

# Culinary Narrative: Therapeutic Artistry of Cooking in Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

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## ABSTRACT

The advent of food studies has unlocked new avenues for literary exploration to examine how the use of food metaphors and imageries represent intricate ideas and concepts in literature. Food writing has transcended nutritional considerations by accentuating on how writers have started using it to perform literary artistry. Banana Yoshimoto, a contemporary Japanese writer weaves the intricacies of quotidian culinary practices in her novella *Kitchen* through her protagonist, Mikage Sakuri who navigates grief and loss and finds solace in the act of cooking. *Kitchen*, the very title of the novella, goes beyond being a mere physical space to becoming a canvas that unravels the character's loss, coping strategies and their cultural narratives. Yoshimoto's work *Kitchen* is generally read in the light of contemporary Japanese literature focusing on identity, love, feminism and loss. This paper attempts to investigate the therapeutic potential embedded in the act of cooking through the novella's protagonist and examines how far the kitchen could be read as a female space where Sakuri exercises her autonomy. The study will be based on a hermeneutic research paradigm and adheres to a qualitative mode of enquiry. Yoshimoto savours her reader's literary palates through intricately crafting her work with evocative language and culinary symbolism. The author provides a narrative feast by exploring the effects of food and cooking on Sakuri's psyche.

**Keywords:** therapy, healing, autonomy, food, kitchen.

## 1. Introduction

With the renewed interest in food studies, there is a growing enthusiasm in exploring the multi-dimensionality of culinary culture delving in to the intricate relationship between food and human experiences. The representation of food in literature has not been merely used to emphasize the role of food in meeting the character's physiological requisites. Katz (2003) states "Feasts and food in literature, however portray more than the mere physical appetite for food and a triumph over nature in festivals" (117). Food in fiction unveils important twists and turns in a narrative by infusing an historical, emotional, cultural and a symbolic layer to it. Fitzpatrick (2012) states "when authors refer to food, they are usually telling the reader something important about narrative, plot, characterization, motives, and so on" (122). Banana Yoshimoto is a renowned contemporary Japanese writer who is celebrated for her unique voice and for her poignant exploration on themes like love, loss and complexities of modern life. "Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, a literary prize-winner and runaway bestseller in Japan, is fast-paced and determinedly upbeat" (Stephenson, 1994). Yoshimoto seamlessly blends traditional Japanese culture with a contemporary relevance through her evocative prose writing style in her work *Kitchen*.

The Novella revolves around Mikage Sakuri, an orphan who after the death of the only remaining member of her family, her grandmother is taken by Tanabe family and feels a sense of security in their kitchen space especially in the act of cooking. Yuichi Tanabe's mother Eriko is murdered in the night club by a man who finds that she was biologically a male. Grief ties both Mikage and Yuichi together and finally they fell in love with each other. The story is a blend of various themes like identity, loss, belonging and death. The novella delves in to the nuanced quotidian ritual and its transformative power to cope up with grief.

## 2. Review of Literature

Gibney M (2005) examines the themes and motifs in Yoshimoto's 'Kitchen' and argues that the writer depicting the traditional Japanese literary tropes like Noh Drama explores contemporary modern Japanese issues of family, death and sexuality. The article considers food as a source of comfort and healing through which they challenge the conventional notions of gender and family.

Afreen H.G (2018) explores Yoshimoto's two works 'Kitchen' and 'The Lake' from a cultural lens and states that the select works reflects and challenges the changes experienced by Japanese women in the modern society

by retaining the traditional Japanese culture establishing the influence of westernization. It also explores the theme of healing, love and growth through employing techniques like magical realism and vivid characterization.

Hang D & et.al (2022) talks about the hybrid narrative style in Yoshimoto's 'Kitchen' which reflects in comprehending the struggles and experiences of the characters in the contemporary modern society. The paper addresses the concept of blending traditional and postmodern values shedding light on the cultural and societal challenges faced by the characters in the novella. The study reveals that "Viewing postmodern society from a traditional perspective, Banana has created a writing style that covers many issues not only of the current era or of exclusively Japan" (7).

Sharma D (2022) analyses the representation of food and gender in Yoshimoto's 'Kitchen' and interrogates on how it challenges the stereotypes that prevail in the Japanese society. The paper focuses on kitchen as a radical space that aids the protagonist in exploring her identity and agency. It also talks about food serving as a signifier of a community and in building relationships. It throws light on contesting the heteronormative society.

Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* is generally read from feminist perspective and explores the theme of grief, love, loss. Studies have also focused on the blend of Japanese traditions and modern world in her works. But this paper interrogates on the therapeutic potential embedded in the quotidian act of cooking and how Kitchen as a female space gives the protagonist a sense of autonomy.

### 3. Research Methodology

The study is a critical investigation on Yoshimoto's Novella *Kitchen* and it adheres to a hermeneutic research paradigm. It is based on a qualitative and descriptive analysis.

### 4. Quotidian Ritual and Healing

The Protagonist of the novella, Mikage Sakuri after the loss of all her family members finds cooking as a mechanism to escape sorrow and grief. Abarca (2006) states "Cooking is a universal practice, and food is symbolically charged with social messages" (133). She finds cooking as a tangible outlet through which she maintains a sense of order from the emotional turmoil. "Cooking and eating in this house felt natural, almost too natural" (Yoshimoto,75). By engaging in the everyday act of cooking especially the routine of chopping vegetables, stirring pots and preparing recipes she finds herself engaging and escapes the bitter reality. Cooking does go beyond an escape mechanism by providing her a sense of comfort by redirecting her towards healing. Food and the very act of preparing it is not basically to meet her corporeal needs but food here is for her soul over body. Cooking for Tanabe's family is not a duty that she performs but it does give her some interpersonal connection with them. Yuichi and Eriko in the novella talks about how "Mikage has gone completely nuts, hasn't she?" And it's true that for the whole summer I went about it with a crazed enthusiasm: cooking, cooking, cooking" (Yoshimoto,58). Mikage herself accepts their comments emphasizing on her passion and obsession for cooking. It offers her solace and emotional stability. The act of producing a meal gives her a sense of autonomy to battle against her losses and vulnerabilities. The profession that she chooses adds value to the narrative trajectory. Mikage undertakes a culinary endeavour as a cooking teacher which metaphorically indicates a sense of renewal and the very act of cooking symbolically indicates nurturing and caring. "Getting the job I have now, as an assistant to a cooking teacher, was incredible" (Yoshimoto, 59). Choosing a profession out of her passion gives her a positive outlook towards her life. The mundane act of cooking did serve as a source of emotional healing in the Mikage's life of uncertainties.

### 5. Unveiling feminine Space: Kitchen and Autonomy

The very title of the novella is indicative of the space for cooking. But it does transcend the mere physical space as it reflects the character's grief, loss and personal transformation. Kitchen is generally perceived as a domestic space dealing with ordinary everyday experiences. Kitchen in Mikage's life is a sanctuary which provided her solace. "The place I like best in this world is the kitchen. No matter where it is, no matter what kind, if it's a kitchen, if it's a place where they make food, it's fine with me" (Yoshimoto,4). Mikage finds a sense of companionship in the kitchen revealing the emotional stability she gains from there "When I'm dead worn out, in a reverie, I often think that when it comes time to die, I want to breathe my last in a kitchen" (Yoshimoto,5). This establishes the significance of domestic space in a woman's life. "Now only the kitchen and I are left. It's just a little nicer than being all alone" (Yoshimoto, 5). Mikage when asked what would she want to know about a house and their people whether is it their toilet, she replies "The kitchen" (Yoshimoto,10). Mikage is found carrying out the task of cooking throughout the novella confining herself in a domestic sphere, but later she chooses a profession out of it. "Feminist food studies has looked on to the domestic sphere as a conflicted site, one that simultaneously reproduces patriarchal values and, hence, the physical, intellectual, and ideological

subordination of women and that serves as a space where women enjoy an realms” (McLean, 250). Her passion for cooking goes beyond societal expectations. Even the grandmother character, though absent is often associated with cooking and kitchen which indicates women’s relationship with food and its space. The other transgender woman character in the novella is Eriko Tanabe, the mother of Yuichi even she along with the protagonist excels in culinary art. The feminine kitchen space both adheres to the conventional norms as well challenges it when the Mikage uses the space to exercise autonomy and creativity as what Abarca (2006) calls it as a shift from ‘women’s place’ to a ‘woman’s space’ (Abarca, 23).

## 6. Conclusion

The culinary lens to Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen* transcends the traditional notion associated with food especially the nutritional or the sustenance boundaries by establishing the symbolic and transformative meaning it to. Art of cooking serves as a metaphor for connection, healing and other human experiences by elevating the emotional landscape in the novella. Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen* serves not only as a physical space but has got significant symbolic meaning attached to it. It becomes a microcosm where both joy and sorrow are intertwined. The novella also addresses the stereotypical gender norms associated to the ritualistic act of cooking but it redefines such identity through the eyes of Mikage Sakuri by giving her a sense of autonomy through it. Therefore, Kitchen becomes a realm where grief is transcended and the novella establishes the therapeutic potential embedded in the act of cooking through Mikage’s culinary endeavour. It also redefines the concept of femininity associated with kitchen space by considering it as a platform for self-expression and creativity. Yoshimoto weaves *Kitchen* with food metaphors, food memories enhancing the readers engagement with the novella.

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