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**An Ecocritical Cultural Study of Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*:
Rethinking Nature and Consumerism**

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Abstract:

This study explores Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* through the lens of ecocriticism, examining the complex intersections between environmental degradation, cultural production, and global capitalism. The novel exposes the ecological and ethical consequences of industrial meat production, revealing how media and marketing shape consumer behaviour while masking the environmental costs of agribusiness. By analyzing Ozeki's narrative strategies—such as her use of multiple perspectives, documentary-style realism, and satire—this research highlights how the text critiques the commodification of food, bodies, and nature. Furthermore, the study investigates the novel's portrayal of transnational power dynamics, gendered bodies, and environmental justice, emphasizing how ecological issues are inseparable from cultural and political contexts. Ultimately, this ecocritical reading underscores *My Year of Meats* as both a work of environmental activism and a literary intervention that challenges readers to rethink their relationship with food systems and the natural world.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, Ruth Ozeki, My Year of Meats, environmental justice, industrial meat production, transnationalism, ecofeminism.*

Introduction

In the novel *My Year of Meats*, Ruth Ozeki, the author delves into Ecocritical cultural studies, examining the complex relationship between humans, nature, and food production. Through a thought-provoking narrative, Ozeki unveils the intricate connections between personal and environmental well-being, challenging prevailing notions of food consumption and its impact on the natural world. The novel follows the journey of Jane Takagi-Little, a documentary filmmaker hired to produce a television series promoting American beef in Japan. As Jane delves deeper into the meat industry, she becomes acutely aware of its ecological consequences, animal welfare concerns, and broader implications for human health and the environment.

Ozeki uses Jane's experiences to explore the interplay between culture, commodification, and the natural world. The novel scrutinizes the industrialized food system and its disregard for sustainability, biodiversity, and ethical considerations through ecocriticism. It challenges the dominant narratives of meat consumption, raising awareness about the ecological consequences of our dietary choices. By intertwining personal narratives and larger societal issues, Ozeki encourages readers to question the established norms surrounding food production and consumption. She invites us to critically examine the interconnections between our choices and their collective impact on the natural world. *My Year of Meats* emphasizes adopting a more natural and sustainable approach to food production. It prompts the readers to reflect on the environmental costs of industrial agriculture, the mistreatment of animals, and the potential health risks associated with an overreliance on processed and factory-farmed foods. Through her Ecocritical lens, Ozeki prompts us to consider alternative ways of engaging with the

natural world and reshaping our relationship with food. She advocates for a more conscious and compassionate approach that aligns with sustainability, biodiversity, and the well-being of humans and the environment.

My Year of Meats explores Ecocritical cultural studies, unraveling the intricate connections between food, culture, and the natural world. It challenges readers to question prevailing food practices while inspiring a deeper understanding of our choices' environmental, ethical, and health implications. Through the novel's engaging narrative, Ruth Ozeki encourages us to embrace a more natural way of relating to food, fostering a harmonious coexistence between humanity and the earth.

Transnational corporate narratives that advertise items together with identities and cultural values often ignore the misery of women, people of color, children, and the impoverished, as Ruth Ozeki demonstrates in her novel *My Year of Meats*. Multinational companies produce global stories to shape consumers to want Western products and identities. However, these stories are crafted in such a way as to gloss over the negative impacts on disadvantaged communities and the environment. The novel focuses on women and how "the body, frequently highlighted as ethnic, gendered, and socioeconomically marked, is the reservoir of the poisonous consequences of multinational corporate operations" (Fish 49). In this chapter, it is deemed to look at how Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* addresses these problems by building environmental justice narratives that empower marginalized communities and show how media (and literature) can be used to forge transnational alliances that challenge simplistic understandings of gender and difference across borders.

Japanese filmmaker Jane Takagi-Little gets entangled in the cattle industry through the American-produced TV program "My American Wife!". BEEF-EX, the show's corporate sponsor, presents a new beef dish to Japanese viewers weekly to boost demand for American beef in that country. Jane's role is to find American families to showcase on the program and "stimulate consumer purchasing motivation." (MYOM 41). Jane first sees her work as a means to an end (paying the bills), but as time passes, she becomes more aware of the risks associated with the beef business and how firms like BEEF- EX suppress this information. Keeping her employment and navigating cultural interactions that attempt to highlight the atrocities of the meat business grow more difficult as Jane's function as a media producer gets more complicated. When Jane meets Akiko, a Japanese housewife who reaches out to her after watching the program to achieve a life like the one she sees on television, the situation becomes even more nuanced. In addition to learning about the implications of hormone poisoning on a young child, this encounter causes Jane to consider the impact of her job and the accuracy of the media.

My Year of Meats by Ruth Ozeki is a novel that explores the relationship between humans, animals, and the environment from an eco-theological perspective. The novel critiques the meat industry and its negative impact on the environment and human health, highlighting the interconnectedness of all living beings. One of the main eco-theological concepts in the novel is the idea of interconnectedness. Ozeki emphasizes that all living beings are connected and that humans' actions impact the environment and other species. The novel highlights the negative impact of factory farming on the environment, such as water pollution and deforestation, which in turn affect other living beings. This

interconnectedness is also reflected in the personal. Relationships between the characters as they struggle to connect despite their differences.

The concept of stewardship is also present in the novel. The main character, Jane Takagi-Little, is a filmmaker hired to produce a series of television shows promoting meat consumption. However, as she delves deep into the meat industry, she becomes increasingly aware of the negative impact of factory farming on the environment and animal welfare. She begins questioning her role in promoting meat consumption and seeks to raise awareness about the harmful effects of factory farming. Her actions reflect a sense of responsibility and stewardship towards the environment and other living beings. The novel also explores the concept of reverence for the natural world. Jane's experiences filming television shows in various parts of the world, including Japan and the United States, exposed her to different attitudes towards animals and the environment. She encounters people who view animals as sacred and those who exploit them for profit. Through her experiences, Jane develops a deeper appreciation for the natural world and recognizes the need to treat all living beings with respect and reverence.

Living in harmony with the natural world is also present in the novel. Jane learns that the traditional Japanese diet is based on a balance of meat and vegetables and that this balance promotes health and well-being. This idea of living in harmony with the environment is contrasted with the meat industry's focus on profit and efficiency, which leads to the exploitation of animals and environmental degradation.

My Year of Meats presents multiple environmental narratives by exploring the meat industry and its effects on the environment, animal welfare, and human health. The novel critiques the industrialized food system while promoting alternative ways of thinking about food and our relationship with the natural world. One of the novel's main environmental narratives is factory farming's impact on the environment. The novel depicts the pollution caused by the meat industry, such as water and soil contamination, deforestation, and the release of greenhouse gases. These effects are presented as detrimental not only to the environment but also to human health. Ozeki portrays the meat industry as a major contributor to climate change and environmental degradation, an increasingly relevant theme today. Another environmental narrative in the novel is the exploitation and mistreatment of animals in factory farming. The novel exposes the inhumane conditions in which animals are raised and the harmful effects of industrialized animal agriculture on animal welfare. Through the character of Akiko Ueno, a Japanese housewife with infertility, the novel presents the issue of hormonal residues in meat and its impact on human health. This storyline also highlights the ethical implications of meat consumption and the need for greater awareness of the source and quality of our food. The novel also presents a narrative of the importance of food and the relationship between food and culture. The novel explores the cultural significance of food and its role in shaping individual and collective identity. Jane's experiences filming television shows in different parts of the world, including Japan and the United States, highlight the diversity of food cultures and the importance of preserving traditional food ways. The novel emphasizes the need to promote a more sustainable and just food system that values both cultural and ecological diversity. In addition to these narratives, the novel highlights the importance of community and personal relationships in creating a more sustainable food system. The

novel presents a vision of food to foster social connections and promote well-being. Through her work on television shows, Jane learns the importance of building relationships with the people involved in food production, such as farmers, ranchers, and chefs. The novel suggests that building these relationships is crucial in creating a more sustainable and equitable food system.

The novel *My Year of Meats* presents multiple environmental narratives highlighting the negative impact of industrialized animal agriculture on the environment, animal welfare, and human health. The novel critiques the current food system while promoting alternative ways of thinking about food and our relationship with the natural world. Through its exploration of food and culture, the novel emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural and ecological diversity. The novel also highlights the importance of community and personal relationships in creating a more sustainable and just food system.

When Jane first starts working on “My American Wife!” The producers stress the importance of her careful selection of the spouses who would appear in each episode. The women are especially crucial since they are the ones who prepare the meals. Thus, they should both be “appealing.” The show’s sponsor provides Jane with a detailed list of requirements for the ideal spouse, including that she only dates white, middle-class families with lovely houses and children. All dishes must use beef and be easy to prepare yet flavorful. The target audience consists of Japanese housewives who will hopefully purchase the beef and cook it in an “American” style. The show’s meaning depends just as much on the wife as on the steak. She must not be white and not seem or behave like a working-class person or have any physical flaws since this is not the image of Americans that the entertainment business wants Japanese viewers to perceive. The wife’s potential financial, interpersonal, or marital difficulties are not intended to be the audience’s focus since it would be detrimental to all American families. Japanese customers would think that only less-than-ideal households in the United States eat beef if it is less than admirable. The consumer’s perception that beef is a “good” product consumed by “good” families—and therefore, that the wife is also a product—is crucial for its commercial success. The woman is picked and shot based on her marketability since her identity counts. Since it is her “civic obligation to promote American beef abroad and therefore assist in redressing the economic deficit with Japan” (*MYOM* 35). This is the first thread in the corporate narrative that co-opts the concept of feminism and meat consumption to promote Western ideals and products. Seeing how the ladies and their families are featured prominently in the program illustrates how beef is just a vehicle for Western lifestyles. BEEF-EX wants to expand the market for Western goods by exporting idealized stereotypes of middle-class American families (especially mothers) and their purchasing patterns. The campaign’s visuals, which include white ladies and meat, aim to increase Japanese women’s appetite for the products.

The association between the female protagonists and the meat is not accidental. The spouses are not just sexualized but are also compared to the company’s main selling point in Japan meat. Jane’s bosses remind her, “[the wife] must be attractive, delicious, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough to digest. Through her, Japanese housewives will feel the strong sense of warmth, of comfort, hearth, and home - the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America” (*MYOM* 8). Words like “appetizing,” “ample,” and “never difficult or hard to

digest” are often used to describe meals when they are taken out of context. The corporation is counting on her as a part of the package to increase meat sales to Japanese housewives. Images of both products need to be enticing and delicious if they are to sell well. Since they are both consumable, the show’s target audience will likely want both.

BEEF-EX markets its products to the Japanese by highlighting a prosperity narrative that portrays Japan as inferior. As a result of this capitalist globalization, traditional cultural traditions are erased and replaced with ones contingent on the availability of a given commodity, like beef. For example, while traditionally, more fish than beef has been consumed in Japan’s diet, the country’s expanding middle class has opened up a new market for beef producers. Therefore, BEEF-EX idealizes the West as a means of demeaning “other” cultures, as shown clearly by Joichi (Jane’s employer), “who touts meat’s superiority above the so-called lesser grains of bread and rice, [and] overlooks the history of Japan’s delayed adoption of beef in his television marketing efforts.”(Chiu, FF 140). To increase sales, BEEF-EX creates false stories suggesting that Japanese people’s culture is deficient and that eating beef would improve their lives. BEEF-EX’s goal is to generate worldwide customers by shaping and manipulating other societies to believe they need and want their goods. At the beginning of the novel, Jane and her cameraman, Suzuki, wander the aisles of a Wal-Mart “filming items to create in [the] Japanese women a condition of want (as in both senses, ‘lack’ and ‘want’), because want is good.”(*MYOM* 35). According to BEEF-EX, Japan is lacking in meat, strength, power, and plenty, all of which are hallmarks of Western civilization. According to Julie Sze, “the novel ties meat production with global consumption, including advertising that acts to generate and shape the wants and desires of individual consumers and in national and worldwide marketplaces.” (Sze 806). By appealing to Western society’s idealization, BEEF-EX can keep a firm foothold in the American market while imposing its ideals on other societies.

“My American Wife’s” counterpart is on the other end! Japanese housewife Akiko Ueno’s husband, John, is the show’s Japanese producer. John assigns Akiko to watch the program and make the featured dish. She is also asked to rate the show’s popularity and credibility and the dish’s taste in a series of surveys. Ozeki allows readers to interact with global themes from various perspectives by dividing the novel between two protagonists, Jane and Akiko. This opens up space for Ozeki to engage in the chaos of cross-cultural interactions. After establishing Jane as the producer and Akiko as the consumer, the plot quickly spirals into a complex maze of race, gender, nature, and capitalism in which nothing is fixed, the truth is ambiguous, and the numerous female characters are forced to perform a variety of roles.

Ozeki presents an alternative message highlighting the harm done to the environment, women, and animals resulting from beef consumption. There is a real and substantial connection made between women and livestock. They are essentially the same thing from the viewpoint of multinational companies, which exploit them for greater profits and control (over markets, peoples, nature, consumerism, and wants). Meat, in Ozeki’s narrative, “is how eventually one may make sense of DES’s development in the United States, both as a metaphor linking women and animals and as a technical method to control nature and achieve efficiency via technology.”(Sze 803). Through her investigation of DES, Jane learns that she, too, is one of these women. Before the presentation, Jane

had no idea what caused her cancer or the physical abnormality that rendered her sterile. Repeated inability to conceive led to the dissolution of her first marriage, which began while she was living in Japan. It is Jane's fault, she says. "My relationship with my body had been irrevocably altered by my failure to conceive. With a shriveled uterus and a predisposition to cancer, I was not in the mood for love. I was deformed, barren, and scared" (*MYOM* 158). Her mother's DES usage was the cause of her cervical cancer and a malformed uterus. The physicians recommended the hormone to Jane's mom since she is petite by American standards (later research revealed DES could not help sustain a pregnancy, resulting in more miscarriages than prevented). Due to her mother's decision to take the hormone that caused Jane's fertility issues, Jane is furious and cannot believe it.

After learning about DES and continuing to investigate feedlots and slaughterhouses, Jane can no longer dismiss these findings. Since the truth about the persecution of women, children, people of color, people with low incomes, and the environment in the beef business has been hidden for so long, Jane uses her platform as a documentary filmmaker to expose these hidden stories. By employing Jane and the readers, Ozeki, according to Susan McHugh's analysis, is "engaged in a new sort of science fiction by using the novel as a vehicle to develop knowledge about current science." (McHugh 39). The reader's journey mirrors Jane throughout *My Year of Meats*, making the novel a counter-narrative in and of itself. With an interest in the inner workings of the beef business, Jane chooses to visit a feedlot and slaughterhouse. As a result, she has decided to join the Dunns. John Dunn and his son Gale owned the Colorado feedlot and slaughterhouse. John is in his sixties and has a five-year-old daughter, Rose, with his much younger wife, Bunny. The cattle are given industrial waste and corpse pieces, connected to mad-cow disease in England during the late 1980s. Jane accuses Gale of advocating cannibalism, but Gale brushes it off as the cows are not people.

Once again, he calls this method "recycling," giving an unpleasant and risky situation a favorable environmental spin. Cows are not considered living things because they are not considered such. All that counts in the business is that output and profit improve while costs fall if things like cement fatten cows quicker at a lower cost. Rachel Carson observes, "We are accustomed to looking for the gross and immediate effect and to ignore all else. Unless this appears promptly and in such an obvious form that it cannot be ignored, we deny the existence of hazard" (Carson 190). The cows in Gale's stories are transformed into machines controlled to produce more products at a reduced cost. As the results take time to manifest, these manipulations are wise business decisions. His arguments support production while disguising dangerous circumstances, poisonous poisons, and racial and gender biases seen at the slaughterhouse.

Inside and outside the slaughterhouse, racism, and sexism are rampant. When Jane brings the camera, the staff are reluctant, but they quickly give up and attempt to answer some of her questions regarding the procedure. The attitudes at the slaughterhouse strengthen the link between women and meat. Not only is Jane treated cruelly because of her color, but also because of her gender. Gale teases her about viewing the "killing floor." When Jane turns back at him before entering the slaughterhouse, she finds Gale and another employee, Wilson, standing in front of an erotic poster with "their heads precisely aligned beneath the jungle girl's huge extended breasts" (*MYOM* 281). Ozeki's inclusion here is purposeful as it excellently depicts a broad tie between the men's business and their sexist conduct.

It is not just the hormones and industrial waste that have converted animals such as cattle into commodities but also the technology involved, making the slaughterhouse into a sort of factory as witnessed via Jane's first description of what she sees on the Dunn's property:

Steam hissed, and metal screeched against metal, clanging and clamoring, splitting the ear relentlessly. Chains, pulleys, and iron hooks whipped around us with unbelievable speed, and as far as the eye could see, conveyors snaked into the distance, heaped with skinned heads and steaming hearts. Overhead a continuous rail system laced the ceiling, from which swung mammoth sides of beef, dripping and heavy with speed as they rattled toward us (*MYOM* 281).

The cows are split into pieces, and these components are further sorted depending on usage value. The slaughter and butchering of the cows is a fairly mechanical procedure centered on cost reduction and profit-generating, converting the animal into a product. The cow enters the slaughterhouse as an animal and exits as meat, steak, and veal- rebranded as something that does not remind the customer of what it used to be or where it originated from. The Dunns continue engaging in unlawful activities on the property even after the disastrous impacts on their family become apparent. John's daughter Rose, just five years old, is already a victim of the relentless pursuit of wealth and production in the West. Due to excessive exposure to illicit growth of hormones at the feedlot (as well as from consuming meat and milk), Rose experiences puberty much earlier than she should, resulting in the development of breasts, pubic hair, and menstruation before her body is ready. Her father and half-bro continue to use the medications on their cattle despite knowing about the issue and having a good idea of what is causing it. Even Rose's mother, Bunny, knows and finally is the one who discusses the situation with Jane on camera.

Rose's father is initially unconcerned by the fact that his five-year-old daughter has developed enormous breasts. Both mother and daughter are reduced to commodities and pushed aside for profit. Lori Gruen observes, "Because women and animals are judged unable to comprehend science and are thus relegated to the position of a passive object, their suffering and deaths are tolerable in the name of profit and progress" (Gruen 67). Bunny and Rose will not be expected to know how a feedlot or ranch operates. John keeps Bunny as a souvenir to demonstrate his virility even in his advanced years. Rose attests to his masculinity and sometimes lends a hand to his son Gale as he prepares the feed. She only receives information that she is in charge of the cows' diet. Rose's early growth worries Bunny, but John assures her that she is just like her mother, which is reason enough to be pleased. Because Bunny plays such a small role in ranch operations, the health risk is downplayed, and her concerns are disregarded.

The persecution of women and other marginalized groups extends to livestock. Moreover, as Lori Gruen points out, "Of all the creatures murdered in food production, female animals suffer the worst." (Gruen 72). Due to most of their reproductive potential and the industry's efforts to manipulate and control them, sows, hens, and cows suffer more than their male counterparts. The over-milking and confinement of millions of cows necessitates the liberal use of antibiotics to prevent the spread of illness. Cows treated with growth hormones mature more quickly, make more milk, and may even be aborted if their progeny are not wanted. In the novel, Gale illustrates this well when he describes the

feedlot and butcher run by the Dunn family, where pregnant cows are put to sleep because they consume too much food throughout their pregnancy.

The reader is reminded of the flaws in Grace's logic by her words. Ozeki subtly hints at the family's bigotry and criticizes Jane's multicultural families, despite seeming to be doing well on the surface. The broader critique is directed at Western culture and nations like the United States, which think the rest of the world needs their aid while, in truth, they are the ones who create many of the issues that need to be fixed.

Fish observes that "the novel shows how the failure to make connections between consuming and desiring, whether it is the food we eat or the ethnic and racial images we exoticize, is dangerously naïve" (Fish 43). After receiving a fax from Akiko in which she blamed the resumption of her monthly periods on her diet of pork, Jane realized that Akiko had been adopting Jane's multicultural imagery and the show's message about the healthful advantages of meat. It all culminates in a rape that lands Akiko in the ICU with an unplanned pregnancy when Joichi finds out about her correspondence with Jane. After much deliberation, Akiko chooses to leave Joichi and go to the United States (unfortunately before seeing the Dunn episode), where she plans to settle down and live happily ever after.

Ozeki emphasizes the challenge of forging bonds across cultures/borders without misunderstandings or misinterpretations by muddying the waters of Akiko and Jane's first meeting. Jane sees her shows one way but soon realizes that Akiko has a different take on them. Akiko had built up Jane and her career in a specific way, only to discover that Jane has similar fertility and social acceptability challenges. Both ladies are fighting against having their identities and bodies used as commodities. After losing her pregnancy, Akiko encourages Jane to edit her film from the slaughterhouse, and in return, Jane provides Akiko with comfort and a network in the United States. Jane plans a visit for Akiko to the Beaudroux family and a subsequent meeting with Lara and Dyann.

Alliances between Akiko, Jane, and the other women in the program highlight that the beef business has touched them differently. Each woman's experience with DES, hormone poisoning (through eating or direct exposure), infertility, physical violence, racism, classism, and sexism, among other issues, has resulted in a unique perspective on environmental politics that challenges simplistic generalizations about the effects of environmental degradation on human beings. Ozeki's grasp of the varying and unequal consequences of environmental degradation on women, children, people of color, and the impoverished is on display via these characters. She exposes the limitations and simplifications of dominant environmental narratives like BEEF- EX's, allowing other perspectives, experiences, and complexity to emerge. Instead of seeking the truth and rejecting what is deemed incorrect, we should welcome our diverse backgrounds and perspectives and use them as a springboard for investigating other realities.

Conclusion

It is opined that *My Year of Meats* presents complex eco-theological and cultural studies perspectives on meat consumption and the treatment of animals in the meat industry. The novel challenges readers to rethink their relationship with nature and to consider the ethical implications of consuming meat. Further, the novel highlights the interconnectedness of all living beings and the environmental impact of industrialized meat production. The novel suggests that our treatment of animals in the meat

industry has significant environmental and ethical consequences and that we must take responsibility for our actions and their effects on the natural world.

Furthermore, the novel explores cultural studies' perspectives on the role of meat in shaping cultural identity and values. The novel shows how the production and consumption of meat can reflect and reinforce cultural norms and values and how these cultural beliefs can impact our relationship with nature.

Through its eco-theological and cultural studies perspectives, *My Year of Meats* challenges the readers to consider their actions; moral implications and cultivate a deeper understanding of our place in the natural world. The novel emphasizes the importance of respecting and protecting the natural world and acknowledging the interconnectedness of all living beings. *My Year of Meats* offers a powerful critique of industrialized meat production and challenges the readers to embrace a more sustainable and compassionate approach to our relationship with nature. The novel encourages the readers to reflect on their beliefs and values and consider how their actions impact the world around them.

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