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Original Research Article

"The place I like best in this world is the kitchen": Reading the Kitchenspace in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

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Abstract: Banana Yoshimoto (the pen name of Mahoko Yoshimoto, born in 1964) is a Japanese writer who, like her contemporary Haruki Murakami, is distinguished by her desire to question and problematize aspects of modern Japanese society in her fiction. Banana Yoshimoto is regarded as a representative figure in contemporary Japanese fiction, foregrounding the experiences and self-questioning of a younger generation struggling to find its place in a society torn between conservatism and the contingencies of a radical, dynamic, globalized, but at the same time, consumer culture. The elusiveness of relationships, of intimacy, of love and life, the difficulty of defining and finding happiness, and the inscrutability of one's self are some of the central themes in her writing. This paper looks at Yoshimoto's widely acclaimed novella, *Kitchen* (1987), and the manner in which Mikage Sakurai, the protagonist, manoeuvers through death, loneliness and healing to arrive at a secure sense of self. This happens through the primary metaphor of the kitchen, and the gendered associations that it elicits. At the same time, Yoshimoto's representation of this space, as well as of food in general, challenges certain stereotypes associated with these. In the process, interpersonal relationships as well as the conventional idea of family also come to be reconstituted in the novella.

Keywords: Japanese literature, Banana Yoshimoto, *Kitchen*, food and gender, the kitchen, family, the individual and society.

INTRODUCTION

Banana Yoshimoto (the pen name of Mahoko Yoshimoto, born in 1964) is a Japanese writer who, like her contemporary Haruki Murakami, is distinguished by her desire to question and problematize aspects of modern Japanese society in her fiction. Her father, Takaki Yoshimoto (who took the pen name of Ryumei), was himself a well-known writer, literary critic and intellectual, and a "leader in the radical student movement in the late 1960s" (Kuiper n.p.). She was brought up, therefore, in a much more liberating environment than most Japanese children at that time, which is reflected in her creation of unique characters who break away from normative models, like the central characters in *Kitchen*. In fact the pen name Banana Yoshimoto itself signifies this aspect since the writer herself states that she chose it because "she considered it both cute and androgynous and because of her love for banana flowers" (Kuiper n.p.). Banana Yoshimoto is regarded as a representative figure in contemporary Japanese fiction, foregrounding the experiences and self-questioning of a younger generation struggling to find its place in a society torn between conservatism and the contingencies of a radical, dynamic, globalized, but at the same time, consumer culture. Many of her protagonists are young women struggling with "loss and longing", attempting to "locate themselves in a set of relationships that undercut traditional and normative networks of support" (Buckley 581-2). The elusiveness of relationships, of intimacy, of love and life, the difficulty of defining and finding happiness, and the inscrutability of one's self are some of the central themes in her writing. This paper looks at Yoshimoto's widely acclaimed novella, *Kitchen* (1987), and the manner in which Mikage Sakurai, the protagonist, manoeuvers through death, loneliness and healing to arrive at a secure sense of self. This happens through the primary metaphor of the kitchen, and the gendered associations that it elicits. At the same time, Yoshimoto's representation of this space, as well as of food in general, challenges certain stereotypes associated

with these. In the process, interpersonal relationships as well as the conventional idea of family also come to be reconstituted in the novella, critiquing, thereby, normative notions associated with ideas of love, gender and family.

Kitchen traces the journey of a young woman, Mikage Sakurai, overwhelmed by desolation, grief and loneliness after the death of her only living family member, her grandmother, through her emotional rescue by a young man, Yuichi Tanabe (a friend of her grandmother), and his transgender mother, Eriko Tanabe, to her independent identity as an assistant in a culinary school. The novella was Yoshimoto's debut fiction and won the 6th Kaien Newcomer Writers Prize in the same year of its publication. At the time, Yoshimoto was working as a waitress at a golf club restaurant to support herself. In 1988, after her next work, *Moonlight Shadow* was published and won the 16th Izumi Kyoka Literary Prize, the two novellas were published again in a single volume. This volume launched her into the wide popularity that she still enjoys today. Yoshimoto's works, influenced as they are by Japanese popular culture, have proved to be extremely relatable not only to the contemporary Japanese reading public, but to contemporary readers across the world as well.

Attempting to account for the equally enthusiastic reception of *Kitchen* (especially among younger generations of readers) in countries other than Japan, Akiyoshi Suzuki argues that one of the possible reasons for this is that the novella:

Depicts how a generation of youth overcomes the chronic feeling of loneliness stemming from a favored warm/cool relationship with others and stands autonomously. It is taking a "cool" worldview in which each person is independent, discrete, and free to express individuality and can develop warm human relationships. It is the new Japanese way of making human connections, which is divergent from the traditional Japanese *wa* (Suzuki 15).

This way of making human connections becomes very apparent in the novella through the trajectory of the evolving bond between Mikage and Yuichi. After the death of her grandmother, Mikage feels truly alone for the first time in her life, plunging her into extreme loneliness and despair (Yoshimoto 48). The death of Eriko, Yuichi's mother, affects him in a similar way. Though the two come together in their grief, Yoshimoto highlights the necessity of both overcoming their individual encounters with loss and loneliness independent of one another. This results in a heightened awareness of their individual selves and it is only after the enunciation of their individual, autonomous selves that the indeterminate relationship between the two is allowed by the author to become a relationship of love. In all this, food and the kitchen become powerful tools through which the protagonist and narrator, Mikage recuperates her agency after her debilitating grief at her grandmother's death and her disorientation after the death of Eriko. The kitchen is the space where she feels she can survive, first, as a passive self, holding on to the warm memories attached with the large, gleaming steel refrigerator at her grandmother's house and then – through the gleaming modern kitchen of the Tanabes on to the culinary school that she joins as an assistant – as an active and independent individual. This paper, hence, explores how the relationship between food and gender is used strategically by Yoshimoto in the novella to trace this self-recovery on the part of Mikage and what its implications seem to be in the context of contemporary Japanese society.

Food and Gender

Foodways have long been a site of establishing and perpetuating, and at times, negotiating, gender differences through "beliefs and behaviors surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food" and through "the division of labor, alimentary exchanges, access to food, and the meanings surrounding eating" (Counihan 2003 105). In terms of the power politics revolving around food and foodways, however, women mostly occupy the lower rungs, as they "predominate in the lowest status, lowest paying, and most servile roles in agribusiness and the food industry as fieldworkers, waitresses, fast-food servers, and cannery and meatpacking workers" (Counihan 2003 105). Even at home, women's work and labour in the kitchen, revolving around preparing and cooking food among other food roles, are undervalued and taken for granted, as it is 'naturally' assumed to be their designated roles (Counihan 2003 106). Working women come under double the pressure since they are expected to perform their food roles in addition to their professional roles. At the same time, in many "food exchanges, men and women create meaningful relationships and demonstrate wealth and power" and "exercise influence over family members by giving or withholding food, and they contribute to establishing hierarchy in the family by allocation of delicacies" (Counihan 2003 107). In addition, the practice of eating together works to create a sense of community, as well as to initiate relationships (Counihan 2003 107).

In terms of personal power, relationships to food and foodways contributes to the awareness of self in a gendered manner, and "[m]en's and women's attitudes about their bodies, the legitimacy of their appetites, and the importance of their food work reveal whether their self-concept is validating or denigrating" (Counihan 1998 2). Women's roles in the kitchen, for example, show the ambiguity of female agency in the sense that while they seem to hold power over their households by determining the distribution of food (a commodity of value), at the same time it also points to "female subordination through women's need to serve, satisfy, and defer to others, particularly husbands or boyfriends" in most cultures (Counihan 1998 4). Such ambiguities occur in most cultures of the world, irrespective of the economic and geographical regions they belong to.

Such dynamics of power as outlined above can be found in Japanese society as well. Tomoko Aoyama states that, like in many other countries, "men's cooking was confined to the professional sphere until relatively recently, while women were, and to a large extent still are, expected to take charge of the much less glamorous, unpaid work of everyday domestic cooking" (Aoyama 172). As a result, Japanese chefs, especially prominent ones, are mostly men, while Japanese women are confined to the domestic sphere wherein they are not merely in charge of preparing meals for the household but also of making *obento*s (lunch boxes) for themselves, their children, and their husbands/partners. In fact, the artistry and variety of lunch box becomes a standard to judge the dedication and engagement of mothers in grooming successful and motivated children (Allison 2012). The term "kyoiku mama," or education mother, is an actual term "given to a mother who executes her responsibility to oversee and manage the education of her children with excessive vigor" (Allison 165-66) In Japanese society, many women have internalized this concept, and "[m]others who manage the home and children, often in virtual absence of a husband/father, are considered the factor that may make or break a child as s/he advances towards that pivotal point of the entrance examinations" (Allison 165). Such expectations from women have effectively worked to exclude women from the elite professional world of chefs; at the same time, male chefs have also consistently opposed the rise of women to positions of authority in the culinary arena (Aoyama 172). Not only is the preparation of food, but eating, speaking and writing about food, too, are influenced by gender (Aoyama 173). Aoyama argues that the representation of food in Japanese literature also reflect such contexts and that there exists distinct differences between male and female Japanese writers with regard to "pervasive gender imbalance in relation to food" (Aoyama 174). While the women in most male writers (studied by Aoyama) do not express dissent regarding this imbalance, women writers like Fumiko Hayashi, Taiko Hirabayashi, Ineko Sata and Banana Yoshimoto "allow their female narrators and characters to describe gender inequality and to express their dissent against it" (Aoyama 174).

The Tropes of Food and the Kitchen in *Kitchen*

Yoshimoto's novella starts with Mikage's assertion that "The place I like best in this world is the kitchen" (Yoshimoto 3). Mikage further qualifies this by saying that the kitchen should, ideally, be large and "well broken in" (I love even incredibly dirty kitchens to distraction") (Yoshimoto 3). Thus, at the very outset of the novella, the author seems to emphasize the gendered connections between female protagonist and the space of the kitchen. But as the narrative proceeds, we are let in on the acute loneliness that the orphaned protagonist is thrown in after the recent death of her grandmother:

When my grandmother died the other day, I was taken by surprise. My family had steadily decreased one by one as the years went by, but when it suddenly dawned on me that I was all alone, everything before my eyes seemed false. The fact that time continued to pass in the usual way in this apartment where I grew up, even though now I was here all alone, amazed me. It was total science fiction. The blackness of the cosmos (Yoshimoto 4).

In the depths of debilitating sadness, the hum of the huge steel refrigerator, well-stocked with food, becomes the centre of her consciousness, consoling her with its presence. When she enters the home of the Tanabes, it is the kitchen again that, along with the enormous sofa, captures her attention. As she explores the kitchen, she takes note of the superior quality of all its objects – the mat, the Silverstone frying pan, a German-made vegetable peeler, plates, glasses, dishes, bowls and so on. The fact that it is well-cared for and neatly organized, makes Mikage immediately fall in love with it. The kitchen motif is carried forward in the narrative through Mikage's training herself to cook like a professional in the Tanabe kitchen, and ultimately, her entry into a professional kitchen as she joins a culinary school as an assistant to a female teacher. Like the kitchen in her own home, the Tanabes' kitchen evokes a sense of belonging for Mikage on her path to financial and psychological independence:

Someday, I wondered, will I be living somewhere else and look back nostalgically on my time here? Or will I return to this same kitchen someday? (Yoshimoto 42).

This sense of belonging is further enhanced by the trope of "dream kitchens", like the one she dreams of while coming back to Yuichi and Eriko's house after clearing out her former apartment (Yoshimoto 35) or the dream of being back in the kitchen of her old apartment, cleaning it vigorously with Yuichi (Yoshimoto 36-39). Even in the culinary school, the kitchen proves to be a source of strength as she is verbally attacked by Okuno, Yuichi's classmate (Yoshimoto 70-73). The kitchen in Yoshimoto's novella, thus, becomes a space that, while associated with women, at the same time, is not totally bound by the stereotypes such an association engenders. In fact, as Aoyama argues, "[t]raditional or stereotypical gender roles and images seem to be either reversed or denied in this story" – "Mikage learns to cook not from her mother but from books, television, and her professional Sensei (female), whose gentle demeanor presents a striking contrast to the rigor of the male chefs and connoisseurs" (Aoyama 180). As Aoyama points out, none of the real and dream kitchens in the story oppress or repress the protagonist (Aoyama 180); thus the site of the kitchen in the novella is one that becomes a site for liberation and agency of the female self, as far as the protagonist is concerned. Even though this space juxtaposes (in the cooking school) the unconventional Mikage with the more conventional Kuri (characterised by her "appealing cuteness") and Nori ("a beauty of the 'proper young lady' variety") (Yoshimoto 69), the three come together in a community that bonds over cooking. It is a space that defies traditional gender expectations even as it accommodates both the conventional and the unconventional. As Fuminobu Murakami argues, "the kitchen in

Banana's novel *Kitchen* is not placed outside the frame of the house, but instead, its function in the story deconstructs, subverts, and effaces the traditional cultural ideology" (Fuminobu 60). The teacher is a rarity in the male-dominated culinary world in that she is quite famous in her profession, not only taking cooking classes, but also being involved in important television and magazine assignments (Yoshimoto 58). In contrast, the women who attend her classes come from sheltered, well-off background and are ostensibly happy, "taught, probably by caring parents, not to exceed the boundaries of their happiness regardless of what they were doing" (Yoshimoto 59). But this happiness is at the cost of their individuality and the invisible bubble where they have been nurtured by the figures of authority in their respective families, robbing them of their agency and the "real joy" that comes from being able to exercise it:

But therefore they could never know real joy….What I mean by "their happiness" is living a life untouched as much as possible by the knowledge that we are really, all of us, alone (Yoshimoto 59).

Mikage's refusal to censure these women, however, point towards the openness of the community built around the kitchen that acknowledges the validity of both the self and the other. While the kitchen space in the story is populated mostly by women (Mikage, her grandmother, her teacher, her colleagues Nori and Kuri, and the female students), it is not exclusively a female world; it is also inhabited by Yuichi and the beautiful Eriko, Yuichi's transsexual mother. However, Yuichi is portrayed as a "vulnerable young person with 'natural' tenderness" (Aoyama 180-81), while the formerly male Eriko transforms himself physically and psychologically into Yuichi's mother, becoming "body and soul a woman" and a "mother in name and fact" (Yoshimoto 52). The refusal of the inhabitants of this space to conform to stereotypical gender norms thus offers a powerful critique of the heteronormative society through the appropriation of the kitchen as the site where resistance to rigid gender roles will be played out.

Napier argues that in fantastic fiction in post-war Japanese writers, father figures or similar figures exerting some kind of controlling authority are frequently problematized (Napier 56). In many of the younger generation of Japanese writers like Yoshimoto, often, "the father is simply not there and the absent father (and often an absent mother) is a staple element" (Napier 56). In male writers who had grown up during the Second World War, like Yukio Mishima and Kenzaburo Oe, it is the mothers in particular who are often portrayed as betrayers, as "emasculators, criticizing the male until he appears to have no choice but to flee into madness or grotesque fantasy in order to escape the demands of marriage and social responsibility" (Napier 56-57). In these writers, "[w]omen in general are frequently seen as agents of entrapment or humiliation", becoming both a victim of the foreign conquerors who defeated and occupied Japan at the end of the War and an "unpleasant reminder of male powerlessness" in this "despoiled Japan" (Napier 56). However, when we look at a female writer like Yoshimoto (who is mentioned only tangentially by Napier) it is interesting to see that the gender roles assigned conventionally to the mother and the father can no longer so simply defined. In *Kitchen*, this happens through the introduction of the queer into a heteronormative idea of the family. Eriko admits to Mikage that she has not been the conventional parent to Yuichi (whether as his father or as his mother); at the same time she is never, throughout the narrative, apologetic about this, and nor does she feel guilty of her gender transformation. In fact, she asserts her transgender identity as the only one that has actually empowered her and allowed her to break free of the restraints that traditional society would have bound her with in raising her child all alone. As a transgender, Eriko is able to lay claim to a social, economic and psychological autonomy that enables her to create the sense of security and comfort (associated with the idea of a conventional family unit) in her unconventional home. Eriko in this role, also functions as a catalyst for the Mikage and Yuichi in coming to terms with the overwhelming impact of the death of the people closest to them in each of their lives. Again, crossdressing becomes one of the ways the characters (Eriko in *Kitchen* and Hiiragi (in the companion piece *Moonlight Shadow*) use as strategies for survival after the death of their loved ones. In the case of Eriko, crossdressing as a woman comes to define her reconstituted identity as Yuichi's 'mother' for the rest of her life, while in the case of Hiiragi (the brother of the protagonist's late boyfriend in *Moonlight Shadow*), dressing himself with his late girlfriend's sailor uniform is his means oh holding on to her memories till the moment of her reappearance provides a closure to his overwhelming sense of grief and loss. The fantastic in each of the two stories emanates from the female protagonist's perception, and features feminine figure as the one who will help resolve the protagonist's dilemma, in a counterchallenge to the perceived passivity of the female subject in much of twentieth-century Japanese literature.

Another aspect of the challenging of dominant subject positions in the narrative is through Mikage's deep involvement with and passion for food and cooking. Her interest in cooking is not due to "any duty or obligation, but for her own pleasure and the pleasure of her surrogate family: Yûichi and his transsexual "mother" Eriko" (Aoyama 180). Again, the kinds of food Mikage loves are common foods like katsudon, and not expensive or exotic dishes (Aoyama 180). Again, what becomes more important than rent for Eriko is the comfort of home cooking that Mikage's soupy rice brings to the Tanabe household. Food thus becomes in the novel a signifier of community and enables each of the lonely characters to establish connections with one another. Mikage's cooking practice brings the three of them in the Tanabe household together as they eat together as often as they can (Yoshimoto 57). Mikage remembers the time spent talking with her grandmother over green tea, coffee or cake before they retire for the night (Yoshimoto 20). Mikage cooks an elaborate dinner for Yuichi and herself (with Yuichi's help) in the Tanabe home immediately after learning of Eriko's

death/murder, as a way of consoling both Yuichi and herself and expressing their profound grief over Eriko's demise (Yoshimoto 62-62). Finally, towards the end of the story, Mikage dramatically brings over a dish of katsudon out of concern for Yuichi from faraway Izu, which provides the opportunity for the two of them to express their feelings for one another and start the process of healing themselves. Thus food enables the characters not merely to find a place to belong to but at the same time facilitates the nurturing of their individual selves. Tea and ramen serve as highlights in Mikage's dream of being in the kitchen at her old apartment with Yuichi, as they drink tea and clean the kitchen together. The bonds that are anticipated between the two of them in this dream are realized towards the end of the narrative through the image of the katsudon that brings the two together in reality. The kitchen, both as a space and with it association with food, serves to emphasize the increasing self-reliance of Mikage as she gradually comes to initiate the significant moments in the narrative. The kitchen is a restorative place for her that simultaneously reminds her of the past and urges her to strive forward. Scrubbing and cleaning the kitchen, putting things in order, and going about the business of cooking, and planning and preparing meals are material ways through which Mikage manoeuvres through her traumatic grief, both in her dream kitchens as well as in the very real Tanabe kitchen. As such, the kitchen constitutes a crucial element of Mikage's consciousness, a part of her soul:

Why do I love everything that has to do with kitchens so much? It's strange. Perhaps because to me a kitchen represents some distant longing engraved on my soul. As I stood there, I seemed to be making a new start; something was coming back (Yoshimoto 56).

Food and the Fantastic

Yoshimoto frequently uses elements of fantasy or the supernatural in her works in order to defamiliarize the mundanity of the real as well as to prepare the ground for the complex questions that she raises in them. Susan Napier points towards the same when she argues that the fantastic seems to become an appropriate vehicle to illuminate the complex interpersonal relationships developing in Japanese postmodern life as traditional cultural and social foundations become unstable in a post-war era:

Increasingly in the postwar period fantastic literature has been the vehicle of choice for illustrating the bitter complexities of male-female relationships. Perhaps because postmodern life contains in itself so much that would seem bizarre to traditional cultures, fantastic fiction may well be the best vehicle for its representation. The genre of realism may be simply incapable of encompassing the technological breakthroughs, social breakdowns and psychic revolutions that characterize contemporary Japan…. (Napier 58).

This element of fantasy is introduced through the dream sequence (discussed earlier) that is experienced simultaneously by Mikage and Yuichi. In the dream, Mikage sees herself cleaning the kitchen in her old apartment where she had lived with her grandmother. After clearing out the shelves she proceeds to scrub the sink while Yuichi is mopping the floor (Yoshimoto 36). As they take a break and sip tea, Yuichi suggests they go to a neighbourhood ramen stall after finishing up. When Mikage wakes up abruptly in the Tanabe home, she sees Yuichi entering the kitchen and the latter expresses a desire to eat some ramen. Upon being told by Mikage that he had said the very same thing in her dream, Yuichi is stunned as he realizes that they had the same dream; in fact they did not merely share but actually experienced the same dream together and interacted with each other within it (Yoshimoto 40). This element of the fantastic is used as a narrative ploy by Yoshimoto to underline the fact that there lies a deeper bond between the two than the circumstances at that point of the narrative indicate. The binding elements in the dream are the kitchen, tea and ramen. By foregrounding this kitchen space and placing tea and ramen two of the most ubiquitous presences in Japanese popular food culture, Yoshimoto transforms the mundane reality of the empty kitchen in the now-vacated apartment into a rich layered space that encapsulates Mikage's (as well as Yuichi's) desire to escape from the oppressive present as well as to their deeply personal nostalgia and longing. Furthermore, as has been stated earlier, this fantastic scene anticipates the latent attraction between Mikage and Yuichi who refuse, for the most part of the novella, to be reduced into two lovers playing out the dynamics of a conventional love story. Murakami argues that in the scenes where the two characters indulge in satisfying their appetites for good food (in the feast that Mikage cooks for Yuichi and herself, and the katsudon episode at the end) "the common appetite for food is used to connect the two characters' hearts and the reader witnesses a transformation of sexual desire into food desire, and feels reassured to see them beautifully, cheerfully and openly satisfying their hunger" (Murakami 60). This signals the postmodern turn in Yoshimoto wherein "characters eat together where modernists would sleep together" (Murakami 60). Thus, in *Kitchen*, Murakami argues, Yoshimoto "subverts the borderline between sexual and food desires and consequently brings out 'something else' which is neither sexual desire nor food desire" (Murakami 61).

CONCLUSION

The kitchen becomes a radical space in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, wherein traditional gender roles are subverted and exploration of a freer self is made possible. The spce opens up into alternate experiences of gender identity, but at the same time, acknowledges the intertwining nature of the traditional and the unconventional through the interactions among the central character, her grandmother, her surrogate family, her female cooking teacher, her female colleagues and the students at her culinary school. The kitchen also embodies the suppressed attraction and desires of

Yuichi and Mikage. Similarly, food metaphors in the novella also underline this attraction between the two central characters. The fantastic is yet another tool deployed by the author to explore the dynamics of this desire. Food and the kitchen also underline the individual's quest for family and community, even as they constitute a major aspect of the trajectory of the self of the protagonist and her evolving into an independent woman.

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