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

**Text**: “Maharlika” and “The Hunt”

**Rationale and justification for choosing the topic**: Borders (hereinafter used interchangeably with “liminal” and “borderzones”) are typically the refuge of the marginalized, the blind spot of a myopic hegemonic. 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 – the hyper-local. But can the liminal hold more sway beyond the local, and provide not only much-needed “difference” (as used by Lyotard) to the subaltern discourse, but also a space for a unifying, transcendental and political empowerment**?** Further, how does the liminal deal with extreme stress and oppression? Such a hyphenated borderzone would hold significance in uniting not only a subaltern and help in their political action, but also unite the local with the global: a perennial problem in ecocriticism. Here, I choose to zoom in on Bookchin’s social ecology and Warren’s oppressive conceptual framework to explore their links to a fluid borderzone.

**Rational and justification for choosing the texts**:

As an English-translated Bengali short story about the triumph of a mixed-race tribal woman, “The Hunt” provides fertile ground to consider liminality in mixed language, narration and its protagonist Mary. Similarly, “Maharlika” has as its central theme a meta-narrative of class cleansing, with the Vermin slowly pushed to the boundaries of civilization. The dehumanizing narrative depicts the cross-section of a hegemonic class with racial boundaries: not between races, but between race-and-no-race. Both texts deal with borderzones in interesting ways, and thus merit comparison. While “The Hunt” exemplifies borders *within* a subaltern brilliantly, through its depiction of linguistic “leakage,” a mixed-race protagonist or a village-town divide, “Maharlika” provides a more subtle view of borderzones *between* subalterns – in particular, among human (balikbayan) and non-human (vermin), race-and-no-race, and the thin barrier between race and class explored in Carlo’s identity and experiences. Clearly, “Maharlika” and “The Hunt” bear strong undertones of the liminal, by virtue of their status as postcolonial English-language texts with heavily political slants (class oppression and racial Othering). However in Maharlika, the political power of borders is used for *malicious* purposes by the ruling elite (“Parti Datu”) when they ghettoize the Vermin.

**Aims of the research:**

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 their temporary subversion of value hierarchies, which I will illustrate by comparing the language, narration style, character identities and plot of the two stories.

**Language and Narration Style:** Both texts probe the English language (the language of colonial imperialism) in subtle, postcolonial devices – for example, “The Hunt” is a sprinkles some English words such as “cash,” “unfettered monopoly” and “train” deliberately to both point to their external origin, as well as to accompany Mary’s train of thought.

**Character identities:** While “The Hunt” unearths liminal identities (mixed-race, village-town, lower-class and upper class) through the self-narrative of Mary, “Maharlika” goes further by exploring boundaries between subalterns, making it a ripe ground for political pathos. The class-driven hegemon denies the dehumanized Vermin even the attribute of race, leading to a race-and-no-race boundary, which Carlo struggles with, especially when he starts identifying the decanted Vermin as Filipino or as his own race. The boundaries between race-and-no-race, and race and class conflict heavily through his tensions – especially when he is pushed to the extreme.

**Plot:** Boundaries 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 itself. 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.

Some pertinent questions my thesis will tackle include: (i) In a rather political story about exploitation of tribals, why does Mahasweta Devi choose to depict the protagonist as a mixed-race tribal woman rather than as a conventional native who exemplifies the tribe? (ii) Why does Carlo recognise his parents as “blood-thirsty strangers” and then go on to kill an innocent child? (iii) Why does Carlo shoot the innocent child rather than its already-maimed mother?

**Conclusion:** In sum, I will explore how the two texts utilize liminality in race, gender, class and nature as a key tool in politicizing their message by thwarting rigid hierarchy, and not just in depicting racial or gender-oriented sensitivities. Limitations of this study include the truncated scope of just three subaltern groups, and the disjunction in comparing stories originally written in different languages, which may confound my analysis of the (political) tone of the two texts.

**Bibliography**:

Bookchin, Murray. *Social Ecology and Communalism.* AK Press, 2006, Oakland. [The paper will discuss how Bookchin’s posit of a rigid “deep-seated hierarchy” (and consequent environmental harm) is often broken by depiction of porous identities in the texts. For example, Mary often performs both “first” and “second” nature roles in the “The Hunt,” (as my analysis will show) thus laying her groundwork for class and environmental liberation.]

Andersen, Karlin. “Mahasweta Devi’s Mary Oraon: Balancing Language and Identity.” *UC Berkeley Comparative Literature Undergraduate Journal”,* ed. by Paige Downie, 2020. [Andersen analyses Mahasweta Devi’s deliberate use of English terms in the Bengali original to describe neo-colonial, classist realities in Kuruda to emphasize their foreign-ness, and intrusion into the Bengali language. I will use argue that this linguistic leakage denotes a sense of post-colonial reclamation by the native]

Soper, Kate. “The Discourse of Nature.” *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader,* edited by K. Hiltner, 2015. [Soper’s discussion of the Great Chain of Being as both an anthropocentric hierarchy and as “organic connectedness” will be used to analyze liminal character identities (e.g. can Mary’s mixed race free her from the shackles of the Great Chain by reappropriating it as a desocialized whole?).]

Sturgeon, Noel. Ecofeminist Natures and Transnational Environmental Politics. *Ecofeminism & Globalization*, pp. 91-122, 2003. [I will explore how Sturgeon’s criteria for a successful strategic essentialism: the temporary downplaying of differences for political expedience can be modified to include a politics that arises from the trumpeting of difference (in “The Hunt”), as well as to maliciously systematically dehumanize Vermin to gain literal political power (in “Maharlika”).]

Warren, Karen J. “The Power and the Promise of Ecological Feminism.” *Environmental Ethics*, volume 12, pp. 125-146, 1990. [Warren’s features of oppressive conceptual frameworks, such as “mutually exclusive value dualisms” cease to apply to gender and racial borders (such as Mary’s fluid gender role in “The Hunt”), and their rejection allows political agency and expedience to the once-subaltern.]