



# Ocean's Unsung Heroes: Exploring the Role of Oysters as Marine Engineers and Anthropogenic Exploitation in *The Oyster Catcher* by Jo Thomas

Dr. V. Tamilselvi<sup>1</sup> & Pavithra. J<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English SF

PSGR Krishnammal College for Women (Autonomous), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu

<sup>2</sup> PG Student, Department of English SF

PSGR Krishnammal College for Women (Autonomous), Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu



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## Abstract

*The world under the sea is an intriguing and mysterious part of nature that holds accountability for multiple marine organisms and their diverse activities influencing and modifying various other activities solidifying their importance in the overall natural bio-diversity. One of the least explored marine creatures is oysters which play a significant role in regulating and balancing the marine ecosystem besides being an exotic element in the global culinary world. This essay analyses Jo Thomas's *The Oyster Catcher* illuminating the exploitation of oysters in the culinary industry and under indigenous cultural beliefs, disrupting their role as marine engineers. This analysis is further augmented by the application of niche construction theory, thereby yielding a rich tapestry of insights and illuminating novel findings. Thomas's narrative serves as a stark reminder of the essentiality of preserving these organisms from these deliberate anthropogenic activities for better and more active functioning of the marine world.*

**Keywords:** marine ecosystem, oysters, culinary world, marine engineers, human exploitation

## Introduction

The beauty of the marine world is unmatched and inexplicable and not much is explored by the people. They get acquainted with this besotting realm only through literary works, films, and documentaries. Live exploration of the activities under water and the lives of these organisms appears to be an imagination in the minds of the people who are miles away from the aquatic world. Among these interesting creatures, are the least known species called oysters which play an important role in the regulation of the ecosystem resulting in a balanced marine environment. Oyster is the common name for several different families of salt-water bivalve molluscs that live in marine or

brackish habitats. There are two important types of oysters, True Oysters and Pearl Oysters.

True oysters are edible and are consumed as food in different parts of the world, especially in island countries and coastal regions. Early humans cooked oysters by placing them on embers or heated stones until the shells popped open. They were heavily farmed for human consumption, supporting various aquaculture industries. They are harvested by picking them up from their muddy beds by dredging and then shucked from their shells. The use of oysters in the culinary industry has expanded in the shortest time, but what people fail to notice is the environmental benefits that they possess and the crucial role played



in providing habitat to other organisms, purifying water, and in multiple activities, therefore ensuring the stability of the marine ecosystem without falling prey to the human interventions. They also can maintain the water pressure and improve water clarity and purity.

Another golden characteristic feature of these organisms is that they provide habitat to other micro-organisms that are present underwater and prove to be their safe zone to grow and develop into a full organism from their early stages. The oyster shells are rich in calcium and other minerals as well. But apart from the magical benefits provided by these marine engineers, they are exploited by humans on a massive level that can pave the way for the deterioration of the environmental balance, specifically in the marine world and the need to address this issue has become of the utmost significance aligning with the 14th Sustainable Goal formulated by the United Nations – Life Below Water, that aims to protect and safeguard the marine species from natural and human threats, to guarantee the systematic functioning of the biodiversity, failing so can lead to catastrophic effects which can take a toll on all species including the humans.

This essay focuses on how oysters are found to be diminishing on a higher level due to anthropogenic exploitation as a result of their growing demands by analysing the novel *The Oyster Catcher* by Jo Thomas. Jo Thomas is a Welsh Author who writes warm escapist fiction about food, love, family, and community and is considered to be a successful contemporary writer. Her debut novel *The Oyster Catcher*, published in 2013 was a runaway bestseller in ebook and was awarded the 2014 RNA Joan Hessayon Award and the 2014 Festival of Romance Best Ebook Award. The narrative structure is presented in a compelling manner with a vivid description of the sea, oyster farms, and the coastal community offering a magnetic experience to the readers. The novel is analysed using Niche Construction Theory which was coined by Oxford biologist John Odling-Smee in 1988. Niche Construction: The Neglected Process in Evolution is a key text associated with this theory. Niche construction theory focuses on the process whereby organisms actively modify their own and each other's evolutionary niches.

General examples include the building of nests and other artifacts by animals. Modifications such as alteration of physical and chemical conditions, the creation of shade, influencing wind speed, altering natural selection pressures, and evolution by niche construction are the possible outcomes.

### **Problem Statement**

Jo Thomas's *The Oyster Catcher* explores the complex and precarious relationship between human beings and the natural world disrupting the active functioning of the organisms, raising critical questions about the ethical boundaries in exploiting these organisms for personal growth and development driven by the greedy nature of human beings to satisfy their desires disregarding the catastrophic effects that would result in the marine world. The novel presents the lives of an oyster farmer and his assistant who harvest oysters for commercial purposes by being indifferent to their ecological roles exhibited in the marine ecosystem.

The novel also encapsulates the extent to which these oysters are used by highlighting the significance of these organisms on the daily lives of the characters of the novel as it is deeply rooted in their customs and traditions for generations. Furthermore, the novel highlights the complications that arise in these farming practices, the tension between tradition and sustainability, the disregard for environmental protection, and the need for responsible aquaculture practices as the demand for oysters has led to unsustainable harvesting practices.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative literary analysis approach to examine Jo Thomas's *The Oyster Catcher*, focussing on the exploitation of oysters for culinary purposes, and also as a result of traditional beliefs, along with the interference between the human world and the natural ecosystem. The methodology involves a structured close reading of the text guided by thematic analysis to identify various elements of the interactions between the protagonist and the oysters and how these interactions benefit humans and disrupt nature. Additionally, narrative analysis is employed to explore how Thomas constructs these themes through storytelling techniques,



character development, and plot progression. This approach investigates how the author brings together the thematic analysis, moulding the reader's perception of the unfolding events within the text. Character arcs are also examined to reveal how the narrative structure reinforces the ethical questions of sustainability, ethical harvesting procedures, and the need to preserve the natural organisms for a smooth and active functioning of the marine ecosystem. This textual analysis is supplemented by a review of secondary sources, including articles and theoretical works on these topics, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the novel's thematic and ecological elements.

### Research Objectives

1. To illuminate the importance of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG-14): The 14th Sustainable goal which aims at preserving and enhancing life below water is illuminated through the crucial need to protect oysters, which are key organisms in the marine world with reference to the novel *The Oyster Catcher*
2. To highlight the ecological importance of oysters: Apart from being an exotic culinary element, oysters are known for their commendable ecological functions that include filtering impure water, providing habitat to other marine organisms, subduing marine issues, and more.
3. To propagate awareness among the public: It is essential to create awareness among the public on the presence of oysters and its environmental influence against commercial exploitation.

### Discussion

#### Oysters: The Unsung Heroes of the Marine World

The Nature Conservancy Australia has reported that "Individual oysters can filter 150 litres of water a day which is almost enough to fill a bathtub every two days". Until the mid-1800s, Sydney rock Oyster and Australian Flat Oyster reefs occurred in southern and eastern Australian bays and estuaries from Noosa in Queensland to Perth in Western Australia, including all around Tasmania. Sadly, overfishing and contamination of river waters flowing into these bays and estuaries caused the sudden decline of oyster reefs and the complete loss of the industry they served.

Though existing studies have addressed the decline of oysters due to oil spills and other environmental factors, this study addresses the decline of these animals as they are being over-harvested for use in the culinary sectors. Production of oysters for the food sector and overexploiting them to a level higher than desired is one of the primary reasons for its extinction creating an air of tension within the marine biodiversity. This is investigated in the novel *The Oyster Catcher* which interlaces the story of the protagonist Fiona Clutterbuck and the resuscitation of her life from a not-so-pleasant past through the role of working as an oyster farm assistant.

The title has a profound meaning in the novel that elevates the plot to a greater level. The oystercatcher is generally a bird, but the title also has a metaphorical take as it hints at the immoral activities done by human beings, such as looting and exploiting the oysters for commercial gains. But the bird, oystercatcher a large, conspicuous wading bird with orange-red bill, long and black and white plumage has also been a cause for depletion of oyster species on a large scale. They are found in coastal areas, including beaches, mudflats, and rocky shores, where they feed on shellfish, including oysters, mussels, and snails. Its name comes from its habit of opening oysters and other shellfish with its powerful bill. They are known for their bold and curious nature and often walk along beaches and shorelines, searching for food. Though the novel predominantly focuses on the metamorphosis of the protagonist from a fragile to a fearless woman, the least explored element is the significant role played by the oysters in the lives of the indigenous people of the island under cultural and culinary grounds, and how much these organisms are exploited on these requirements.

#### The Complexities of Oyster Farming

Oyster farming was in the past a successful venture that supported the livelihood of the residents of the nearby island. Oysters are also the major diet eaten by island residents. Oysters have been found to be rich in nutrients, low-fat protein, full of vitamin D, and vitamin B12, high in minerals, and rich in Omega-3 fatty acids. To develop, oysters do not need extra nutrients or food sources aside from what is naturally present in their water environment. For centuries, the



islanders based their livelihood on the richness of the sea. But as the years passed, the oyster farming business started losing its momentum. The oyster beds that were once plentiful started to dwindle, and the development of new oysters trickled to a halt due to commercial efforts. "Farmers were going out of business. Everyone was finding it hard. Tom blamed the Murphy brothers for their building work just down from his farm" (Thomas, 2013). Very few individuals managed to carry on the business in the traditional way and one such is Sean Thornton whose business in oysters enabled him to earn a living where Fiona was working as his assistant.

It's a precarious business, oyster farming, he says. It's not like we can call in a vet if the stock gets sick. And we can't move them into shelter if the weather gets bad. But one of our biggest problems is theft. There are the oystercatchers for starters-they're a species of birds, he explains at my puzzled look. They like to feed on my oysters. And then there's the oyster pirates. (Thomas, 2013)

Oyster farming is a delicate and challenging area of work, and the dependence of humans on these sea creatures has been many times greater than anticipated. But oysters are living organisms that need carefully controlled conditions to survive. If they are ill or injured at harvest time, they are worthless and are discarded. This not only impacts the population of oysters but also has a knock-on effect throughout the entire ecosystem. Species that depend on oysters for food, shelter, or breeding grounds are also impacted when oysters are removed from their habitats. The delicate balance of the marine ecosystem is disrupted, leaving these species vulnerable and without their natural resources. "Just a crab. You'll see a lot of them. Just pick them up and put them in the bucket" (Thomas, 2013). This also points out the existence of several crabs observed by the characters as they engage in the activity of oyster collection from water which sheds light on the vulnerability of the organisms as it lacks a safe and secure habitat which affects their development and growth.

### **The Unending Demand for Oysters**

Using the Niche Construction Theory, oysters create an environment for many organisms such as various

types of fish and other microorganisms. The crab is just one such example to illustrate the reliance of such organisms for growth and sustenance, but once the oysters are over-exploited, these organisms lose their natural habitat as well leading to redundancy in their development. If organisms are not given proper and suitable conditions to develop, it later influences the food chain that not only consists of other sea animals but also human beings because a vast majority of humans consume fish every day, especially those living in island nations and other seashore areas. The prime reason why these oysters are raised in the farms is to supply them to the food business. Vachon (2022) has pointed out a fascinating fact that oysters, similar to cheese, charcuterie, and other cold dishes, are a simple, value-added menu option for chefs and restaurant owners.

In the early 1800's, oysters were only eaten by the rich, but the increase in production by the mid-1800s made the cost come down making it less expensive to buy compared to meat, poultry, and fish. Low prices began to generate huge demand for oyster harvesting and it soon became popular among the working population as it was cheap and an inexpensive source of protein with big oyster markets like New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore providing the high demand for oysters in America, and later became popular in the culinary world. Today, it's a popular dish worldwide and people consume oyster meat as it's a lush seafood delicacy. Its popularity has also reached India and is widely available in Goa and other seafood restaurants.

Sean Thornton collects the oysters and sells them to his business partner and oyster broker Nancy Dubois who runs a new French restaurant, requiring a heavy supply of oysters. "Sean doesn't need to prove anything to anyone round here. I do the selling. Everyone's happy. I will be taking all native oysters for my restaurants. It's all sorted. They are exactly what I need to get the New Restaurant of the Year Award" (Thomas, 2013). Nancy is an intelligent and manipulative woman who exploits Sean for two reasons: to obtain the oysters since no one else can pick the best oysters except Sean, and to propel her restaurant to great heights since people like to eat flavourful oysters of high quality. Sean is also under pressure to provide large orders



and the demand for oysters also rises. As attention is provided only to harvesting these organisms for commercial purposes, the effects caused by them on the marine ecosystem are deeply ignored. One of the primary causes of ignorance is the selfish urge of humans to amass every available resource for their development and prosperity in both their personal and professional lives.

The characters of Sean and Nancy exemplify a remarkable apathy for the ecological importance of oysters, with their only aim being to source healthy specimens for business use. Ironically, they are unaware that oysters need very careful conditions, such as the very best water quality, in order to thrive and reproduce. In the meantime, the Murphys' incessant quest for financial rewards through construction operations has led to a disastrous reduction in water quality, thus eroding the very basis of oyster farming. This situation highlights the selfish nature of their wants, where they reap the advantages provided by oysters but constantly deprive themselves of good conditions to live. The activities of Nancy, Sean, and the Murphys bring to the fore the anthropocentric behaviour of exploiting natural resources without regard to the ecological consequences, thereby upsetting the delicate balance of the marine ecosystem. The general lack of awareness among the locals is another major reason for the ignorance of the ecological importance of oysters. To them, oysters are a symbol of local pride and heritage, rather than an irreplaceable component of the marine environment. As an elderly resident nostalgically remembers, "In my day, this place was the oyster capital of the world, the very best" (Thomas, 2013).

This emotional connection points to the narrow perception of the locals regarding oysters, which subsequently supports their indifference towards the environmental impacts of their activities. This happens as there is a lack of environmental consciousness amongst the population that continues to give rise to ecological issues globally. The lack of knowledge regarding the long-term consequences of human activities develops a culture of complacency in which individuals do not perceive the harmful impact of their activities on the planet.

### **Cultural and Traditional Hindrances**

One of the climactic moments in the novel is the revival of the oyster festival, a time-honoured ritual that forms the basis of the community of Dooleybridge. This overlooked holiday is revived by Fiona, who sees its rich cultural heritage and potential to reinstate the island's worldwide fame as the oyster capital of the globe. The celebration becomes the talk of the town with oysters being the major source of attraction. One of the interesting events is the shell-shucking contest, an old-time activity that has long been part of the community tradition. This cherished activity attracts broad attendance from the islanders, who keenly display their proficiency in this time honoured and respected practice. "So its official, we're bringing back the oyster festival. For real! Margaret is telling anyone who'll listen from behind the bar. It's brilliant. I mean, that's exactly what we need.". Fame, right here in Dooleybridge" (Thomas, 2013). The overjoyed feeling of Margaret reveals the deep satisfaction in restoring the oyster festival among the people as it represents the rekindling and rejoicing in their culture and tradition exhibiting the significance of oysters on a conventional level and not on an ecological level. Shell-shucking competitions are one of the prime aspects of attraction in such events.

Shell shucking, also known as oyster shucking, is the process of opening oysters and other types of shellfish to reveal the edible flesh inside. Shell shucking competitions, like the one mentioned in the novel, typically involve contestants competing to see who can shuck oysters the fastest and most efficiently. These competitions involve contestants shucking as many oysters as possible within a given time frame, with penalties for smashed shells, spilled liquor, or bruised oyster flesh. The shell shucking contest at the Dooleybridge Oyster Festival is characterized by the jaw-dropping size of the oyster collection, with a major portion being wasted in the process. The task of opening oyster shells is no small endeavour, since the hard shells, supported by the enormous pressure within, present a strong challenge. The refractory oysters that are not opened are callously discarded, either tossed on the garbage heap or tossed back into the sea, thus rendering their possible ecological contribution null and void. "The TV





company is putting up a £10000 prize for the winner of the Dooleybridge oyster festival shell shucking contest.” (Thomas, 2013). The television company’s guarantee of a big £10,000 prize for the contest winner is an extremely effective spur, mobilizing a huge and diverse crowd of people to make their way to Dooleybridge from distant locations. This rush of participants then brings about a similarly sudden demand for oysters, with the necessary result that much of these shellfish – fully half, in fact – will be made worthless, further amplifying the ecological impact of this seemingly celebratory activity. Some of the more notable oyster festivals around the world are very relevant to those described in the novel. Some of the popular oyster festivals are Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival (Ireland), Urbanna Oyster Festival (Virginia, USA), Cancale Oyster Festival (France), Narooma Oyster Festival (Australia) and more.

Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival is considered to be the world’s oldest international oyster festival and is held on the last weekend of September every year. Galway, Ireland’s west coast, is the only location in Ireland where one can obtain native flat Galway oysters in natural wild oyster beds. The festival lasts for three days with marquee events, live music, seafood trails, oyster hot spots, a masquerade winners party, and the extremely competitive World Oyster Opening Championship.

My uncle and her dad go way back, competing in shucking competitions together. I look at him blankly and he gives a little laugh. Opening oysters, he explains. It’s an art form and a sport all in one. There are competitions all over the world. You use a little knife to open them and the winner is the person who can do it the fastest and the neatest. (Thomas, 2013)

In the book, the Dooleybridge Oyster Festival is a perfect example of Niche Construction Theory in action, whereby human actions alter the environment at the expense of destroying niches that influence the evolution of local species. The harvest of the huge oysters during the festival not only exhausts this critical resource but also hinders the marine food web, which can cause other species to dwindle since they feed or find refuge in the oysters. In addition, the wasted oyster shells add to pollution, destabilizing

the natural function of the marine world and further contributing to catastrophic effects. “We’re going to have restaurateurs and buyers from Dublin, Galway, and France. It’s going to be a very prestigious event” (Thomas, 2013). The popularity of the festival results in a surge of demand for oysters from different parts of the globe which further culminates in the excessive harvesting of the oysters leading to catastrophic effects on species living underwater which subsequently affects the species living on land. Finally, the Dooleybridge Oyster Festival is a prime example of how human niche construction can have long-term ecological implications, and the importance of sustainable practices that take into account the long-term effects of human actions on the environment.

Another important event that contributes to the findings of the study is the way oyster shells are obtained for decorative and aesthetic reasons. Typically, these shells are used extensively in a number of different decorative applications that range from mirror and frame borders, vases and centre-pieces, wreaths and garlands, mosaics and tabletops, and for various purposes. In the book, Fiona’s friend Maire gathers these shells to adorn her photo frame, and an enormous quantity of these shells are gathered to adorn the tables and chairs that were erected for individuals who visited the oyster festival. This questions the commodification of natural resources and cultural appropriation of coastal communities’ practices and traditions. These are mostly rejected by the people once they find them not very suitable for their use. “We could cover the tables in white rolls of paper and put oyster shells out with salt and pepper in” (Thomas, 2013). But most people do not realize that the oyster shells contain 95% calcium carbonate which is a calcium-rich substance, thus proving to be great source of medicinal value.

### **Oyster Shell Benefits on Poultry Birds**

The oyster shells are commonly utilized as a natural calcium source in animal feed, especially for poultry and livestock. Annie (2021) has stated that chickens’ calcium deficiency can be addressed with the addition of oyster shells in their diets. Calcium deficiency in chickens commonly caused several problems including: thin or soft eggshells, combativeness,



fracture of bones, and egg drop syndrome. But this crisis can be averted by incorporating calcium-rich oyster shells in some of their products so that the flock is provided with the nutrients they require. She also talks about a product named “Golden Graze”, a daily chicken snack that encourages quality eggs with golden yolks and Omega-3 fatty acids. It has oyster shells as the primary ingredient with other necessary products. In fact, oyster shells are a goldmine of advantages, but their worth is not being utilized to a great extent because of ignorance, and their function of habitat formation according to the niche construction theory is also not being served. Even though these shells are being exploited in plenty, they are usually discarded thoughtlessly, wasting their potential to be used for a productive cause. It is also important to mention that people such as Sean Thornton, who run a small poultry farm also do not possess this information. Through the use of the nutritional richness of these shells, Sean will be able to give the birds a high level of calcium that can drive their growth in the most wholesome manner. In a world where sustainability and its norms take precedence, we should acknowledge the real potential of these resources and find new ways to recycle them.

The most dismal aspect in the decline of such species comes through in the mode of unethical pillaging particularly the native oysters that are impossible to obtain from anywhere. “They’re lifting a dripping sack of oysters from the water with a stick. I have to stop them”. (Thomas, 2013). The perpetrators are stealing Sean’s oysters from his farm and Fiona portrays all her strength in guarding them from the undesirable individuals. The thieves steal these oysters due to their value. They are driven by the possible profit from selling the oysters, as they are a delicacy and sell well in a high price since the local residents also regard them as a major ingredient in their food. They also view the potential for selling them on the black markets or to restaurants and seafood retailers at a big profit.

### **Commercial Demands over Environmental Stability**

Oyster theft also shows the oyster farming sector’s exposure to theft and how crucial it is to protect such vulnerable resources. The oyster industry is

an important sector in coastal communities as seen in the novel, sustaining livelihoods for thousands of people. From oyster farming to harvesting, processing, and trade, the industry encompasses an intricate social web of relationships, economic exchanges, and cultural practices. It also finds a place among the ancient myths that still seem true to the people living on the coastal islands like the people in Dooleybridge. Sean, in *The Oyster Catcher*, narrates how the oysters were thought to be the food of the Gods. He also contributes the fact that;

Well, Aphrodite, Greek Goddess of love, is supposed to have sprung forth from the sea in an oyster shell and straight away gave birth to Eros. That’s the mythology behind it. And then of course Casanova was supposed to have eaten twelve dozen oysters at the start of each meal. He stands up, still talking, and goes to fetch the whiskey bottle from the kitchen. (Thomas, 2013).

These views are well-rooted in the minds of individuals and view oysters as a more resourceful factor and are also greatly admired as a staple food source as stated in the paragraphs above. The book *The Oyster Catcher* skillfully spins a story around the unsung oyster, carefully detailing its path from harvesting to market, and hauntingly pointing to its deep-seated influence over the lives of the people living in Dooleybridge.

Yet, beneath this charming facade, there is a severe issue that has gone largely unseen: the damaging environmental impact on the actions of the characters. As one reads on, it is a bitter reminder that the unchecked pursuit of cultural relevance tends to overpower environmental concerns, leading to an appalling reality that cannot be ignored. To tackle the decline of the oyster populations, sustainable measures must be implemented that not only benefit the people who are behind commercial gains but also aid in navigating the environmental issues reducing the effects of human actions thereby contributing to a healthier future. In order to promote long-term sustainable initiatives, precise and proper understanding between the human world and the natural world is unarguably vital and humans are expected to take the crucial step in acknowledging the natural functioning of each and every species on the earth.



## Conclusion

The Oyster Catcher provides a rich and complex story about oyster cultivation and the cultural and customary practices that engulf the lives of Dooleybridge characters. But under the pretext of keeping traditions alive, people turn a blind eye to environmental issues and also disrupt the functioning of organisms that hold an immense potential to subdue those issues. Oysters are an integral species that maintain the stability of the marine ecosystem and disrupting their natural potential can result in devastating effects to the marine world eventually affecting humans as well. The events that propel the narrative structure of the novel forward are the reflection of the activities prevailing in the real world where humans are driven by their commercial desires and have turned a blind eye to a harmonious and stable environment. The drastic measure that should be employed is educating people about the use of oysters and to encourage sustainable consumption. Raising awareness through media, and social campaigns can aid in promoting a better future. Chefs and food industry professionals can highlight sustainable oyster options and can educate diners about ethical seafood consumption. The ultimate motive is to continue the presence of oysters in the culinary world but in a rather sustainable approach and not interrupting their natural contributions to the balanced functioning of the marine environment.

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