

Restoring Environmental Virtue Ethics To Promote Sustainability: An Ecocritical Analysis From An Ethical Perspective In Ruth Ozeki's "My Year Of Meats"

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Abstract:

This qualitative study investigates how the unethical utility of man causes environmental deterioration through the fictional work, "My Year of Meats" by Ruth Ozeki where she explores the unprincipled act of injecting chemicals into the meat in slaughterhouses and the consequences of ill effects on human health. The finding of the analysis asserts that everything is being commercialized in the food industry using terms like "healthy", "fertility" and "quality" which are only assertions to conceal the true ethical commitment of man. Hence there is an urgent necessity to reestablish strong ethical frameworks among human beings towards the environment and its entities, emphasizing sustainability practices. This study explores the need to adhere to one such ethic, 'environmental virtue ethics', for addressing environmental degradation. When human beings treat the environment with virtues like humility, care, and compassion, there is hope for a better future for the generations that follow, thereby creating a harmonious existence with nature.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Food Politics, Human health, eco-consciousness, Sustainability, Environmental Virtue Ethics.

Highlights

- ▯ Humans, due to the anthropocentric attitude, over-utilize the environment and all the entities on the earth for their benefit without realizing the consequences.
- ▯ Human health is greatly impacted by exposure to meat produced in American slaughterhouses which is injected with toxins, and women are especially susceptible to these effects.
- ▯ Human beings have to acknowledge the intrinsic value of all living beings and treat them with great reverence and appreciation.
- ▯ The environment can be preserved for future generations by the human virtues man possesses towards the environment.
- ▯ Sustainability can be developed by adopting the values of Environmental Virtue Ethics which encourages harmony living with nature.

INTRODUCTION

In modern times, the environmental devastation is enormous and if this continues, the existence of living beings on Mother Earth is questionable for future generations. Man's superiority over nature leads to the destruction of the environment. When man destroys nature, it eventually destroys the environment and its entities, resulting in an unfriendly atmosphere that affects man in all aspects. Though there are a lot of awareness initiatives like SDGs and environmental policies across the globe, the ecological crisis persists. Due to Man's materialistic attitude, he does not show any concern for fellow beings that exist on earth. All the detrimental acts that occur in the ecosystem are due to man's lack of ethical values towards nature. Man has to be ethically conscious for the whole community's well-being in the ecosystem to have a mutual coexistence without impacting one another. Frederick, an environmentalist argues that to live in harmony with nature, human beings should have biological awareness. He identifies that "The cutting edge biological awareness has an inclination that the harmony among human and the common world must be kept up. An ideal nature is one in which plants, creatures, feathered creatures and individuals live in such

concordance that none overwhelms or wrecks the other" (Frederick 147). Since "The most well-known measure to handle ecological emergency is sustainable improvement" (Frederick 128).

This study has attempted to portray the man-made deterioration in the environment due to unethical practices. An emphasis is given to adhering to 'environmental virtue ethics' to be more eco-conscious of sustainability through the fiction of Ruth Ozeki, "My Year of Meats". This study catches the injustices that lead to the environment and its entities. More focus is given to the corruption that takes place in the global food industry where they inject toxic substances into the meat and the animals in the slaughterhouses for gaining weight. The purpose is ultimately to increase their profit in business. They never bother about the consequences after the consumption of the injected meat. Human health has been badly impacted. Especially, there are challenges in women's fertility.

The moral importance of protecting natural areas extends beyond questions of societal utility and rights. Human beings can be conscious only when they realize the ill impacts on the environment of their 'ego-consciousness'. The need to develop an attitude of 'eco-consciousness' is essential for the sustainable growth. The man should realize the intrinsic worth of nature and its entities. These challenges can be addressed by adhering to virtuous qualities like humility, compassion, care, and love towards the environment. This study insists on the adaptation of virtuous qualities for sustainable living.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ecocriticism is the term coined by William Rueckert in 1978. According to him, Ecocriticism is "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Rueckert, 1996). It is a shift "from ego-consciousness to eco-consciousness" (Glotfelty C, 1996). Ecocriticism paved the way for developing another theory related to environmental issues when the environmentalist realized that there should be some ethical values needed to protect the environment from various hazards namely "environmental ethics" (Singer P 1991).

As revealed by Gewirth there is a need for "...the actions and policies that we as contemporary humans undertake will have a great impact on the well-being of future individuals. In the light of these facts, some philosophers have found environmental ethics on obligations to these future generations" (Gewirth, 2001). Karunya in her research has brought out the "significant in determining the purpose behind conservation as an inclusive purpose to protect wild lands can be envisioned only if nature is valued for its intrinsic value, and not its utilitarian value" (Karunya, 2023).

Environmental ethics relies heavily on environmental virtue terminology. This is because the language of obligation and consequences is much less varied and subtle than the language of virtue and vice. Honesty and dishonesty, compassion and brutality, generosity and miserliness, optimism and pessimism, courage and cowardice, temperance and intemperance, respect and disrespect, gratitude and ingratitude, and so forth are just a few of the hundreds of phrases that describe virtue and vice. Compared to the conventional deontological and consequentialist categories—that is, incorrect, permitted, obligatory, and supererogatory—this enables more nuanced and comprehensive assessments of both character and behaviour. Given the intricacy of the relationship between humans and the natural world, this diversity and richness are essential to environmental ethics.

Basic resources, information, leisure, rejuvenation, and, for some, spiritual experiences can all be found in nature. It is also a source of values that are independent of humans, a threat, and unconcerned with us. The language of virtue and vice gives the resources that environmental ethics requires to handle this diversity without homogenizing or misrepresenting it. "At the same time, not many individuals focused on the virtue-based link between humans and nature" (Cafaro, 2001, 15). (Hill, 1983, 211)

Other facets of environmental ethics are complemented and, in some ways, balanced by the role that environmental virtue plays in enhancing an individual's life and fusing ecologically conscious behaviour with personal happiness. The importance of (nonhuman) environmental elements, such as species or animals, is a well-known topic in environmental ethics. This area of environmental ethics typically places a strong emphasis on responsibility and moderation, or the values-based commitments to what we cannot or must do to the environment. Our reliance on and susceptibility to the natural environment constitute another important aspect of environmental ethics. This area of environmental ethics typically focuses on the losses or harms to us that will happen if we do not alter our environmental behaviour.

Men “act in ways that minimize their contributions to global environmental change” but their “acting in this way should generally not be contingent on an agent’s beliefs about the behavior of others” (2007: 167). According to Jamieson, rather than calculating the consequences of the immoral attitude of man, it is better to achieve moral values that focus on human virtues. In his perception, “[i]nstead of looking to moral mathematics for practical solutions to large-scale collective action problems, we should focus instead on non-calculative generators of behavior: 7-character traits, dispositions, emotions and what I shall call ‘virtues’” (Jamieson 2007: 167). Sandler rightly points out that “virtue-oriented normative theory [which] evaluates actions according to what a person’s dispositions ought to be (i.e., in terms of what is the virtuous thing to do)” (Sandler 2010: 182). Lenzi demands to do justice. Because “[f]ailing to do what we can ... is morally blameworthy, because it reflects vices of injustice, callousness, indifference, and so on” (Lenzi 2022: 8).

In Karen Bardsley’s words, human life can flourish based on the gratitude he cultivates towards natural environment. To him, “possible grounds for feelings of gratitude, or a sentiment closely akin to gratitude, toward the natural environments that support human life” (Karen Bardsley 2013: 28). According to Nathan Wood, one must “actively will [nature] to be what it is” to conceptualize “gratitude as an environmental virtue” (2020: 483). In this sense, thankfulness is broadened to include a willingness to embrace and respect nature’s otherness for its own sake, independent of any benefits it may provide to humans. “We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect ... That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. (1968: viii–ix)”

The combination of “the knowledge of what is truly enjoyable, fulfilling, and meaningful in life; and the wisdom to know when enough is enough” is what Gambrel and Cafaro describe as “material simplicity” (2009: 86). An individual who practices simplicity or temperance will resist giving in to the never-ending demand for new material goods. When it comes to the environment, temperance is a remedy for the vices of avarice and acquisitiveness. Henry David Thoreau, a fervent supporter of the idea that “[m]ost of the luxuries, and many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind,” is renowned for advocating simplicity in this context (Thoreau 1951, quoted in Sandler 2013: 1).

According to Hursthouse, the attitude of respect is more troublesome than the comparable virtue. She claims that developing “a set of dispositions and capacities” (2007: 163) that essentially make up a virtue is what “an attitude of respect for nature turns out to involve.” “Being disposed to feel wonder the right way, towards the right objects, for the right reasons, to the right degree, on the right occasions, in the right manner, and to act accordingly” is what Hursthouse claims constitutes the virtue of “being rightly disposed with respect to wonder” (Hursthouse 2007: 161).

The moral importance of protecting natural areas extends beyond questions of societal utility and rights. Rather, human virtues and excellence are inextricably linked to our attitudes towards nature. Focusing on a particular facet of the sustainable development principle—that is, ecological sustainability—is meant to make it easier to put ethical ideals into practice and offer a chance to achieve the desired outcomes. The query is, “What sort of person would destroy the natural environment—or even see its value solely in cost/benefit? A recent development in environmental ethics is Environmental Virtue Ethics or EVE. Connecting environmental ethics and virtue ethics has useful results in the domain of ecosystem sustainability. These two scientific fields can thus help in real-world situations to promote collaboration for the benefit of the environment.

Environmental virtues can be divided into three categories, which are not mutually exclusive: ecologically sensitive, environmentally productive, and environmentally justified. The environmental virtues are more than merely character qualities that are used in natural settings, such as while examining barnacles or taking a stroll through the woods, because not all of them are environmentally responsive virtues. Characteristics that are useful for promoting ecological sustainability in our daily lives, like temperance, humility, and foresight, as well as qualities that make for good environmental stewards and advocates, like

loyalty, perseverance, and trustworthiness, are examples of environmental virtues (Welchman 1999; Cafaro 2001a; Sandler 2007; Treanor 2010).

Liezl van Zyl has made a distinction between surprise-wonder and appreciative wonder in more recent times. According to her, environmental virtues "play a role in environmental ethics that is analogous to the role that the capacity for empathetic concern plays in interpersonal ethics" (van Zyl 2021: 89) and that only "appreciative wonder" is an emotion with a corresponding environmental virtue. We can include Kawall's "reverence for life" (Kawall 2007) and Jamieson's "mindfulness" (2007: 181), which is the virtue that entails "appreciat[ing] the consequences of our actions that are remote in time and space" (182).

On the contrary, a large portion of the population still lack awareness of 'Environmental Virtue Ethics' (Haakonssen, 2002, 285). Here comes the need to reinforce the theory of 'Environmental Virtue Ethics' which offers a positive vision for the relationship between humans and nature, where human flourishing and environmental flourishing not only coincide but are intertwined, by highlighting the benefits that ecological sensitivity, care, concern, and other environmental virtues can offer their possessor, even when she is carrying out her duties or acting responsibly (Cafaro 2001b).

"Environmental virtue ethics (EVE) is, as the name suggests, a way of approaching environmental ethics through the lens of virtue ethics" (Wikipedia). Environmental virtue ethics is an ethical framework that emphasizes the moral character and virtues necessary for fostering a respectful and caring relationship between humans and the natural environment. This approach advocates for the cultivation of virtues such as compassion, empathy, and responsibility towards all living beings, recognizing their intrinsic value beyond mere utility to humans. Man has to understand the intrinsic value of nature.

Environmental virtue theory explains how environmentally conscious behaviour promotes agent flourishing; environmental virtue predisposes an agent to act by environmental ethics rules and principles of action; and environmental virtue aids in identifying or determining appropriate environmental actions and policies. These are just a few ways that show environmental virtue ethics is an essential part of environmental ethics. Environmental virtue ethics can assist in determining which activities are right in addition to preparing one to act morally about the environment.

DISCUSSION:

This study aims to explore the unethical utilitarianism of men over women and the other entities of nature whose voices are unheard or forgotten. Both women and the environment are admired for their beauty and are overutilized for their benefits. Men often fail to understand that they have attained dignity and power only because of their soul partners. Like nature, women are also considered commodities that are submissive in the male-dominated society. They are regarded as the weaker gender and placed under the control of the male with whom they move. Women search for their identity everywhere and often fail to find it.

Commodification and Exploitation

The widespread unethical methods used in the meat industry, where animals are raised in regrettable circumstances, have serious repercussions, including pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and deforestation. In addition to endangering consumer health, the use of hormones and antibiotics in animals pollutes the environment.

One of the real evils in the world against humanity is the problem of food poisoning in the food sector. Through Jane, the main character, Ozeki illustrates the grave consequences of meat poisoning in the food sector. "My Year of Meats" draws attention to the significant effects of human eating choices on international populations and serves as a warning that human actions can upset the ecological balance and cause extensive harm.

The protagonist is Jane Takagi, a journalist who works for the TV programme 'My American Wife' sponsored by the meat industry in the US. The motto of the programme is to promote meat to the Japanese. BEEF EX has to find an alternate source to market meat and "in 1990, as a result of pressure by the U.S. government, the New Beef Agreement was signed with Japan, relaxing import quotas and increasing the U.S. share of Japan's red-meat market" (126-127). The TV show showcases that only by eating meat, the Texas girls are healthy and beautiful from the US. The female characters in the novel have a lot of impact due to the hormones used in the meat industry. Meat is personified in the novel as,

"Meat is the Message. . . . It's the meat (not the Mrs.) who's the star of our show! She must be attractive, appetizing, and all-American. She is the Meat Made Manifest: ample, robust, yet never tough or hard to digest." (8)

The novel conveys Ozeki's concern for food safety and its significance. She implies the immoral use of hormones in the meat industry. "BEEF – EX that represented U.S. meats of all kinds—beef, pork, lamb, goat, horse—as well as livestock producers, packers, purveyors, exporters, grain promoters, pharmaceutical companies, and agribusiness groups," are the sponsors for the TV show on meat." (9–10). Ozeki makes fun of the unfair practice of giving cattle "growth-enhancing" medicines to increase their meat production through the voice of her characters. Human health is negatively impacted by this. Humans' materialistic mindset is the primary cause of all environmental degradation. "The most dangerous job in the United States. . . . Every year more than one quarter of the meatpacking workers . . . roughly forty-three thousand men and women— suffer an injury or a work-related illness" (Schlosser 172).

Along the way, Jane encounters the other characters, Dunn and Son, who are the Custom Cattle Feeders. Along with her husband John, an elderly man who had proposed to Bunny during a lap dance performance, Jane also meets Bunny, a former stripper rodeo queen. They have a son Gale and a daughter Rose. She discovers at one of the prayer services that chicken, which is processed these days, is a deadly delicacy and observes the miserable state of human life due to the fallacious aspects of human nature. When humans eat hormone-induced food, it affects them negatively.

Health and Environmental Concerns

The novel depicts the use of diethylstilbestrol (DES), a synthetic hormone connected to cancer, by the cattle industry, highlighting the moral tension between profit-driven business methods and the welfare of both humans and animals. Jane herself facing a health issue of infertility, works for the profit of the TV programme she works for. Jane is unable to bear a child as her mother has taken DES, a hormone injection that is given to animals and it is been banned in the US for its harmful side effects. The doctor who was treating Jane's mother has wrongly prescribed it thinking that it will help the child in the womb to be healthier and prevent miscarriage. This has caused ill effects on Jane who was in her mother's womb. Jane travels a lot in her business context. During her course of journey, she stops by an abattoir and sees growth hormone-poisoning meat. "Many were afraid to testify against large meatpacking companies, fearing retaliation and 'economic ruin' when foul play is suspected" (142–43). Likewise, animals belonging to the ecosystem are also affected by man's anthropocentric attitude. By observing the pitiful state of animals, Keith Sagar, from an ecocritical standpoint, interrogates, "Why aren't... animals simply given the legal status of 'fellow citizens'?" (Sagar, 2006, pp.147-148).

Another character in the novel is Akiko, who also faces infertility issues and gets a lot of beatings from her husband for not bearing a child. He blames her for not taking meat and points out that is the reason for her not bearing a child. So, he forces her to have meat and to be like the Texa's girls though she doesn't like meat. She was treated like a slave at home. He urges that she watch 'My American Wife' so that she can at least cook and eat meat, which would help her become healthier and become a mother. Akiko also thought of adopting a baby. But her husband John fights with her to have the baby of his genes.

Moreover, Jane observes a nearby abattoir where the flesh is tainted by growth hormones, causing the five-year-old girl to experience "precocious puberty" (270) and appear as mature as an adult woman. Gersdorf, a critique of the environment examines the meat industry's illicit activities critically. Ozeki's characters are indirectly impacted by the use of hormones in meat. Among civilised citizens, the obsession with eating more meat is regarded as a culture (Gersdorf, 2010). In his attribution, Kim illustrates how the tainted food consumed by Ozeki's female characters prevents them from being pregnant. Despite being aware that it will disrupt women's hormones, American television portrays meat as a nutritious food. She focuses on the unfairness to the environment that occurs in the meat business (Kim, 1998).

Both women and the environment are initially silent recipients of the dominance over them. But they reciprocate their power when they cannot resist the troubles given to them. Jane Takagi-Little questions the morality of industrialization and consumerism. Akiko too at one point is no longer receiving blame and beatings from her husband, she develops courage and questions her husband. Other characters also make efforts to recognize the moral ramifications of their behaviour. The profound ecological virtue of

regard for all species is embodied by Jane's advocacy for the animals' welfare after she realises that they are more than simply food.

Interconnectedness of Lives

When Jane realizes the worth of the natural environment, she appreciates the inherent value of every organism in the ecosystem. She believes that all creatures are worthy of respect as the entities of the ecosystem are interconnected and interdependent. They are not merely commodities but valuable living beings who inherit part in human beings in all walks of life. The dangerous chemicals used in the manufacturing of meat, pose a serious risk to both human health and the environment.

In her documentaries, Jane brought attention to the unsustainable aspect of consuming illegal chemicals that are injected into meat. Jane is no longer a helpless bystander to every problem that occurs in the meat industry. This is seen when Jane explains: "I got a small but critical piece of information about the corruption of meats in America out to the world, possibly even saved a little girl's life in the process. . . . I am haunted by . . . big things, little things, Splendid Things and Squalid Things—that threaten to slip through the cracks, untold, out of history" (360). She exposes the truth about the food industry despite the risk to her employment because of her growing empathy and ethical obligation to the animals.

The author purposefully draws attention to the pitiful state of the quarry workers, who are also a part of our ecology. The attitude of the container truck driver mistreated the unseen impoverished people even after causing them harm. He disregarded her and declined to stop, administer first aid, or transport her to the hospital for medical attention. The novel depicts the anthropocentric mindset of the contemporary generation through the incident in which a container truck crushes Christina Bukowsky's leg, with the driver showing no concern for the human being. To care for and safeguard these marginalised individuals, human virtues like compassion and love must be nurtured.

Ozeki skilfully embodies the importance of raising awareness to comprehend and educate people about the negative effects of hormones injected into animals for more profits. In one of the TV interviews, Ozeki stated that "it only made sense to investigate how meat could impact the physical body of my character" and that she wanted to raise awareness of the negative effects. Because "the synthetic hormone DES had a history of misuse, as not only as a pregnancy drug for women but as a growth stimulant for cattle," she has also denounced the use of DES in her presentation (Ozeki). This demonstrates how the decline of one ecosystem component affects the others.

Ozeki shows her concern for humans' indolence towards nature. The understanding is that people have an egocentric attitude to destroy other living species in the environment without any concern for them or preventing them from serious diseases affecting the human race. According to Naess, humans' 'self-realization' can be advantageous for both individuals and the ecosystem as a whole (Naess, 1995). Humans ought to cultivate an innate sense of ecological consciousness to build a sustainable planet for a healthy lifestyle.

Ethical Implications

Resonating with the ideas of environmental virtue ethics, the decline of a species on Earth impacts the ecosystem's public health, reflecting the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans within it. They advocate for a more thoughtful and strong ethical concern for the wellness of all life forms through care and compassion by giving voice to the marginalized populations that are at risk of such ecological disasters.

Jane in the later part realizes that the corruption and the medications used in the slaughterhouses of the US have very bad health impacts. she learns that it spoils the health of the whole entities in the ecosystem. The animals are being injected with hormones to yield more meat. That in turn affects the health of human beings resulting in hormone imbalance and infertility. Even after Akiko conceives a baby, her husband blames her and tortures her for not eating meat. She expressed her desire to bring up her baby in the US even without the support of her husband.

Motivated by her concern for the welfare of the animals and the humans who eat the meat, Jane decides to reveal the truth about the meat industry in her documentary despite the consequences of her career. Her activities, which link her professional work with her ethical convictions, even at personal expense, demonstrate the fundamental environmental virtue of integrity. The production of industrial meat is contrasted in the book with more environmentally friendly methods including organic farming and plant-

based diets. Jane's support for these substitutes shows her dedication to minimising environmental damage and encouraging morally and environmentally responsible behaviour.

Jane also witnessed in her voyage a small girl who constantly eats meat as she lives near the meat industry and looks older than her actual age. Henceforth, there is a need for an ethical and caring approach to the environment that acknowledges the interconnection and interdependence of all living species on Earth. Moreover, it encourages fostering human values like empathy, accountability, and consideration in man's every interaction with the natural world. In his study, Jagmeet Singh puts forth his finding that "Indigenous environmental perspectives are presented as valuable alternatives to dominant development paradigms, offering more holistic and sustainable approaches to human-nature relationships" (Jagmeet). If the man realizes the turmoil given to the poor creature without ethical values, these marginalized communities survive in the environment. By adhering to the environmental virtue ethics of being compassionate, caring, and protecting women and nature we can establish a sustainable environment.

CONCLUSION

Man ought to realize that he is not superior to any creature or species on earth. He is one among the creatures that exist on earth and is not superior to anybody or anything in the ecosystem. In the selected novel, the environmental damage brought on by factory farming, such as health issues and biodiversity loss, is exposed in Jane's documentary work. The basic ecological idea that human activities should be carried out in line with the constraints of nature is supported by this criticism. Jane raises against the immorality of a system that puts profit ahead of the welfare of the environment and society as a result of her growing ethical consciousness.

The researcher highlights man's lack of ethics and human values which he ought to adopt for preserving the ecosystem and securing his health from all ill effects. All the species around man have intrinsic value and should be respected for their own sake. Man has to realize his responsibility as a man to protect the whole ecosystem for his benefit and the benefit of others. Here comes the need for environmental virtue ethics. Every man has to realize that and show ethical consideration for every action he does in the environment. The realization of interconnectedness can help in creating a sustainable environment.

By just knowing that the elements of nature have innate values human beings cannot live in harmony with nature. The researcher insists on developing the virtues to show consideration towards the ecological entity. Hence there is a need to adhere to virtue ethics where human values are more important for performing into action for developing sustainability. Only when each person has the consideration and empathy towards nature to protect against any harmful impacts, the earth can attain global ecological sustainability.

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