

Akiko and amanda  
ngoho reavey:  
survival through  
identity formation



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Amanda Ngoho Reavey's *Marilyn* chronicles her survival and transformation following transnational adoption and the shifting of her identity. She asserts that " survival is not about hunger. Not nourishment. Not hope. Nor anger. Nor love. It is about curiosity" (Reavey 37), and in attempting to remain afloat in a life that's constantly unstable, she dives into her past to reconcile who she once was with who she can become. Akiko, of Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, has a similar journey of survival in times when her very humanity is being questioned, but her journey stems from her pursuit of who she can become after years of being stripped of independent identity. While both Reavey and Akiko navigate survival through curiosity in regards to the formation of their identities, Reavey does so through curiosity about the home of her past and how that affects her future, while Akiko does so by plunging forward into an unknown future unburdened by the trauma of her past.

Reavey's frequent changing of her name reflects how she grapples with her identity, and how her past pushes her to uncover who she is. Her birth mother names her Marilyn, which is a name that she carries with her through her first foster home, and a name that ties her both to that family and to the one she left behind. The decision to change her name to Amanda is one that reflects how she changes in relation to her past. She has a deeply complicated relationship with her birth mother, who gave her up for adoption and the name " Marilyn" is a connection to Adelia Malinao. When she expresses that she wants " to burn the Deed of Voluntary Surrender" (Reavey 86), it's easy to see that that connection is a fairly painful one.

Indeed, when she imagines a meeting with her mother, she describes telling

her that “ you named me ‘ Marilyn’” (Reavey 49), to which she imagines her mother making “ a sharp turn and walk[ing] away” (Reavey 49). “ Amanda” is a way of extracting herself from a painful past and a fear of abandonment, and forging a relationship with a new mother, one who still presents the ability for connection. The name means “ worthy of love” (Reavey 105), something Reavey desperately needs to be reminded of after years of being shuffled across the world from home to home. In order to ensure her own mental stability, she pursues a new identity that will allow her to feel as though she belongs, and also move past the painful memories associated with her past identity.

When Reavey begins to reconnect with her Filipino heritage, however, her curiosity about where she came from fuels her to take on a new name, one that connects her to what she left behind in the Philippines. She feels someone telling her “ Marilyn, remember your name. Malinao, remember your story” (Reavey 46), a reminder of the child she was in the Philippines. When reflecting on her mother’s last name, she explains that Malinao is the name of a plant that disappeared after American colonization, and that she doesn’t want to disappear. In a desire to survive and not be replaced by an American replication of herself, perhaps a girl named Amanda, one who says “ yes, yes. I feel it too” (Reavey 44) when asked if she can feel her ancestral connections to Ireland, Reavey recognizes that she needs to go back to her Filipino roots and find an identity there. In spite of this, Marilyn is still too painful a name for her to approach. She explains that as a child, “ Every morning I would wake up and cry and cry and cry... Because that’s what Marilyn is” (Reavey 57). Her curiosity about her heritage, and the person she

could become if she reconciles the person she's become with the person she used to be, fuels her adoption of the name "Ngoho." She explains that the name "is that sudden feeling, after laying for a long time, of the earth opening up to cradle you. The way a mother would" (Reavey 110), showing a further desire to have something, even something as simple as her name, support and anchor her, when so little in her life has. Reavey grapples with the idea of being anchored, reflected in the way she moves frequently from place to place as an adult: she explains in a lengthy metaphor how bamboo trees must be planted in one place for years before they can put down roots, and only at the very end of the metaphor asks "What if I am afraid to be anchored?" (Reavey 94). The thought of staying anchored to one place is a source of conflict for her, one that she can only approach tentatively, but in order to survive as someone with multiple identities, she realizes that she needs to establish roots somewhere and explore the person she was before coming to America. Her curiosity about what will happen if she puts down roots in her Filipino heritage in the form of the name "Ngoho" enables her to survive, accommodating her multiple identities.

Throughout Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats*, Akiko navigates her own journey of survival through an abusive marriage by extracting herself from the marriage in whatever ways she can, fueled by curiosity about who she can be absent from it. She lacks the ability to make choices within a marriage that was not, in fact, orchestrated by her: it was "proposed by John's boss at the advertising agency to Akiko's boss at the manga house" (Ozeki 95).

Following her wedding, she loses control over her career - she leaves her job writing for manga and begins writing columns for magazines about

pregnancy – and her body, as her anxiety over the toxicity of her marriage leads to her developing bulimia. With her husband away in America, however, her curiosity about who she is away from him – a person with the ability to make choices for herself – strengthens her and allows her to survive. The first time she prepares lamb for her and John is the first time she’s able to eat a full meal and not immediately be sick afterwards, helping her gain some control over her body. As she recovers and removes herself from her husband, she begins to pursue other options for her life, realizing that in making her own choices, she can not only survive, but also thrive on her own. The choices she makes for herself – writing to Jane to ask her about the American meat industry, moving to America in pursuit of a different life – accommodate her relentless curiosity about a world outside of her the one she currently occupies, and protects her from John by allowing her to plan a life away from him. When she listens to Bobby Joe Creely on the bus ride to the airport, she hears the lyric “ You can’t feel no pain // you can’t heal no pain” (Ozeki 320), she remarks that “ that used to be true. It wasn’t anymore” (Ozeki 320). She may not be certain of whether she’ll stay in America permanently, or where she’ll live full time, but her desire to build a new life has pushed her out of a harmful one, into a situation where she can make her own choices and avoid pain.

Akiko’s letters to Jane and her move to America help her reconcile her repressed identity, helping her to find one that allows for a better life. In her first fax to Jane she says that “ I listen to the black lady say she never want man in her life, and all of a sudden I agree! I am so surprising that I cry!” (Ozeki 214) In engaging with new ideas about her sexuality and her true

feelings about her marriage, Akiko allows herself to construct a new identity that accommodates who she really is. She says that “ I do not know if I am Lesbian since I cannot imagine this condition” (Ozeki 214), but her curiosity about other ways of life allows her to consider this possibility for the first time. Akiko watches the tape of the My American Wife! episode featuring the lesbian couple because John forces her to watch every episode of the show, but her own curiosity is what fuels her to contemplate her sexuality and a life in which she is free to do so. Her desire to learn more pushes her on a journey to survive, because without the hope and possibility of a better future, she would remain trapped in a violent marriage that also prevents her from learning the truth of her sexuality.

While motherhood is an expectation of the marriage Akiko was forced into, her curiosity about children pushes her to forge her own, independent relationship with motherhood. Early in their marriage, John tells her that it “ was unseemly for couples to announce a pregnancy too early in a marriage, but after a year, he announced it was time to try” (Ozeki 47). Her husband is the one to dictate when they’ll have children, something that becomes impossible for her once she develops bulimia, which John blames her for. The toxicity with which John approaches pregnancy is literally destroying her from the inside out, and in order to survive and maintain some sense of physical and mental peace, Akiko is forced to create her own relationship with motherhood. As My Year of Meats progresses, she realizes that she “ wanted a child, she’d never wanted John, once she became pregnant, she wouldn’t need him ever again” (Ozeki 181), and begins to make her own decisions regarding her child and her life during (and presumably, after),

pregnancy. When she watches her baby grow she remarks on meticulous details about her growth and says that she's "full of promise" (Ozeki 317). Her realization that she does want to be a mother, at least on her own terms, and her exploration of different ways to be a mother (her fascination with the Beaudroux family and their adopted children, her interest in Lara and Dyann), allows her to take on an identity of mother, but one that allows her to leave John, forge a life for herself, reassume control over her body, and ultimately survive.

Akiko's relentless pursuit of new knowledge that could impact her identity and life helps her to survive an abusive marriage, culminating in her seeing a life path that will open to her if she leaves her husband. Similarly, Reavey's curiosity fuels her development of new identities for herself, constructed by new names and new physical locations, as she attempts to reconcile her past and present. She's driven to survive by a desire to find someplace where she fits in the world and doesn't disappear, and where she feels that she has found an anchor. Akiko's curiosity pushes her to move away from her past, but Reavey's curiosity forces her to reexamine it, painful though it may be. For Akiko, her past holds the most suffering and her future the most hope, but for Reavey, while her past holds pain, it also holds beauty, as it contains memories of a homeland she was forced to leave. Akiko's journey to survival means that she must move away from her pain, forever impacted by it, but Reavey's journey demands that she reconcile pain with beauty and create an identity that blends past and present.