



Food, Kitchen and Healing in Banana Yoshimoto's Novella *Kitchen*

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Abstract:

In this paper, an attempt is made to analyse cooking and kitchen spaces as channels of healing, as portrayed in the novella *Kitchen*, by Banana Yoshimoto. Cooking food becomes the nonverbal language of expressing loneliness and rejuvenation by the characters. Roland Barthes' idea of food as a system of signs will be used to show how food expresses grief and intimacy. Georg Simmel's theory of urban alienation and the "blasé attitude" adopted by city dwellers as a defence mechanism, will be roped in to understand how the kitchen becomes a haven for the protagonists after the loss of dear ones. Michel de Certeau's theory of highlighting everyday practices as meaningful acts which aid in healing and providing comfort, will be used in the analysis. These theorists will be used to show how cooking food and the kitchen space become emotional arenas that help individuals to cope with grief and handle the alienation of modern existence. The paper begins by locating the importance of food in Japanese Literature and then moves on to the analysis of the novel. This paper highlights the act of cooking and the kitchen space as emotional anchors that can combat the loneliness of modern life and help the characters rebuild their broken lives.

Keywords: Food Studies, Cooking, Kitchen, Grief, Urban loneliness, Healing.

Food today has ceased to be merely a means of survival. Food studies have emerged as a major arena for academicians. In the book, *Food in Society: Economy, Culture and Geography* (2001), Peter Atkins writes on the genealogy of food studies by “demonstrating the rich variety of disciplinary and theoretical contexts in which food studies have flourished” (4). He traces it to the 1960s and 1970s to the French Annales school of history (1). The historical approach to the study of food flourished under historians like Sidney Mintz, Stephen Mennel, etc. who were concerned with the different patterns of food consumption in different geographical settings and phases of history (Atkins 4). Cultural and sociological approaches gained prominence in the 1990s under theorists like Mary Douglas, Claude Lévi Strauss, Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu, etc. (Atkins 6). If the functionalists worked on the “utilitarian nature of food”, the structuralists sought to understand the underlying meaning behind food habits (Atkins 5). The one thing that unites them all is providing a suitable vocabulary for chronicling those tales which can be difficult to convey otherwise. The discipline of food studies is still growing and embracing newer ways to study food and its impact on human life. The idea behind mentioning the history of food studies is to showcase how these different approaches have brought food and the different activities associated with it to the centre of academic circles. Analysing Banana Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen* is in keeping with this drift of bringing the study of food from the margins to the centre of academic research.

The main focus of this paper is to highlight how Yoshimoto uses food and cooking in her novella to help her protagonists overcome grief and move towards the journey of healing. Various theorists will be used to showcase this. Roland Barthes’ idea of food as a network of signs will be used to show how food can signify the myriad emotions of humans. Georg Simmel’s theory of the “blasé attitude” adopted by urbanites as a defence mechanism against urban loneliness will also be used. The paper transposes the idea of the “blasé attitude” to analyse how the protagonists use the kitchen space as a defence mechanism against the

loneliness brought on by the loss of dear ones. Practices like cooking, eating together, talking, etc. which Michel de Certeau has elevated to the status of meaningful activities will be used in the analysis of the novella to understand their importance in aiding the grief stricken protagonists in rebuilding their lives. The purpose of using the above mentioned theorists is to underscore how food and the kitchen space become emotional anchors that rescue individuals from the mire of grief and assist them in the path of healing. The paper starts by examining the importance of food in Japanese novels to locate *Kitchen's* place in the Japanese literary landscape, and then moves on to highlight how food takes centre stage in Yoshimoto's literary text.

The depiction of food in Japanese novels is not a recent phenomenon. In the book, *Reading Food in Modern Japanese Literature* (2008), Tomoko Aoyama writes that though references to food may be found in Japanese Literature, however:

the theme of food in Japanese Literature has been neglected in Japan for decade because food and eating have only recently began to attract serious academic attention. The historical neglect is based on disgust, on a fear of food and eating, on a view that they are feminine, embodied, impure, unclean and uncivilised...The significance of the thematic of drinking is certainly evident in both modern and classical Japanese Literature. In contrast, eating has enjoyed much less prominence for centuries. It was regarded as vulgar and unmanly to talk about food, let alone to celebrate the pleasure of eating or cooking (8).

Today, a glance at the publishing industry tells a different tale. However, Yoshimoto's novel was published decades earlier. She made her debut in the literary landscape with a text that squarely placed food at the epicentre of its narrative. Yoshimoto goes against the grain of treating the idea of food as a taboo subject to be relegated to the sidelines. The different

disciplines of food studies mentioned at the beginning of this paper have, in one way or another, highlighted the importance of food in understanding human beings and human society. Food can signify a plethora of things. It can highlight discrimination, class or caste structures, destructive passion and so on. Yoshimoto chose to focus on the healing or sanative potential of food. Instead of considering food as uncivilised and vulgar as her literary ancestors, she chose to elevate it as an antidote to human suffering.

Mahoko Yoshimoto, the author of *Kitchen*, adopted the pseudonym “Banana” because of her fondness for the banana flowers. *Kitchen* was her debut novel. The novel is divided into two parts. Part one includes the novellas *Kitchen* and *Full Moon*. They deal with the story of Mikage and Yuichi. Part two focuses on the story of Satsuki-Hitoshi and is titled *Moonlight Shadow*. The paper deals with the story of Mikage and Yuichi.

Kitchen opens with the death of Mikage’s grandmother and her attempts at coping with the loss. Mikage moves in with Yuichi and Eriko, her grandmother’s acquaintances, who help her in her journey towards healing. In the first few pages of the novel, Yoshimoto introduces the themes of loneliness and death. Talking about these themes in an interview, Yoshimoto says:

In traditional Japanese culture, death was an intimate event... Now it is completely different... People do not really know how it actually happens... But it does not change the fact that when someone loses someone they love, they go through a deeply traumatic experience. The young generation has lost the ability to communicate this experience... I think loneliness is universal, and everyone experiences it very strongly. However, I will say that Japan is changing so fast that a lot of people are being left behind without being able to cope with these changes (Doshi).

Mikage ponders over the feeling of being orphaned at a young age and being raised by her grandparents. She loses them one by one. She says, “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” (Yoshimoto 5). She was amazed that even though she was slowly spiraling towards the mire of loneliness, the world around her seemed to function in a normal way. In the “blackness of the cosmos” (Yoshimoto 5), she finds the kitchen space to be her haven. The kitchen space is similar to Georg Simmel’s idea of the “blasé attitude” adopted by people in the metropolis. In his essay, “Metropolis and Mental Life”, Georg Simmel talks about how the mad pursuit of money in the city reduces the quality of life and pushes people towards loneliness and alienation (Simmel 13). He says, “The modern mind has become more and more a calculating one...it has been money economy which has thus filled the daily life of so many with weighing, calculating, enumerating and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms” (Simmel 13). The only way one can combat the onslaught of modern life is to develop a “blasé attitude”. The attitude involves practising emotional detachment as a sort of defence to protect individuals from the tiring pace of the metropolis. Simmel writes:

There is no Psychic phenomenon so unconditionally reserved to the city as the blasé outlook...the incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy constitutes that blasé attitude...The essence of the blasé attitude is an indifference towards the distinctions between things...the metropolis is the seat of commerce...it is also the seat of the blasé attitude...this peculiar adaptive phenomenon-the base attitude-in which the nerves reveal their final possibility of adjusting themselves to the content and form of metropolitan life by renouncing the response to them. We can see that the self-preservation of certain types of personalities is obtained at the cost of devaluing the entire objective world (Simmel 14).

Mikage finds a different coping mechanism – the kitchen. The warmth of the kitchen acts as an antidote to the emptiness she experiences after her grandmother’s death. The importance of

the kitchen space is highlighted in the very first page of the novella. It is not a state-of-the-art kitchen that we are told about. It is a kitchen which has remnants of human touch- it is messy, it has unwashed dishes and vegetable peelings on the floor. Mikage writes:

The place I like best is the kitchen. No matter where it is, no matter what kind, if it is a kitchen, if it is a place where they make food, it is fine with me. Ideally, it should be well broken in. I love an incredibly dirty kitchen to distraction – vegetable droppings all over the floor, so dirty your slippers turn black” (Yoshimoto 5).

Mikage finds that the kitchen is the only place in the entire house where she can find some solace after her grandmother’s death. It is a place where she can process her grief. It signifies human bonding. When she goes to live with the Tanabes, it is the kitchen which makes her trust them even though they are complete strangers. She says, “It was a good kitchen. I fell in love with it at first sight...whether I could trust him or whether he still had something up his sleeves...But I trusted the kitchen” (Yoshimoto 11-15).

It is the trust which convinces her to stay with Yuichi and his mother. The kitchen serves as a rejuvenating haven against the alienation of modern life. Instead of adopting Simmel’s “blasé attitude” as a protection, the novel shows that intimate spaces like the kitchen can help one process grief and nurture human bonds. At the same time, by celebrating the healing potential of a messy kitchen, Yoshimoto turns the idea of disgust associated with food on its head.

The set up of the Tanabe household is very unconventional. Eriko, Yuichi’s biological father became a woman only after his mother’s death. However, this set up does not prevent Mikage from forging a strong bond with the Tanabes. The gender identity of Eriko plays a huge role in facilitating Mikage’s healing. According to Cassandra Keller, “Gender can have a significant impact on the counselling process...Studies have shown that men tend to be more task-oriented and analytical, while women often use their feelings and emotions to approach situations”

(Keller). In the novella, because of Eriko's gender transition, she can offer Mikage the support of both a male and female counsellor. Eriko engages in thought provoking conversations with Mikage, giving her the emotional support to express her thoughts. Eriko understands the importance of providing emotional support as she herself had experienced loneliness after the death of her wife, with no one to comfort her. It was also the time when thoughts of becoming a woman consumed her. Eriko says, "That may have been the first time it occurred to me that I did not like being a man" (Yoshimoto 82). The conversations serve as healing experiences for Mikage and Eriko.

At the same time, Eriko realises the importance of keeping Mikage engaged in some physical activity. Eriko understands the importance of food in Mikage's relationship with her grandmother. Right from the beginning, she keeps nudging Mikage towards cooking. Eriko says, "...instead of rent, just make us soupy rice once in a while. Yours is so much better than Yuichi's" (Yoshimoto 21). In another instance, Eriko brings a juicer home and asks Mikage to drink lots of juice. Mikage is touched by the gesture. Eriko's act of engaging Mikage in the cooking process not only aids her healing journey but also influences her decision to take up cooking as a profession.

Apart from cooking, Mikage starts doing ordinary chores in the Tanabe household. She says, "I would clean house, watch TV, bake cakes: I lived like a housewife. Little by little, light and air came into my heart. I was thrilled" (Yoshimoto 23). Michel de Certeau's idea of everyday practices as a means towards healing can be applied here. In the book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau distinguishes between strategies (the imposed laws of dominant institutions, media etc) and tactics (the ordinary ways and means by which people work around those rules) (xix). He writes that, "Many everyday practices (talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character" (de Certeau xix). In the kitchen, the ordinary act of cooking functions as a tactic. Instead of merely consuming factory-bought ready-to-eat food,

people give their own twist on recipes, putting a lot of thought and care into the process. The act of cooking:

is just as mental as it is manual. All the resources of intelligence and memory are thus mobilised. One has to organise, decide, and anticipate. One must memorise, adapt, modify, invent, combine...In cooking, one always has to calculate, both time and money...not overestimate one's own work speed...one has to evaluate in the twinkling of an eye what will be the most cost-effective in terms of price, preparation and flavour, one has to know how to improvise with panache (de Certeau et al. 200).

The kitchen becomes a space of one's own. People can have control over the kitchen. As they manipulate recipes to their liking, it restores a sense of agency and purpose to their daily lives. Using improvisation, a meaningful meal is created that suits the palates of those who consume it. Cooking then becomes a therapeutic act of nourishing not only the body but also the mind, thereby clearing the path towards healing. In the novel, Mikage writes how the simple act of cooking not only aids in healing but also helps her create a meaningful relationship with Yuichi and Eriko. She muses:

That summer, I had taught myself to cook. The sensation that my brain cells were multiplying was exhilarating...for the whole summer I went about it with a crazed enthusiasm...When I think about it, it was because of my cooking that the three of us ate together as often as we did...I tried making anything and everything...When I finally learned to correct my mistakes coolly, it was truly as if I had somehow reformed my own slapdash character (Yoshimoto 59).

That summer, in the Tanabe kitchen, Mikage heals herself. In the beginning she keeps going back to her old house. Slowly the house begins to feel like a stranger to Mikage, until she can no longer enjoy the comfort of belonging. She realises that it is time to move on. On the bus

ride back to the Tanabe household, for the first time since her grandmother's death, she cries her heart out. It is only when she spots a brightly lit kitchen that she can overcome her sadness. She says:

Looking up, I saw white steam rising in the dark, out of a brightly lit window overhead. I listened. From inside came the sound of happy voices at work, soup boiling, knives and pots and pans clanging. It was a kitchen. I was puzzled. Smiling about how I had just gone from the darkest despair to feeling wonderful (Yoshimoto 36).

Mikage has a strange dream. She finds herself at her old apartment with Yuichi. They are cleaning and singing, and suddenly Yuichi speaks of having *ramen*. When she wakes up in the morning, Yuichi speaks of making ramen for breakfast. Mikage tells him about her dream and she realises that he too had a similar dream. The surreal experience leaves her thrilled as she says, "While what had happened was utterly amazing, it did not seem so out of the ordinary, really. It was at once a miracle and the most natural thing in the world" (Yoshimoto 42). The experience makes her realise that even though her grandmother was dead, she was no longer alone in the world. The kitchen and the act of cooking would always help her connect to her grandmother. At the same time, it would help her move forward in life and create new bonds with others.

If the first half of the novel is about Yuichi being Mikage's emotional anchor, the second half sees a role reversal. Eriko dies, and Mikage who had moved out of the Tanabe house, comes back to support Yuichi. Yuichi delays telling her the news for a long time because he is unable to come to terms with Eriko's death. He feels that telling Mikage would have made it all real. He says, "You have been on my mind the whole time. That is the truth. All the time. But somehow I just could not call. I was afraid that telling you would make it all real" (Yoshimoto 51). They realise that they have become orphans and only have each other for support.

Yuichi's journey towards healing begins with a huge homemade feast prepared by Mikage. Before that, he had been surviving on instant food. Being back in the Tanabe kitchen is a therapeutic process for Mikage as well. She begins by cleaning the kitchen while musing to herself, "Why do I love everything that has to do with kitchens so much? It is 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" (Yoshimoto 57). Mikage prepares an extravagant dinner. As Mikage and Yuichi start eating, they realise that they have feelings for each other, and the only way they can heal is by being together. Yuichi tells her, "Since I have been alone in this place, I have not been eating very well...I thought maybe if I explained everything to Mikage, she will come over...at least maybe she will listen to what I have to say...But I was afraid-terribly afraid-to even hope for such happiness" (Yoshimoto 65).

According to Roland Barthes, food is:

not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies, it is a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour... Food serves as a sign not only for themes but also for situations; and this...means for a way of life that is emphasized, much more than expressed by it. To eat is a behaviour that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up and signalling other behaviour, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign. What are these other behaviours? Today, we might say all of them: activity, work, sports, effort, leisure, celebrations-each one of these situations is expressed through food (Barthes 3-6).

Barthes' theorisation can be used to understand how Yoshimoto uses food to highlight Mikage's journey from a grieving lonely individual to someone who transforms her life for the better. In the beginning, when the loss of her grandmother is quite fresh, loneliness and grief overpower Mikage. We do not see her engaging in any sort of cooking. She keeps trying to

find her grandmother in the empty kitchen. She says, “Now only the kitchen and I are left. It is just a little nicer than being all alone...Before the Tanabe’s took me in, I spent every night in the kitchen” (Yoshimoto 5). After moving in with the Tanabes, she slowly takes up cooking. At first the dishes are quite simple and aimed at comforting a grieving heart. The first dish she cooks is a simple spread of “cucumber salad and soupy rice with eggs” (Yoshimoto 18). The experience leaves her feeling grateful and nostalgic. She reminisces, “In the joy of being in a kitchen...I felt an immense nostalgia” (Yoshimoto 17). Gradually she is able to move past her grief. As Mikage starts to heal, the nature of her dishes becomes much more complicated. She recalls:

I bought three books on cooking...On the bus, in bed, on the sofa, I read the one on theory, memorising caloric content, temperatures and raw ingredients-it took a fair amount of work to be able to make those things...I was not afraid of burns or scars; I did not suffer from sleepless nights. Every day, I was thrilled with pleasure at the challenges tomorrow would bring...Having known such joy, there was no going back (Yoshimoto 58-60).

Cooking food reflects Mikage’s state of mind. It heals her and later allows her to become Yuichi’s emotional anchor after the death of Eriko. Yuichi is not very expressive about his emotions. Food again becomes the language of communication. Commenting on his inability to savour food, Yuichi says, “Nothing, nothing at all has any flavour for me.” (Yoshimoto 77). The statement not only reflects his inability to enjoy the taste of food after Eriko’s death but also reflects his emotional despair after the loss.

For Mikage and Yuichi, the declaration of love also begins with food. Mikage goes out of town to Izu for some work-related issues. Later at night, she goes to a restaurant and has *Katsudon*. At that moment, she feels an irresistible urge to eat it with Yuichi. She takes a taxi with a

takeout of *Katsudon* and goes to the town of Isehara, where Yuichi is staying. As they enjoy the dish, happy memories shroud them and Yuichi comments that food becomes more savoury when he is with her. Mikage replies, “Could it be that you are satisfying hunger and lust at the same time?” (Yoshimoto 100)

Two lonely souls in Japan find solace and peace with each other through food. Instead of using words, Mikage and Yuichi express their feelings through food. Eating and cooking together becomes a curative process which aids in healing trauma and the curse of loneliness in urban settings. The kitchen ceases to be a random room and operates as a space of safety and comfort. The novella shows how the kitchen space and food operate as non-verbal communication channels through which the protagonists portray grief, intimacy and healing when words fail them. The importance of the novella lies in how Yoshimoto rescues the portrayal of food in Japanese Literature from obscurity. As Japan grapples with a declining birth rate and smaller families, Yoshimoto shows how food can turn strangers into family.

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