

Wyatt Johnson

Lisa Haynes

English 124 B1

10 August 2014

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, horseas well as livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups" (Ozeki Ch. 1). As we learn about the operations of these industries through characters at different levels of involvement with the meat industry, we find many instances of corporate greed. 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 improve efficiency, but unfortunately had the side effect of causing massive damage to a female consumer's reproductive system. A company such as BEEF-EX cannot both maximize profit and remain morally conscious.

Storytelling is used in *My Year of Meats* to provide personal insight into the workings of BEEF-EX as well as providing a character that the reader can identify with. The main character in the story, Jane, is a producer for the new Japanese television show "My American Wife" where she must travel around the United States to find housewives that can be featured on the show as to encourage the sale of American beef as per the sponsors intentions. Initially, Jane is innocent to the idea that the beef that she is marketing is hiding a dark secret. When it is later revealed to her, she only eats organic red meats if she does at all (Ozeki Ch. 9). The believable nature of Jane makes it really easy for a reader to personally identify with the issues that she encounters. Through the story, we are exposed to a variety of situations that are simply used by the author to provide factual evidence to support the corruption both in the meat and in the processes of BEEF-EX. One of the most powerful and longest periods that we learn about information through story was that of Jane's own attempts at having children, and her discovery of DES which "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 "My American Wife!" which would "land [her] a job and keep [her] both meat-fed and employed for over a year" (Ozeki Ch. 1). Her naive outlook on the meat industry can be seen as a symbol for 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" (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.