that has been biosocially shaped to seek the conditions that were structurally denied to it through whatever social environment remains available. Nandha does not form

surrogate bonds because he is relationally gifted but rather because of the biological drive toward attachment since he has nowhere else to go.

Periyavar's home in Rameshwaram serves as a hybrid third space providing temporary territorial belonging and father bonding to the protagonist. Here, the most biosocially significant surrogate kinship relationship is formed. Periyavar exhibits paternal behavioural characteristics which replaces the missing biological father figure and provides the protagonist the first secure kinship-like bond. These behaviours include concern for the protagonist's basic wellbeing, emotional mentoring, and social legitimation, thus producing narratively observable behavioural stabilization for the protagonist. As the protagonist's social engagement increases through the observed behavioural path, his emotional volatility decreases. Eventually his capacity for protective behavioural investment in others starts developing. Nandha is seen constantly scanning his environment for potential threats. Thus, hypervigilance and his inability to relax or trust his environment, even while being under the care of Periyavar, can be read as consequences of the life's events on him. As per Krieger's (2011) concepts, the behavioural stabilisation that Periyavar's presence produces in Nandha is evidence of the body's biosocial responsiveness. It is the body's capacity to begin recovering regulatory function when a social environment finally provides what earlier environments withheld. This is the biosocial mechanism of embodiment working in reverse, not merely sentimentality. Since the adverse social conditions inscribed dysregulation into Nandha's body, a functional surrogate kinship environment begins to inscribe the conditions for stability, even though it's tentative and incomplete. These changes are consistent with biosocial bonding theory's prediction that attachment to a functioning kinship substitute restores adaptive behavioural capacity in subjects whose primary bonding structures have collapsed (Hirschi, 1969).

The protagonist's secondary surrogate kinship network is formed within the Sri Lankan refugee camp environment. In this environment, shared displacement and mutual vulnerability results in compensatory bonding among subjects who have all experienced territorial exclusion. The protagonist develops a relationship with Kalyani who is a survivor of both civil displacement and familial loss. This exemplifies a bilateral surrogate kinship formation where biological kinship ties lost by both individuals are replaced with reciprocal emotional engagement, shared trauma history, and mutual care. Protective masculine behavioural patterns are activated in the male protagonist. This behaviour represents a distinct biosocial form of identity that is grounded in caretaking and reciprocal vulnerability rather than territorial dominance and hierarchical authority as represented in conventional masculine identity. In spite of his love for Kalyani, he goes through moments of emotional suppression and withdrawal from her at crucial moments, especially after

the death of Periyavar. The surrogate bond formed with Kalyani within the refugee camp is spatially significant. It is a space that marks shared territorial exclusion. This mutual displacement between them makes the foundation for surrogate kinship formation.

### **Spatial Mobility as Adaptive Identity Strategy**

Spatial mobility emerges as the primary adaptive strategy in absence of territorial stability through analytical synthesis of the three preceding mechanisms. Conventional biosocial models of masculine identity identify territorial stability as the foundation for development of kinship hierarchy and social bonding. In conditions of denial of territorial stability, structural formation of conventional masculine identity is limited or denied. Through these circumstances, Nandha's journey depicts movement – through institutional environments, domestic spaces, communal settings and marginal territories – as a compensatory behavioural mechanism that replaces the territorial anchoring that traditional masculine identity demands.

This mobile adaptive strategy does not produce the biosocial stability associated with stable spatial anchoring. It is not equivalent to conventional territorial dominance but rather a condition of permanent identity negotiation across changing spatial environments. Each spatial transition represents a behavioural adaptation to the foreclosure of the prior geographical anchor. These include the movement from institutional confinement to family rejection to communal provisional membership to surrogate kinship formation. The protagonist's masculine behavioral identity is thus constructed without complete biosocial collapse through the capacity to negotiate successive territorial losses rather than possession of territory.

In Krieger's (2011) terms, this mobility would not be considered as freedom but instead as the body's navigation of a social landscape that has offered it no stable ground. Each movement in Nandha's life trajectory is the embodied response of a male subject whose biological and social systems have been repeatedly deprived of the territorial and relational anchoring they require. These movements – from home to institution, from institution to rejected threshold, from threshold to Rameshwaram, from Rameshwaram to the refugee camp – are not his strategy but instead his condition that has been socially produced and biologically incorporated.

The concluding phase of the observed behavioural trajectory leads to the protagonist's ultimate acceptance of his mother's poisoned food, the death of the surrogate father figure, and the final foreclosure of home reintegration. The poisoned food offered by the mother completes the circuit of embodied social injury that the narrative has traced from its opening scenes. The biological kinship – his mother – figure who first failed

to protect the child from paternal violence and later closed the door against the returning adult concludes the cinematic narrative. Nandha's body had incorporated decades of social adversity and was ultimately destroyed by the same social environment that first damaged it. Krieger argues that bodies tell stories about the conditions of their existence whether or not those stories are ever verbally narrated. This recent reformulation of ecosocial epidemiology further reinforces the interpretive relevance of embodiment as a framework for understanding socially produced vulnerability (Krieger, 2024). In the case of Nandha (2001), the narrative documents this process through observed behavioural sequences. The result is the same: a male body that carries and continues to survive through social inequalities, and is finally killed by the same social conditions it was never able to outrun. At the concluding phase of this case, or the film's ending, to be precise, the destruction of the surrogate kinship network is tragic in its own sense. It is not just a narrative loss but also the biosocial removal of the only reparative social environment the protagonist ever had access to.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study examined the formation of masculine identity in Nandha (2001) through a biosocial analytical framework that integrated social bonding theory, territorial behaviour, kinship adaptation models and masculinity theory. Three major findings can be concluded from this biosocial analysis. First, it was found that institutional confinement systemically disrupts the four social bonding elements identified by Hirschi (1969). It eventually results in biosocially marginalised male subjects who are denied kinship and territorial resources that are necessary for formation of conventional masculine identity. Second is the formation of surrogate kinships as a compensatory adaptive response to the breakdown of biological kinship structures. Drawing from concepts by Krieger (2011), this study interprets this process not as voluntary but as a biosocial imperative driven by the body's need to restore bonding conditions that were structurally denied to it. Third is that persistent displacement of the male subject results in spatial mobility as an adaptive identity strategy. This reflects a form of biosocial behavioural plasticity in contexts where territorial stability is denied to the subject.

Collectively these findings bring us back to the paper's central question: Can chronic displacement, shaped through fractured domestic ties, institutional confinement and territorial exclusion, function as a distinct pathway of embodiment within Krieger's ecosocial model? The analysis conducted in this paper supports this theoretical possibility. Recent developments in ecosocial epidemiology continue to emphasize embodiment and the interpretive significance of how bodies register structural inequalities across time and space (Krieger, 2024). Pathways that have been

established by Krieger (2011), namely social trauma, economic deprivation and ecosystem degradation, do not articulate spatial displacement as a lived condition. The closest existing pathway is the sixth one- ecosystem degradation which is explained in relation to the systematic alienation of indigenous populations from their lands. However, this pathway is defined in terms of macro-level, population-scale, politically produced territorial dispossession of entire communities. The chronic spatial instability discussed in this paper operates at individual life-course level, across domestic, communal and institutional environments. This is explained through a distinct mechanism of cumulative biological inscription of sustained territorial denial on stress regulation, attachment formation and identity coherence. These are analytically separable mechanisms operating on different scales, and therefore need distinct theoretical recognition within framework. The reading of Nandha, suggests that displacement occurs through specific mechanisms such as confinement in non-places, denial of territorial belongings and accumulation of spatial exhaustion. This study proposes it as an avenue for further theoretical investigations, rather than presenting it as a conclusive claim. Studies through other texts, lived experiences and cultural contexts can assist in further validation of the claims of this paper.

The study makes two primary contributions to two interconnected areas of scholarships. First in the domain of biosocial masculinity studies, by demonstrating spatial displacement as an under-theorized dimension of embodiment of masculine identity formation. This can be conceptually accommodated by Krieger's framework but has not yet been formally recognised. Second is that, the study also demonstrates how structured behavioural case study of realist narratives can become a generative site for exploring the applicability of biosocial frameworks, even where direct physiological measurement is limited. Future research may build on this approach by extending the framework empirically through longitudinal studies, to examine the consistency of similar patterns of spatial embodiment in representation of marginalised masculinity, especially in South Asian contexts.

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