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Cooperate Greed in Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*

One of the most influential entities in Ruth Ozeki's book *My Year of Meats* is the Beef Export and Trade Syndicate (or BEEF-EX), a large lobby group representing the interests of "beef, pork, lamb, goat, horse as well as livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups" (Ozeki Ch. 1). As we are given insight into the operations of these industries through characters at different levels of involvement with the industry, there are instances of corporate greed that can be identified. It can be seen that the industry is willing to sacrifice the well being of their customers during the production of the BEEF-EX sponsored show, "My American Wife!" We also learn about the major role that pharmaceutical companies play in the production of meat, primarily in the use of Diethylstilbestrol (or DES). We learn that these drastic drugs were used to simply fatten up the cattle faster. This unfortunately had the side effect of causing massive damage to a female's reproductive system. Ultimately, what is at stake here is the morals of corporations and the health effects that are resultant from those profit maximizing behaviours, which everyone can agree is something to be concerned about.

When it comes to the health of the masses, it can be clear that a good quarterly statement reflects worse than health concerns. Until 1959, the use of DES was quite rampant in the poultry industry, as it enhanced many traits that made the meat more desirable. At that point however, the issues with DES became clear with "dogs and males from low-income families in the South were developing signs of feminization after eating cheap chicken parts and wastes from processing plants" (Ozeki Ch. 6), and the Federal Drug Administration (or FDA) banned it for use with poultry. This didn't seem to affect the market. In 1954, the FDA approved the use of DES for cattle, heralding it as "'miracle' and 'a revolution in the cattle industry,'" (Ch. 6). This then leading to DES becoming "used by more than 95 percent of U.S. cattle feeders to speed up production" (Ch. 6). When the evidence became clear that there was so many medical reasons to stop using DES, it still took the FDA until 1979 to actually ban its use in livestock production. As a reader, I

felt very moved by these issues raised and faced by Jane. The issues that she encountered were the resultant of the choices her mother made, the food she ate, and the environments that she was exposed to. The importance of the changes highlight the struggle that takes place in-between what we think is safe or not safe to eat. From the beginning of the book, Jane developed and learned so much about the beef industry, specifically relating to her own personal health. Her discovery of DES “ultimately changed my relationship with meats and television. It also changed the course of my life” (Ch. 6). When describing the resulting damage of Jane’s uterus from the DES that her mother took during her pregnancy, she referred to the ideal one looking like “head of a bull, with the fallopian tubes spreading and curling like noble horns”, while as a result of the hormones before birth “[t]he left side of the bulls broad forehead was caved in, less triangular, as though my uterus had been coldcocked” (Ch. 7). These changes then described to her mother will highlight the difference over generations, that her mother was not even aware of these issues back then. In fact, her mother didn’t even know the drugs that she was given, she “try everything. Some vitamin, some Doctor Ing-san medicine” (Ch. 11). This shows the blind faith in the doctor that she had, eventually resulting in being given DES. The doctors prescribed this even when studies that were released at the same time when it was approved for cattle, DES “showed a significant increase not only in miscarriages but also in premature births and infant deaths” (Ch. 6). It’s not like this wasn’t common knowledge anyways, as the very same drug that was used by pregnant women to strengthen their children was “even used as a morning-after pill to terminate pregnancy” (Ch. 6). This contrasts the attitude that Jane had when she was prescribed Tace for her pains after the miscarriage. Armed with the knowledge of the drug industry, Jane looked it up, just to find that it could actually be quite harmful to someone with her condition! This will relate quite nicely to the idea of the trust that the meat industry has, or rather had relating to the safety of their products. It was the simple fact that the corporations ignored the evidence, as they were making profit.

Jane’s development of the relationships with the people that she filmed provided another insight to the industries goals. Lara and Dyann in the novel are used as a pipeline to describe factual and historical evidence of the food and drug industry and the lengths that some people go to avoid the issues that are caused by them. Dyann went so far as to state that they could “never eat it[meat] the way its produced here in America. Its unhealthy. Not to mention corrupt, inhumane, and out of control” (Ozeki Ch. 8). Another

character that provided a lot of information on the industry was Bunny and Rosie. Their role was more of a direct effect of the results of the industry as they lived on a cattle ranch. As a result of the exposure to DES, Bunny's daughter, Rosie, suffered greatly. Rosie underwent puberty at age 5, developing traits that would have taken many more years to develop; a direct result of the extremely high amounts of DES in the environment. Jane later used footage of Rosie to spark a controversy relating to the illegal use of DES in 1991, which was 12 years after it was supposedly banned in livestock production. This of course was motivated by the profits, as without the use of these artificial growth accelerants, they could have gone out of business like Jane's grandparents.

The mood of the novel changes from the start of the book, and reflects the opinion that Jane has on the industry. In the beginning, Jane seems to be looking forward to the employment, which would keep her fed and employed for over a year, this can be seen as the optimism or the innocence of the American public with relation to the industry. When we learn more about the use of hormones and drugs used in the book, the mood becomes much darker. First with Jane's miscarriage, and then Akiko's husband beating her, resulting in her fleeing to America to have her child. This flow can be contrasted with the same attitude that Jane takes with regards to the requests of the Tokyo office to use the "Ideal American Family" as described by being free of "1. Physical imperfections 2. Obesity 3. Squalor 4. Second class peoples" (Ozeki Ch. 1). Jane began by selecting families within these boundaries at the beginning. Later, she begins to choose families that are not fitting to the description, an American-Mexican family, a vegetarian lesbian family, and the Bukowsky family were some of the personal rebellions that she took.

Essentially, I am arguing that the corporate entities as described within Ruth Ozeki's book *My Year of Meats* act with a profit first approach which results in physical and psychological damage to the consumers of its products and content. The drugs were used, even though clear evidence that they were unfit for human consumption. These drugs were then later turned around and fed to the consumer directly, with the thought that some marketing jazz would be a sufficient reason to use it. Everything from the drugs that they marketed, to the food they produced, all tainted by corporate greed. With food being such an important component of everyone's lives, I think that greater care should be taken to ensure that entities that are controlling them act with a consumer first approach instead.

Works Cited

Ozeki, Ruth. *My Year of Meats*. New York: Viking, 1998. Print.