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Gender and Racial Inequalities within Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*

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Abstract:

"Gender and Racial Inequalities within Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*" meticulously analyzes the limitations faced by the female protagonists, Jane and Akiko, due to their gender and race in Ruth Ozeki's novel. With the help of theoretical frameworks, the article highlights the societal disparities between men and women of different racial backgrounds, negatively impacting perceptions of gender and race across cultures. The article argues that Jane, an Asian American director, experiences gender inequality in her profession. At the same time, Akiko is constrained by a male-dominated society that expects married women to focus on domestic duties and childbearing. The article contends that the novel's protagonists exist within patriarchal societies that reinforce the notion that women should be relegated to family life, perpetuating the expectation that women conform to societal norms.

Keywords: gender inequality, race, patriarchy, societal disparities, male-dominated culture, domestic duties, societal norms, theoretical frameworks, feminism, cultural studies.

Introduction

Literature is a mirror of the world in which we live, and by applying theoretical lenses, more can be understood about society, culture, and the values each holds. In Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, the female protagonists, Jane and Akiko, struggle to overcome the limitations imposed on them by their gender and race. Jane pushes to prove herself as a serious documentarian in an industry where women are not respected. Akiko attempts to establish herself as a perfect wife to her domineering husband. Behind all of this, both women face the pressures placed upon them by their Japanese culture. Applying Gayle Rubin's belief that women are products to be domesticated

and Toni Morrison's examination of the impacts of racial hierarchy and exclusion to Ozeki's novel, the societal inequalities between men and women of different racial backgrounds are seen to affect the perception of gender and race across cultures negatively.

Male Dominated Culture

In *My Year of Meats*, Jane Takagi-Little is limited by a male-dominated. Jane is a working professional in a world where outgoing and motivated women threaten their male counterparts. She must earn the respect of the men of her team to be treated equally. Even then, she is held in line by her overbearing boss, John, a man who believes a woman's place is in the home. In the following quote, he voices his displeasure:

“So, now you became a director...”

“Yes.” I smiled, trying to look benign and neutral.

He frowned. “I tell to Kato is not a good idea. You are still incompetent and cannot make correct choices for proper program topics. So I must come here to teach you.”

(Ozeki 127)

He sees her as nothing more than a sturdy body to bear children and not for the dedicated documentarian that she is. As a female Asian American director in a profession traditionally occupied by white males, Jane faces each obstacle head-on, overcoming each hurdle and fulfilling her dream to become the filmmaker she hoped to be when beginning her journey (Fish). She pushes through the barricades of gender inequality, which is highlighted when applying a gender studies lens.

Nearly seven thousand miles away, Akiko Ueno is bound by a male-dominated society where married women are expected to maintain the home, care for their husbands, and bear children. These expectations are pushed further when her relationship status is questioned by her boss, who then requires her to accompany him to meet a male acquaintance:

“About time to marry, don't you think? Any prospects?”

Akiko's face turned crimson. “No,” she gasped.

“Good. Good. I have someone in mind for you. A good, solid salaryman, works for my friend's company. We'll have tea with them tomorrow. We'll leave here at three.” (Ozeki 114)

Akiko is not allowed to turn down the date and treats it “more like a meeting she had been required by her boss to attend” (Ozeki 114). A short time later, she is married, giving up her job

“to learn to cook and otherwise prepare for motherhood” (Ozeki 48). In doing so, she must relinquish a piece of herself. She is a victim without fully realizing the reason why. By the time she understands her situation, it is too late. She is married and thrown into a relationship she did not initially want. In Rubin’s “The Traffic of Women,” she speaks of a “systematic social apparatus which takes up females as raw material and fashions domesticated women as products” (Rubin). As an unwed woman in her culture, Akiko’s single status is akin to being a pariah. She had no plans to marry and was perfectly content in the familiarity of her profession. It is not until her boss forces the match that Akiko even considers the life of a domesticated servant. Marriage may be the expectation, but upon her union with John, her freedom slowly slips away, stripping her of her autonomy.

Patriarchal Societies

Jane and Akiko live in patriarchal societies where women are expected to be confined to family life where their domestication allows them to be loving wives and mothers (Ağır 11). The belief in the domestication of the female sex can be seen in the expectation that women must conform to societal expectations. In Soo Yeon Kim’s essay on Ozeki’s novel, she argues that the “glorification of motherhood remains a serious problem” (Kim 34). After their marriage, John presumes his wife will carry his child, regardless of her thoughts or wants. Akiko becomes her husband’s property. This can be seen in her visit to the doctor, an appointment set up by her husband to examine the cause behind her lack of periods:

I have no patience with stubborn wives like you. There are so many young women who are desperate to have a baby, who would cut off an arm or a leg in order to conceive, and are honestly incapable of doing so. But you, you are not honest. You lack fortitude. Simply put, you have a bad attitude. This is my diagnosis, which I will give to your husband. I hope, for both your sakes, that he will be able to correct your problem (Ozeki 97).

The man who should be helping Akiko insults her by calling her stubborn and claiming she has a bad attitude. He proves the idea that women are to be treated inferior. Rather than assist her by offering support and guidance, he exclaims that he will report his findings to her husband, proving that her life is no longer hers. As Rubin states in her essay, this “innate male aggression and dominance are at the root of female oppression” (Rubin 901). The assumption that women

must long for family highlights the theme of motherhood, one Gayatri Spivak calls “epistemic violence” (Kim 33-34; Spivak 280). Akiko’s husband may believe the doctor when he reports her bulimia, but he is also overlooking the possibility that Akiko’s oppression is causing her both physical and psychological pains (Ağir 7). Women have been held in lower regard than their male equivalents for generations, an issue that bleeds into literature and one gender studies intends to expose.

Sexism and Gender Disparities

Throughout the entirety of *My Year of Meats*, both women are subjected to the virulent sexism of John and his predisposition to discipline their femininity (Williams 246-247). John belittles his wife and does so to achieve his own goals. He encourages his wife not to work while leaving her alone for long periods. John treats Jane as no more than a nuisance. Though both women are vastly different, John treats them similarly and, in both cases, believes he is superior. As Rubin states in her essay, the social subordination and sexual inequalities of women in patriarchal settings can be analyzed for the division between genders (Rubin).

Analyzing gender disparities also aids in the dissection of the treatment of individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Ozeki’s novel explores how a person’s gender and culture influence their perception. On one of his many visits to America, John tries forcing himself on Jane, declaring she will make him a strong baby. In the following excerpt, John disparages his race as not being good enough:

We Japanese get weak genes through many centuries process of straight breeding. Like old-fashioned cows. Make weak stock. But you are good and strong and modern girl from crossbreeding. You have hybrid vigor. My wife, never mind her. We try for having baby many, many years, but she is no good. Me, I need mate like Texas Dawn to make a vigor baby (Ozeki 55).

John refers to Jane as a modern girl from crossbreeding. He then exclaims that she has hybrid vigor. Debito Arudou examines this idea in his journal “Japan’s Under-Researched Visible Minorities: Applying Critical Race Theory to Racialization Dynamics in a Non-White Society.” In it, he states that his research “intends to outline the contours of the conscious and unconscious rules of interaction, and the tacit, “embedded” understandings within Japanese society that lead to differentiated, “othering,” and subordinated treatment of peoples by physical appearance” (Arudou

700-701). John looks at Jane as being a half-breed: half-Japanese, half-white. He does not treat her as equal; however, he believes the mingling of her two races strengthens her genes and, therefore, is better for breeding. He makes determinations based on Jane's appearance while treating her as an object. In his culture, women are expected to become wives and mothers. He views Jane through this lens, but she does not fit the mold even after he attempts to force her into it. As she is not full-blooded Japanese, Jane is not an ideal match, and John sees her as less.

John's treatment of Jane also supports the idea of the racial hierarchy mentioned in Toni Morrison's essay "Playing in the Dark." John belittles his race by suggesting Jane's mixed race is superior; her American genes enhance the Japanese ones passed to her through her mother. While John shines praise, the covert racism she encounters from others proves that not all feel the same. In the following excerpt, Jane must defend herself against an agitated WWII veteran:

"Where you from, anyway?" he asked, squinting his bitter blue eyes at me.

"New York," I answered.

He shook his head and glared and wiggled a crooked finger inches from my face.

"No, I mean where were you born?"

"Quam, Minnesota," I said.

"No, no ... What are you?" He whined with frustration.

And in a voice that was low, but shivering with demented pride, I told him, "I... am ... a ... fucking... AMERICAN!" (Ozeki 15)

The man does not believe Jane to be an American because she does not look like his ideal image of an American citizen. Encounters such as these highlight the racial exclusion and vulnerability of individuals of non-white descent (Morrison 1166). Jane states, "Being half, I am evidence that race, too, will become relic. Eventually we're all going to be brown, sort of. Some days, when I'm feeling grand, I feel brand new – like a prototype" (Ozeki 20). Though Jane is bothered by the man's reaction, she also looks beyond the negativity of being a mixed-race individual. She instead states, "I had spent so many years, in both Japan and America, floundering in a miasma of misinformation about culture and race, I was determined to use this window into mainstream network television to educate" (Ozeki 35). Jane utilizes her creative platform to reveal discrepancies and differences between her cultural backgrounds. Separation of race can only work if individuals marry and procreate with others of the same race. As the world progresses, the ideas

of racial superiority lose traction. Critical Race Theory is essential when tackling the racial inequalities embedded within various cultures.

Gender Bias and Racial Discrimination

To overcome gender bias and racial discrimination, both Jane and Akiko must challenge themselves and step outside of their comfort zones. Jane gives up that battle, knowing she will never fit in as a nearly six-foot-tall woman in Japan. Instead, she changes her image into one that suits her:

I cut my hair short, dyed chunks of it green, and spoke in men's Japanese. It suited me. Poly-sexual, polyracial, perverse, I towered over the sleek uniform heads of commuters on the Tokyo subway. Ironically the real culture shock occurred when I left Japan and moved to New York, to the East Village. Suddenly everyone looked weird, just like me (Ozeki 13).

Jane removes the preconceived notions of how she should look, talk, and behave. She abandons the losing battle of trying to fit in and paves her way through society. Akiko does the same when leaving her husband. She packed up her life and moved to the United States without leaving word. In America, Akiko can follow a life where she is more than just a wife or mother. She can experience life without her husband's control and power over her. Leaving Japan behind frees her to be her own person, with the promise of happiness denied to her previously. With the realization of her good fortune, "Akiko clapped her hands in time and looked around her at the long coach filled with singing people. This would never happen on the train in Hokkaido! For the second time since she left Japan, she shivered with excitement" (Ozeki 399). Akiko feels more at home among the "poor colored folk" of Louisiana than she ever did back home. Under the umbrella of Critical Race Theory, "'race' is purely a social construct without inherent physiological or biological meaning" (Arudou 696). The people on the train treat each other with kindness and compassion, never thinking about how they look or the color of their skin.

Conclusion

As a reflection of the world, literature can guide us through even the harshest of trials. Countless messages are woven through the words on the page, many of which may be known only to the author as hidden gems awaiting the right person to crack the code. Theoretical lenses help

readers better understand the literature alongside the society, culture, and values accompanying them. Applying a Critical Race Theory lens to *My Year of Meats* gives readers a better idea of how different races interact and perceive one another. There is a racial hierarchy that white American individuals often find themselves at the top of as well. Gender studies analyze the differing treatment between men and women. Jane and Akiko struggle to overcome the limitations imposed on them by their race and gender. They challenge the expectations and break out of their molds. In doing so, they attempt to shift the perception of race and gender across cultures in a positive way.

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