**Unifying Boundaries: Exploring the Liminal in “The Hunt” and “Maharlika”**

In this paper, I will explore liminality as a political tool in Mahasweta Devi’s “The Hunt,” and Irene A. Sarmiento’s “Maharlika,” two Asian novels that offer situated geographies and imagined times to the reader. To this end, I will first contextualize my thesis with an ecocritical motive, compare and contrast the two texts in this light, and extend the thesis with concluding insights from a rhetorical and literary case study of the two texts.

The liminal (hereinafter used interchangeably with “borders” and “borderzones”) is typically the refuge of the marginalized, the blind spot of a myopic hegemony. Ecocriticism in the postmodern era has grown to theorize heavily about the liminal, because it is the crucible of churn and change, and the true foil to the meta-narrative in its role as the hyper-local and the hyper-different. However, as a political tool, liminality is implied to be dispensable, with ecofeminists such as Noel Sturgeon suggesting that a “temporary downplaying of differences” among multiple Others (such as women and nature) can create a more effective political movement.

But can the liminal hold more sway beyond the local in ecocritical analysis, and provide not only much-needed “difference” (as used by Lyotard) to the subaltern discourse, but also a global political role against the status quo**?** This materialist inquiry merits an exploration of multiple subalterns and boundaries in literary texts of a political bend, viewed in their situated contexts. This paper uses “The Hunt” and “Maharlika” as fertile ground for this exploration of liminality, due to their rich value as postmodern stories situated in Asia, read in non-native languages, and detailing an oppression that spans class, gender and race.

I argue that “The Hunt” and “Maharlika” use liminality as a political tool (along with its usual role as a crucible of difference) both in their narrative and their wider message. This is a consequence of both their temporary subversion and support of value hierarchies, which I will illustrate by comparing the character identities, plot, and language and writing style of the two works. Notably, while the political *potenz* of boundaries is often benign and constructive in the case of “The Hunt,” it turns deeply malicious in “Maharlika.”

I will first address the liminality evident in the fluid (and rigid) character identities that the primary agents in the two stories take on. I posit that these fluid identities subvert a rigid social hierarchy, thus providing a window to liberate the subaltern from domination. These fluid identities also pose seemingly puzzling questions in the political context of both stories. In the case of “The Hunt,” Devi, a tribal rights activist from West Bengal, India, makes the apparently enigmatic choice of casting a mixed-race, ex-religious and “misbegotten” Mary (and not a conventional tribal woman) as its protagonist, especially in a story revolving around the hunt and exploitation of the tribals in a neo-capitalist world. Mary is cast as “not a tribal at first sight…yet she is still a tribal,” confounding a tribal identity which she polices against “outsiders” who wish to marry her. Similarly, in “Maharlika,” Sarmiento chooses a twelve-year old Filipino boy (and not a white man), Carlo, to dissect class exploitation taken to the extreme. As a young child, Carlo forms a nascent moral compass in “Maharlika,” but as a noble *balikbayan* who kills young infants of his own race.

These unconventional choices to advance conventional materialist political messaging (against capitalism and patriarchy) can be answered by viewing Soper’s theory of nature and Warren’s oppressive conceptual framework in turn. Soper considers both nature in man (“human nature” or instinct) and man in nature (“the Great Chain of Being”) as key elements of gender politics. In the former, she posits a value distinction between “human nature” or “instinct” as inherently either sublime and emancipatory or as base and corrosive. “The Hunt” and “Maharlika” often warp this view of nature in man. “The Hunt” portrays Mary’s instinct as an innately distrustful woman,” “lifting her machete” when “men wanted to be her lover” offers of marriage, and spontaneous loyalty to her employer and tribe, as positive, desirable and empowering. However, it injects a borderzone into “human nature” by then painting Tehsildar’s instinctive lust for Mary and greed for profit (the only two qualities he possesses) as the machinations of a villain indulging in his nature, villainy. Finally, it equivocates Prasadji’s nature by touching on both his spontaneous defence of Mary, indicating that he is “insulted if she’s accosted” and his destructive, yet more benevolent greed. In “Maharlika,” Carlo’s mother is instinctively mother-like and genocidal, best encapsulated in the last line where she cajoles her son with “don’t cry, baby … you’ll kill more next time.”

How does this liminality in human nature affect the rather political position of “man in nature,” which Soper terms the “Great Chain of Being?” As an anthropocentric hierarchy, this “Great Chain of Being” clearly drives the status quo of the two stories: a political backdrop of class exploitation, gendered oppression, neo-colonialism and environmental degradation. The layered hierarchy operates, as Warren posits, by means of an “oppressive conceptual framework” (the stories’ status quo) premised on a “logic of domination.” Both stories use liminal identities to question and attack this oppressive framework, albeit to vastly different extents. Desocialized from parochial constraints, Mary exercises her independence to play conventionally masculine and feminine roles – she gifts Jalim before he does, chooses her lover, drinks alcohol, “pulls hundreds of pounds,” and “fights the Kunjaras,” yet is “most seductive,” “goes to the village to gossip,” and “danced … with the most relish.” This obfuscation and even reversal of gender roles manifests in her exclamation that “I am the husband, you [Budhni] the wife.” Significantly, the mutually inclusive space that Mary inhabits is diametrically opposed to Warren’s second feature of an oppressive conceptual framework – “mutually exclusive dualisms” and in effect dismantles the entire framework. We see this to a lesser extent in “Maharlika” – pushed to the boundary of death, Carlo calls his parents “blood-thirsty strangers” and experiences a strong tension precisely when he starts identifying himself with a name-sake vermin on a racial basis (foreshadowed by an earlier discussion on “should we kill our own vermin?”). Unlike Mary, Carlo experiences a liminality *between* subalterns here – between race and class[[1]](#footnote-0).

Liminal identities in the two stories are thus instrumental in subverting this logic of domination, and by extension the oppressive conceptual framework, transforming the “Great Chain of Being” into a more “organic connectedness,” – resulting in a “Great Web of Being” instead. These identities of Mary and Carlo offer a political platform that draws attention to the exploitation of the Other side of their liminality. However, a liminal identity is not always posited as positive, as in the case of Tehsildar, Prasadji, Mrs. Prasad and Carlo’s mother. Interestingly, we see a different kind of boundary between subalterns in the latter duo – that of Beautiful Ladies juxtaposed against Blue Donkeys, borrowing from Namjoshi’s allegory about bourgeois women complicit in class oppression.

Boundaries, both narrative and physical, also govern the plot of the two stories, unifying their narrative – and appeal. “The Hunt” is driven by Mary’s liminal shifts (each such shift accompanies a key plot point, such as the arrival of Tehsildar, the cutting of Sal, and ofcourse, the hunt itself). “Maharlika” takes this one step further- it subsumes the literal hemming in of boundaries on the Vermin as a key plot point – a framed story. In both stories, the asphyxiation of borders (by a value hierarchy) is also accompanied by environmental degradation – which I will analyse through the cogent lens of social ecology.

Bookchin, in his definition of first nature as evolution by adaptation and mutation, and second nature as socio-cultural evolution of intervention, implies strongly that true political agency (that is, the aspirational agency the subalterns should agitate for) lies not in a homeostatic adaption to the environment (in natural and social connotations), but in the capability to effect change upon it. This higher definition of political agency prompts a consideration of “The Hunt” and “Maharlika”’s plot arc. The development of social institutions over time in Kuruda, from tribal customs, to Hindu-Muslim antagonism to Prasadji’s bungalow, to the arrival of the train, to the death knell of the contractors’ greed, slowly destroy the village. This evolution of social institutions closely mirrors Bookchin’s posit of a “gradual stratification” around kinship, gender, age and class. Mary straddles this stratification by existing in the liminal space between the village and the town. While Mary adapts excellently well to her unconventional reality and Kuruda’s conventional institutions, she does not initially seek to change the Using Bookchin’s lens, Mary can be deemed to have no agency in the story, until she gets back at the capitalist infestation by killing Tehsildar. While this seems to be a radical analysis at first, it follows from the realization that in the face of a “deep-rooted hierarchy,” adaptation is akin to survival, and does not translate into true agency.

This idea of adaptation as lacking agency is made more obvious in “Maharlika” through the device of the framed story, a narrative demarcation where the tour guide, Mang Ruben, recounts a story-in-a-story detailing the rise of the Datu, the social institutions of fascism and neo-colonialism. Akin to a “Pied Piper,” the Datu leads the Vermin to the borders of the capital city, deceiving them in their gleeful adaptation and illusion of liberation under a “hero.” An illusion of political agency is created precisely because of a slightly more beneficial adaptation. Further in the story, the Vermin are shown to adapt to their lives as hunted prey with imagery of futile adaptation as well. They live in “a tacky labyrinth of makeshift huts,” evolve in a Darwinian way to run and avoid gunshots, and embrace a stoic culture of song and merriment in the face of a genocide, best exemplified by the Vermin-man who refuses to stop singing in the wake of a bloody stampede since “he was not yet done with his song.. he looked almost dignified.” Finally, the fact that infants were “well-hidden” further signifies the helpless adaptation that the Vermin undertake – imagery that both underscores their political oppression, and enhances the readers’ pathos at this futile attempt at some agency. What is indeed distressing to the reader about Bookchin’s interpretation of agency is that both Mary and the Vermin possess no agency at the start of the respective stories – and Mary gains hers only when she finishes her hunt. Thus, narrative boundaries heavily influence the political goals the text espouses, and the political action it aims to suffuse in the reader.

Physical boundaries provide a clear political tool within the plot of Maharlika, and as a political message against class exploitation, a focal point for materialist feminism. When borderzones temporarily crystallize into hard borders, both stories zoom into the subaltern, making it the hyper-local, forcing an acknowledgement of what lies on the other and Other side. Faced with representing this Other side, the two stories have two political expedient options - champion borders within the Other side or disregard them strategically. As outlined earlier, Nöel Sturgeon advocates that an effective political movement built on coalitions should follow the latter and “temporarily downplay differences” to provide a singular voice to the movement. However, this strategy can be adopted by the hegemonic forces as well, which can temporarily downplay inconvenient differences to construct a warped reality.

This hemming in of physical boundaries on the Vermin is justified by the Datu by disregarding differences among the Vermin, and essentializing them to their class or economic status. This leads to a process of decantation, where the Vermin are dehumanized and reduced to statistics (“8 maimed, 0 killed”) by virtue of this “strategic essentialism” wielded by the ruling elite. Politically, it warns the reader that Sturgeon’s temporary or strategic essentialism shares the same pitfalls as essentialism itself - it induces the politically active to suspend disbelief and emotion for the Othered, which is crucial to logic of domination.

On the other hand, “The Hunt” eschews strategic essentialism in another way – by embracing a self-narrative of a protagonist that allows for differences to coexist within her. Mary’s self-narrative, shaped by her unique circumstances, is individualistic and hyper-local – she is capable of exhibiting multiple identities at the same time. However, in “Maharlika,” all characters follows the groove of nationalism and bigotry. This is why at the end, Carlo struggles with his own identity - it is initially defined by his intense nationalism and is removed from race, but he later starts to question it.

Finally, the two texts offer a significant postcolonial message through their language, narration and writing style. As an English-translated Bengali story, “The Hunt” contains plenty of linguistic diversity with several English words such as “cash,” “train” and “railway track” in even the Bengali original, and which are italicized in the English version translated by Gayatri Spivak. This linguistic leakage implies a postcolonial reclamation by the native, a mimicry exemplified by Homi Bhaba. At the same time, the theme of the words used – cash, train and railway – is emblematic of the situated history of India – the colonialism and capitalism was introduced into the country’s society as well as its vocabulary, by the British. Even here, capitalism is shown as multifaceted- it takes on a benevolent, symbiotic form with Prasadji as the capitalist, but turns canceorus with the arrival of Tehsildar. The protagonist’s background is similarly multifaceted – she is half-white, half-Oraon, her mother is ex-Christian and she is an illegitimate child in a newly independent country. This forms an interesting Borderzone between gender, Marxist land rights, capitalism and language.

However, Maharlika offers a sterile, photographically negative contrast to the leakage in “The Hunt.” True to its theme of complete colonial takeover, it contains no native Filipino reference or vocabulary apart from the title and the tour guide’s name. This mirrors its representation of capitalism – singular, one-sided and horrible. Carlo’s background is similarly contrasted – he hails from the “default” - a rich, conventional and nuclear family.

Further, as a call-to-action for the tribal land rights, “The Hunt” is written as almost a grassroots story – bottom-up – with its plot detailing the daily life of the protagonist. Viewed as per, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory: “The Hunt” teases out each element in Mary’s life – gender, kinship, race and class – in that order. “Maharlika” collapses all of them to one grand narrative – that of class. The two texts peel the layers in different ways. As a criticism of mechanistic, modernistic thought, Maharlika is deliberately written as top-down. This is hints at why characters are generic enough, the family uses familiar slang, wears conventionally Western clothes , follows generic tropes of a honeymoon, a playful parent, a reserved and masculine father - all roles are conventional. This gives Sarmiento the ease to make the narrative in “Maharlika” dystopian, and mockingly satirical, such that it is convincing not only for the character but also the reader. The impartial, stoic tone of the story is persuasive – it could easily have come from one of Datu’s films. There is no narrative commentary, and the reporting is flat – to emphasize the normalization of the slow violence. Thus, a thorough analysis of the linguistic boundaries of the text allows both a fuller understanding of their political messaging, and an appreciation of their situated contexts as literary works in once-colonized Asian countries.

In conclusion, the various lenses with which liminality (and the absence of it) is portrayed in the two texts influences their political sensitivity, and enhances their call to action. True to the spirit of borders, this politics is suffused with *pathos,* and thus results in two texts – one of speculative fiction in the future, the other of tribal exploitation in the past – having a distinct impact on the reader in the present.

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1. As an aside, we see a similar nascent liminality with Bruno in pop-culture, in the film *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas,* wedged between race and age. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)