

## A Room of Her Own in Banana Yoshimoto's Kitchen

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In A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf wrote that in order to have a writing life, every woman novelist requires "money and a room of her own" (4). In a very different context, the same observation applies to Mikage Sakurai, the engaging narrator of Japanese writer Banana Yoshimoto's novella *Kitchen*.<sup>1</sup> As the title and first lines of the novella make clear, the room that Mikage claims as her own is the kitchen:

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. Ideally it should be well broken in. Lots of tea towels, dry and immaculate. White tile catching the light . . .

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. Whether it's cold and I'm all alone, or somebody's there and it's warm, I'll stare death fearlessly in the eye. If it's a kitchen, I'll think, "How good." (3-4)

For Mikage, a young, single woman living in Tokyo, the kitchen functions as a metaphor for a kind of "good place"—a place of comfort and security where she can most be herself and be most at ease.

At the same time, the kitchen is also traditionally a women's sphere, where the cooking and cleaning of family life take place. This is especially true in Japan, where it is often, as Elizabeth Hanson observes, a cramped, dingy room, even in a home that is well-appointed elsewhere, reflecting the lower status of the women who spent most of their time in it (18). Hanson further argues that "Mikage herself typifies the confusion of young Japanese women, attracted as she is to kitchens as symbols of comfort and womanliness, yet trying to live independently" (18). In light of that observation, in *Kitchen* Mikage captures both aspects of womanhood that Hanson notes. She uses the various kitchens in the novel in two ways: to nurture other characters with her cooking (a symbol of comfort and womanliness), but more important, to emotionally nurture and fulfill herself (as a means to live independently). In this way she fulfills both a traditional and a cutting-edge role, forging her own identity in the context of changing women's roles in Japan.

*Kitchen* in fact is rife with the tensions that contemporary Japanese women face, and the kitchen serves metaphorically as the site of those tensions. As Sandra Buckley puts it, in Japanese culture the kitchen is not simply a room, an architectural space devoted to cooking. Instead, it is a place where "official discourse about national identity, gender, sexuality, family, and motherhood are enacted against the imaginary landscape of real and found memories and images of individual lives" (216-17).<sup>2</sup> These various roles as enacted in the kitchen play out in the various choices that young Japanese women face. Should she seek to be a career woman or a wife? Should she seek social independence or dependence on a spouse? *Kitchen* explores the varied conflicts faced by contemporary Japanese women as they try to find the appropriate models for family, career, and romantic love. The novella comes to no definite conclusions about these matters, but this is perhaps a factor in its immense popularity in Japan when it was first published in 1988. If it does not provide concrete answers about women's roles, it surely raises questions about what they should be.

As this is a relatively contemporary issue in Japan, it is notable how many reviews of the novel comment on how it draws on contemporary and especially Japanese pop culture. Yoshimoto is fond of drawing on pop culture in her works. To cite a typical example, very early in the novella, Mikage reflects on the recent death of her last living relative:

Three days after the funeral I was still in a daze. Steeped in a sadness so great I could barely cry, shuffling softly in gentle drowsiness, I pulled my futon into the deadly silent, gleaming kitchen. Wrapped in a blanket, like Linus, I slept. . . .

However! I couldn't exist like that. Reality is wonderful. . . . It was then that a miracle, a godsend, came calling one afternoon. I remember it well.

*Dingdong*. Suddenly the doorbell rang. (4-5)

The reference to American comics (Linus from the comic strip *Peanuts*) and her use of comic book words ("*dingdong*") are typical of Yoshimoto's use of pop culture, and Heather Stephenson has noted further that her writing shares stylistic elements with Japanese *manga*, some of which are evident in this brief passage: short sentences, fast pacing, and a tendency to sketch characters broadly rather than in depth (171). Other reviewers note that the novella draws heavily on pop culture in its references and settings. Hanson comments on how the novel portrays young Japanese as products of Western consumer culture; in addition to the reference to Peanuts cited above, characters eat Kentucky Fried Chicken, dig into pudding cups from the local convenience store, and fill their apartments with electronic appliances—scenes that had not been seen previously in Japanese literature (Hanson 18).<sup>3</sup> The novella's contemporary concerns are directly reflected in the very contemporary milieu in which the characters interact.

Mikage's inability to function in her grief at the novella's outset is notable as well for its connections to Japanese pop culture. Taken in by friends, Mikage reflects on the literal and emotional space in which she finds herself:

Wrapped in blankets, I thought how funny it was that tonight, too, I was sleeping next to the kitchen. I smiled to myself. But this time I wasn't lonely. Maybe I had been waiting for this. Maybe all I had been hoping for was a bed in which to be able to stop thinking, just for a little while, about what happened before and what would happen in the future. I was too sad to be able to sleep in the same bed with anyone; that would only make the sadness worse. But here was a kitchen, some plants, someone sleeping the next room, perfectly quiet . . . this was the best. This place was . . . the best. (16)

Timothy Craig's study of Japanese pop culture enumerates some of its qualities that are strongly present in this passage and the novella as a whole: its strong strain of "idealism, innocence, and what the Japanese call *roman* (from the word 'romance'): dreams, daring adventures, striving to achieve great things." Mikage may not be striving to achieve great things yet in the novella (that will come later), but her attitude reflects Craig's observation that Japanese pop culture is close to the lives of the people, often featuring flawed, hapless characters whose actions more closely mirror the actions of their readers, thus allowing for identification with them (13). All of these qualities apply extremely well to Mikage in *Kitchen* and indeed apply equally well to Yoshimoto herself, who presently stands somewhat outside the Japanese literary tradition. She was only 24 when the novel was published in Japan to acclaim and enormous sales. From a literary standpoint, she stands alone much as Mikage does: forging her own place *within* but not necessarily *of* the standard Japanese tradition.<sup>4</sup>

Forging one's own place, being alone, and dealing with loneliness are in fact essential themes in the novel. This is worthy of attention, given that the novel is set in a culture where values such as very tight social organizations and strong family ties take primacy, as Paul Varley notes (349).<sup>5</sup> This is certainly the case with *Kitchen*. At the novella's beginning, Mikage's only living relative, her grandmother, has just died (her parents died much earlier when she was a child), so that she is left without any family and forced to move out of the Tokyo apartment that they shared. Throughout the novella, Mikage reflects on her life situation and in turns comments on the essential human

loneliness. The extreme grief that overtakes her life upon her grandmother's death leaves her incapable to making any kind of decisions about what she will do in the long term. This perhaps reflects the usual group-centered norms under which the Japanese are usually socialized. As Sumiko Iwao writes in her sociological study of Japanese women, these norms emphasize putting the needs of a group over the needs of an individual, and because of this, many Japanese women (and men) find themselves incapable of making decisions when they reach adulthood (8-9).

Now that she is entirely alone, Mikage seems to be incapable to making any long-term decisions. Indeed, Yoshimoto carefully presents Mikage as someone who has had very little family socialization. Her relationship with her grandmother is portrayed as more sisterly than generational. "We would spend a little time together before bed, sometimes drinking coffee, sometimes green tea, eating cake and watching TV. In my grandmother's room, which hadn't changed since I was littler, we would tell each other silly gossip, talk about TV stars or what had happened that day," she writes (20), but there is no evidence in the novella that her grandmother functions as a parental figure. In any event, Mikage is already acutely aware of her own loneliness: ". . . I can't help thinking that deep down I was always, at all times, afraid: 'Grandma's going to die'" (20), leaving her to fend for herself.

Thus Mikage's complete inability to function after her grandmother's death may reflect Japanese social realities as much as her grief. Seeking to assuage her grief, she takes to sleeping in her apartment's kitchen for comfort: "The hum of the refrigerator kept me from thinking of my loneliness. There, the long night came on perfect peace, and morning came. But . . . I just wanted to sleep under the stars. I wanted to wake up in the morning light. Aside from that, I just drifted, listless" (4-5). She elaborates a little later in the novella:

No matter how dreamlike a love I have found myself in, no matter how delightfully drunk I have been, in my heart I was always aware that my family consisted of only one other person. . . .

When was it I realized that, on this truly dark and solitary path we all walk, the only way we can light is our own? Although I was raised with love, I was always lonely. (20-21)

Given the highly communal nature of Japanese society, this consistent emphasis on one's essential solitude is unusual. Mikage's relationships with other characters do not detract from her consistent realization that she is—and, by extension, we are—all essentially alone. As she puts it, "Someday, without fail, everyone will disappear, scattered into the blackness of time. I've always lived with that knowledge rooted in my being . . ." (21).

In his review of the novella, Ian Buruma writes that Yoshimoto draws on two key themes prevalent in classical Japanese literature (and also found in contemporary Japanese comics aimed at girls): *kanashimi* (sadness) and *natsukashisa* (nostalgia) (29-30). This is particularly true in how she writes about Mikage's relationship with her grandmother, which is portrayed as deeply fond and even nostalgic (importantly, her grandmother's room has not changed over the years), even while sadness and even fear of loneliness are never dismissed. Thus in *Kitchen* classical Japanese aesthetics meet the world of contemporary Japanese girls' comics.

Because Mikage is extremely unsure about her future, she at first operates in the kind of indecisive holding pattern that Iwao describes. Seemingly on a whim, she moves in with her acquaintance Yuichi Tanabe and his glamorous mother Eriko, who invite her to stay with them while she figures out what she will do with her long-term living situation. They become in effect the surrogate family that she has never had. Yuichi's invitation to live with them is serendipitous and appears completely unplanned. He says simply, "I was talking to my mother, and we were thinking you ought to come to our house for a while" (6). Eriko, on the morning of Mikage's first stay-over, says, "I want you to stay here as long as you like. You're a good kid, and having you here truly makes me happy. I understand what it's like to be hurt and have nowhere to go" (19).

Yoshimoto gives no further explanation as to why Mikage should be living there, and she herself does not question it either. She says simply, "To be frank, I was only going because they asked me. I didn't think about it beyond that" (8). Many episodes in the novella's plot are presented as being as casually serendipitous as this, in part because Mikage in her grief seems initially unable to instigate anything. Rather than making things happen in her own interest, things happen *to* her. This trait is also culturally consistent. Iwao has noted in her study of Japanese women that their value system—indeed, the Japanese value system in general—is reactive and nonconfrontational, arguing that "Pragmatism, rather than principles, guides their behavior" (8). Reacting is certainly consistent with Mikage, at least initially. In all fairness, however, Mikage avoids making decisions because she is overwhelmed with grief; thus Yoshimoto takes a Japanese cultural trait and gives it a plausible emotional motivation, while not discounting it as a cultural trait.

However, pragmatism ultimately serves Mikage well. Iwao writes that ". . . the pragmatic approach allows

Japanese women to adapt themselves in the more appropriate or advantageous manner to the situation at hand” (9). Once she is in the Tanabe home, Mikage immediately is drawn to the kitchen: “There were things with special uses, like . . . porcelain bowls, *gratin* dishes, gigantic platters, two beer steins. Somehow it was all very satisfying. . . . It was a good kitchen. I fell in love with it at first sight” (10). She immediately takes advantage of the situation and begins cooking and cleaning for Yuichi and Eriko as a means to assuage her grief.

In this setting, Mikage can begin to not only function but function well, thus beginning the healing process following the loss of the last of her biological family. But she also must be given the opportunity to do so, as she does not instigate the process herself. If anybody is truly an instigator in the novel, it is Eriko, who, unlike Mikage, *makes* things happen, such as inviting Mikage into the Tanabe household. If one could argue that this might be unusual for a Japanese woman, the novella makes it clear that she is a most unusual Japanese woman. Eriko is not only Yuichi’s mother, but was formerly his father. We are told that after his (Eriko’s) wife died, he decided that he was really a woman, and underwent the surgery to become one. We find out as well that Eriko is a very shrewd businesswoman and now partly owns a bar that she bought with her savings following her spouse’s death. Yuichi explains this to Mikage:

“After my real mother died, Eriko quit her job, gathered me up, and asked herself, ‘What do I want to do now?’ What she decided was, ‘Become a woman.’ She knew she’d never love anybody else. She says that before she became a woman she was very shy. Because she hates to do things halfway, she had everything ‘done,’ from her face to her whatever, and with the money she had left over she bought the nightclub. She raised me a woman alone, as it were.” (14)

Reviewers have especially commented on Eriko as an example of the novel’s connections with contemporary pop culture and of its whimsy. Buruma astutely argues that “the kitchen is to Mikage what drag is to Eriko: a refuge from loneliness after the death of a loved one” (29), and Deborah Garrison writes that in the novella Eriko’s sex change “is a piece of superfluous inventiveness on the author’s part; it lends everything around it an air of cheerful unreality that mirrors Mikage’s state of mind” (110). Both reviewers correctly note the connections between Eriko and Mikage, but to simply read Eriko in terms of “cheerful unreality” is to misread her character. While the character’s sex change may be whimsy on Yoshimoto’s part, there is more to her than that. She is an instigator precisely because she is a man *and* a woman. She sums up the strong decision-making power that Japanese men have in the business world outside the home, though she is a successful *businesswoman* (importantly, Yoshimoto tells us nothing about her career when she was a male). This strength is coupled with the arguably even stronger decision-making power that Japanese women traditionally wield *within* the home. This is a model which Mikage learns to emulate as the novella progresses.

Iwao observes that for all their perceived passivity, Japanese women have a number of choices in organizing their adult lives. They may choose to be single, married, childless, and may work full- or part-time. Men, on the other hand, have a far narrower framework in which to function, their options being largely confined to work. Iwao argues that women thus found themselves in this position in the early 1990s because they were traditionally outside the corporate framework, with no need to necessarily fit in; thus women’s lives tend more toward creativity and self-fulfillment, whereas men remain confined to hierarchical “codes” that are limited to the business world (6-7). Eriko manages to be both a model of male and female strength, bridging the world of professional males in the workplace and nurturing females within the home by taking on a career that allows her financial success and the care of others by working as a host(ess), the owner of a bar. Mikage in turn follows her lead and bridges these same worlds, though in a different way.

She does so by embracing her role in the kitchen, both as her place of solace (a traditionally female role) and as her career (a traditionally male role). In the kitchen, Mikage focuses on the needs and care of others, but importantly does so to take care of herself. Eriko’s importance to the novella, then, is that not only is she the only character who understands these two needs, but she also offers a model as to how it may be done. In one of the most important exchanges in the novel, shortly before her sudden death, she tells Mikage:

“Because I have a lot of faith in you, I suddenly feel I ought to tell you something. I learned it raising Yuichi. There are many, many difficult times, god knows. If a person wants to stand on her

own two feet, I recommend undertaking the care and feeding of something. It could be children, it could be houseplants, you know? By doing that you come to understand your own limitations. That's where it starts." (41)

In other words, the care of others is ultimately self-serving, a means to understand one's own limits and one's strengths.

How well Mikage learns this lesson is the subject of the second half of the novella. After Eriko's sudden death, Mikage has moved onto her own life and apartment and has taken up cooking as a vocation. She has spent a great deal of time cooking for Yuichi and Eriko, lands a job as an assistant to a chef, and learns cooking from the ground up.

In the context of the novella, the appeal of cooking is not hard to understand. First, it is a pleasure in itself that allows for personal fulfillment. Iwao notes that many Japanese women, in another example of their pragmatism, choose careers or lives that allow for personal fulfillment instead of success in the business world, with its extraordinary stress, extremely long hours, and alienation from the family (15). Again, Mikage resolves the tension between these two models of success by settling on a career that allows her both business success *and* personal fulfillment.

Second, whatever chaos one's life may be, one still has to eat and then clean the kitchen, and doing so makes the kitchen manageable and controllable. A good cook wields enormous control; in fact, good cooking depends on control. Mikage extends this control in the kitchen to control over her own life. In another important passage from the novel, she explains:

Complicated omelets, beautifully shaped vegetables cooked in broth, tempura—it took a fair amount of work to be able to make those things. Because my biggest flaw is lack of precision, it didn't occur to me that dishes turn out badly or well in proportion to one's attention to detail. . . .

There was only one way to learn: I tried making anything and everything, and I tried to do it right. I would carefully wipe out the bowls, replace the caps on the spices every time, calmly chart out the steps in advance, and when I began to make myself crazy with irritation I would stop what I was doing and take a few deep breaths. At first my impatience would lead me to the brink of despair, but when I finally learned to correct my mistakes coolly, it was truly as if I had somehow reformed my own slapdash character. (57-58)

Finally, Mikage sees learning to cook as a means for self-improvement, another popular theme in Japanese pop culture. Timothy Craig writes that in any number of *manga*, *anime*, and TV dramas, work occupies a central place in people's lives that goes far beyond merely making money. Work, rather, gives meaning to life, and that includes mastering with devotion the skill set connected to a particular job. In addition, the balancing of career and family has become another important issue in contemporary pop culture (14)—all issues that obviously apply to *Kitchen*.

Even more relevant to the novella, Craig further argues that the struggle to succeed in the face of adversity is also a common theme in Japanese pop culture, though achieving success is often less important than the lesson learned in the process: "Particular emphasis is placed on mental or spiritual strength: patience, focus, perseverance, and pureness of intention" (15). This is clearly Mikage's model in that she sees that the happiness that she gets from cooking not only assuages her grief but also serves a "pureness of intention," by placing that grief into a larger perspective. Cooking, then, goes far beyond learning a skill set. For Mikage, it has a deeply serious, moral import as well. In another important passage from the novella, Mikage speaks of the women who attended classes at the cooking school where she works. Two of them, Kuri and Nori, who came to work at the kitchen after graduating from the same university, are thus summed up:

Kuri's sunny disposition lent her an appealing cuteness, and Nori was a beauty of the "proper young lady" variety. Their clothes were always in the best of taste, the kind that you can't help but stare at. They were even-tempered, considerate, and patient. Of their type—that is, young ladies of a good family, hardly a rarity in the culinary world—they were the genuine article. (69).

They are in fact typical young Japanese women who work part-time but ultimately plan on marriage rather than a career, the kind that Patricia Morley has studied. Morley notes that the period between leaving university and getting married may be the freest for young Japanese women in that they are able to pursue their own interests. Though marriage is a social expectation for both Japanese men and women, women are expected to transfer their dependence to their husbands' family when they marry. The lower-level work that many women take on before marriage in Japan in this time may be tedious and unfulfilling, but it also allows them to pursue their own interests in their free time (71).<sup>6</sup>

These women of which Mikage speaks may be good examples of the *shōjo* in Japanese culture about which John Whittier Treat has written. "*Shōjo*" is a word that has no direct English translation. Though often referring to young women, it can also refer to young men and, according to Treat, is a kind of in-between gender: ". . . In Japan, one might argue that the *shōjo* constitute their own gender, neither male nor female but rather something importantly detached from the productive economy of heterosexual reproduction"—and in fact detached from the capitalist economy as well, instead devoted to self rather than to either marriage or career (282-83). Though one might argue that Mikage is also an example of a *shōjo*, the novella suggests that she is not because she takes a very different path, devoted to self in a fundamentally different way.<sup>7</sup> Mikage herself notes her differences from women such as Kuri and Nori, despite her fondness for them (69), and she further observes in another important passage from the novella that though her contemporaries in the cooking class live their lives happily, they were taught "not to exceed the boundaries of their happiness regardless of what they were doing. Therefore they could never know real joy." Mikage wisely does not judge them, but does insist that that is not her way:

Which is better? Who can say? Everyone lives the way she knows best. What I mean by "their happiness" is living a life untouched as possible by the knowledge that we are really, all of us, alone. That's not a bad thing. Dressed in their aprons, their smiling faces like flowers, learning to cook, absorbed in their little troubles and perplexities, they fall in love and marry. I think that's great. I wouldn't mind that kind of life. Me, when I'm utterly exhausted by it all, when my skin breaks out, on those lonely evenings when I call my friends again and again and nobody's home, then I despise my own life—my birth, my upbringing, everything. I feel only regret for the whole thing.

But—that one summer of bliss. In that kitchen. . . .

No matter what, I want to continue living with the awareness that I will die. Without that, I am not alive. That is what makes the life I have now possible. (59-60)

Here cooking has gone far beyond sustenance, potential career, or, as it is for the women in her cooking class, a kind of consumerist "holding pattern" before the inevitable marriage. It instead becomes the means by which she becomes fully her self and enters into her own life as deeply as possible. Thus passages in the novel that seem whimsical are not but are rather deeply serious. For example, Mikage can say sincerely and without the least bit of irony that she would "make carrot cakes that included a bit of my soul" and in the supermarket "stare at a bright red tomato, loving it for dear life. Having known such joy, there was no going back" (59).

Mikage has in fact resolved what Nancy Rosenberger reads as a developing and unresolved tension for young Japanese women: finding a way to live fully for the self. In her study, Rosenberger writes that the 1990s gave Japanese women an expanded sense of freedom through their larger choices in leisure and work, though always constrained by the context of their families (which expect marriage), their companies (which funnel women into lower-level, lower paying positions), and cultural expectations. With this expanded sense of freedom, however, many young women in Japan are asserting their right to live for the self, that is, to resolve the conflict between cultural expectations and personal aspirations. As Rosenberger puts it, they seek “a way of life that ties with tomorrow and probes deeply into what my self can do and ought to do” (211-12).<sup>8</sup> Mikage’s vocation in the kitchen does just that. Japanese cultural expectations may place women in the kitchen, but the novella asserts repeatedly that it is exactly where she wants to and even needs to be.

Finally, cooking plays an important role in the development of the relationship between Yuichi and Mikage following Eriko’s death. When he finally informs her of his mother’s death, she again comes to the apartment and they decide to fix a professional dinner. Cleaning the kitchen in the Tanabe household helps her deal with the tragedy:

After a long absence I was once again in the Tanabe kitchen. For an instant I had a vision of Eriko’s smiling face, and my heart turned over. I felt an urge to get moving. It looked to me like the kitchen had not been used in quite a while. It was somewhat dirty and dark. I began to clean. . . . 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. (56)

Near its end, both characters dance around the issue of their increasing intimacy, which is ironically based on their shared grief over the deaths of those closest to them. Perhaps as a means to sort their feelings out, they both choose to leave Tokyo temporarily—Mikage on a junket for her famous chef employer, and Yuichi just to be alone with his feelings (for Mikage?).

On the last evening of her trip, Mikage, after a week of rich and expensive gourmet food, orders a simple dish of *katsudon* in a plain restaurant. She impulsively calls Yuichi, who is starving. (Mikage notes that since she left the Tanabe household, Yuichi has been eating very poorly.) Out of the blue, she has a premonition. Rather than tell him that she is about to eat pork and rice—“It seemed like the worst kind of treachery” (91)—she suddenly understands their relationship.

At that moment I had a thrillingly sharp intuition. I knew as if I held it in my hands: In the gloom of death that surrounded the two of us, we were just at the point of approaching and negotiating a gentle curve. If we bypassed it, we would split off into different directions. In that case we would forever remain just friends.

I knew it. I knew it with absolute certainty. (91)

It is not clear exactly what Mikage knows (and Yoshimoto does not elaborate), but impulsively she calls a taxi to take her the hour’s drive to where he is staying and share the *katsudon* with him.

You may say it’s because I was starving, but remember, this is my profession. This *katsudon*, encountered almost by accident, was made with unusual skill, I must say. Good quality meat, excellent broth, the eggs and onions handled beautifully, the rice with just the right degree of

firmness to hold up in the broth—it was flawless. Then I remembered having heard *Sensei* mention this place: “It’s a pity we won’t have time for it,” she had said. What luck! And then I thought, ah, if only Yuichi were here. I impulsively said to the counterman, “Can this be made to go? Would you make me another one, please?” (92-93)

The first line of this quote deserves attention. “This is my profession” means her skill as a professional cook, of course, but it also refers to her nurturing of others by bringing the *katsudan* to Yuichi, again showing how she bridges both male and female roles, following Eriko’s model.

A highly comic scene follows in which she arrives at his hotel and has no idea how to find him, as it is well after midnight and the doors are closed. She manages to climb up onto the roof—again, on a premonition that she knows what room he is in—finds him, shares the meal with him, and then returns to her place.

Though it seems that romance may be blooming between Mikage and Yuichi, Yoshimoto never clarifies this, and the nature of their relationship is left an open question. Reviewers are accordingly divided on how to read the end of the novella. Some critics assume that Mikage and Yuichi have become lovers, while others observe correctly that sex itself, like real parents and siblings, is conspicuously absent in *Kitchen*.<sup>9</sup> Varley, for example, writes that the romantic relationship in the novel, if it can be called that, does not seem to be one. The novella’s close suggests that they are to be together, though the novella emphasizes death, loss, and loneliness instead, and the characters seem to settle for companionship (350).

Certainly one could argue that Mikage’s expertise in the kitchen provides her with a surrogate “family” so that she has no need to pursue a romantic relationship. Rebecca Copeland and Esperanza Ramirez-Christiansen’s study *The Father-Daughter Plot* is not directly applicable to *Kitchen*, but is relevant in its examination of the patriarchal systems in which Japanese daughters function, especially in relation to their fathers and families. Though this is less of an issue for Mikage because, as an orphan, she operates outside that structure, in discussing the classic *The Tale of Genji* the authors nonetheless note that “this work’s durability has more to do with how the fatherless daughters manage to improve their lives by exercise of their abilities in poetry, music, calligraphy—their mastery of the aesthetic symbolic order, certainly—and above all through the prudent management of the complex relationships within the constricted space of a strictly rank-governed society”—a trend that the authors find in modern women’s narratives as well (5-6). Since Mikage is not simply fatherless but “family-less,” one could well argue that she improves her life in the same way by mastering the kitchen, fulfilling a need for usefulness that is not provided by a family structure while prudently managing her social relationships—to the point of perhaps precluding any need for them altogether. If Mikage and Yuichi do not become lovers, perhaps it is because with Mikage’s skill in the kitchen, she has no need for them to do so.

Instead, food itself serves as a substitute for sex. Treat’s observation that the *shōjo* functions in a world in which sex is downplayed (282-83) is relevant here, and one might argue that Mikage is an example of the *shōjo* for this reason. However, Mikage’s character transcends this somewhat shallow archetype, and furthermore Yoshimoto does not ignore sex entirely in the novella. Shortly after Eriko’s death after Mikage has moved out, Yuichi invites her to move back into his apartment. Mikage asks him, “If I were to live here with you, would it be as your lover? Or as your friend?” Yuichi’s answer is telling: “I myself don’t even know. . . . Right now I can’t think. What do you mean in my life? How am I myself changing? How will my life be different from before? I don’t have a clue about any of that. I try to think about it, but with the kind of worthless thoughts I’m having in the state I’m in, I can’t decide anything” (65). This dancing around the subject of sex is in keeping with the characters’ consistent inability to make decisions while overwhelmed with grief.

Yoshimoto instead transfers sexual desire to food, alluding to sex again in a brief exchange while Yuichi and Mikage eat the *katsudan* at the end of the novella. Yuichi asks Mikage why everything he eats with her is so delicious, to which she responds, “Could it be that you’re satisfying hunger and lust at the same time?” (100). Ann Sherif notes that “. . . their [Mikage and Yuichi’s] love remains on a platonic level, though the sensuality of food and its consumption take on an erotic dimension” (257). With Mikage’s skill in the kitchen and her obvious delight in eating food (and having others eat it), any kind of love relationship, sexual or platonic, may be beside the point.

This may be why the novella’s conclusion is ironically inconclusive. In *Kitchen*’s final lines, we are not told much beyond this: Yuichi calls her, tells her that he has returned to Tokyo, and that he will pick her up at the station on her arrival the next day. Do they live happily ever after? Yoshimoto does not say, and that well may be the point. In a culture where marriage is the primary goal for many young women, especially by the age of 25, this ending may not be entirely satisfying for many. Yet for millions of Japanese readers, we may assume that it was. *Kitchen* was a



massive bestseller in Japan. The novella clearly satisfied *something* in its readers: a yearning for self-fulfillment, perhaps, an understanding of the true nature of grief and loneliness, both of which seem for Mikage to take precedence over any potential relationship with Yuichi.<sup>10</sup> In her review of the novel, Garrison rightly is of the opinion that Yoshimoto can't make the issue of the relationship nearly as compelling as that of the "perfectly achieved completeness of Mikage taken by herself" (110). And *that* may be the point. Rather than fulfilling the traditional expectations for young Japanese women, Mikage claims the kitchen as a room of her

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#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I follow the practice of most (English-speaking) reviewers and critics in writing the author's name according to the Western tradition of name order. In Japan, of course, the family name comes first. In the Japanese tradition, the author would properly be referred to as Yoshimoto Banana and her protagonist as Sakurai Mikage.

<sup>2</sup> See her article "Sexing the Kitchen," especially 215-17 and 238-40 in relation to *Kitchen*.

<sup>3</sup> See also Albert Howard Carter III, who notes the novel's mix of Japanese and international cultures, including "takeout food, backpacks, warmup suits, *Bewitched* on TV, computer games, and an international range of cooking" (614-15). The unsigned review of the novella in *The Economist* also notes that the novella alludes to various Japanese beliefs and customs, though it is in essence a Western love story (92).

<sup>4</sup> Ann Sherif nicely captures the extremely mixed reaction to Yoshimoto's success among the Japanese literary establishment. The reasons for her popularity are equally the reasons for her unpopularity: "her nonchalant approach to provocative subjects"; "comforting and upbeat spiritual

solutions or means of emotional healing”; an easy-to-read, even lyrical prose style; and the influence of *manga*, popular culture, and pulp fiction in her works (258-59).

<sup>5</sup> Varley continues, noting that in all of Yoshimoto’s fiction, death is a frequent theme and that characters wander directionless in their lives, often hoping for love while fearing that they will not find it and that their ultimate lot is one of endless loneliness (349).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Morley notes that a sizeable consumer market has sprung up in response to this market niche. Young Japanese women travel, shop, play tennis, take English lessons, and learn flower arranging (71). In Yoshimoto’s novella, Kuri and Nori learn to cook—here, excellent preparation for running the eventual household.

<sup>7</sup> Treat seems to agree with this assessment in reading Yoshimoto’s fiction in general, arguing in his article that he seeks to read her work “as a phenomenon that on one level seems to celebrate the ‘lifestyles’ Japanese are encouraged to lead under its present and not wholly consistent consumer-capitalist logic, yet on another level allows for an assessment of, and even resistance to, those same lifestyles” (284). This is arguably what Mikage does in *Kitchen*.

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion, see her chapter “Selves Centered on Self,” 182-213.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Albert Howard Carter III assumes a love relationship, writing that in the novel’s conclusion, Mikage takes the *katsudon* 100 miles to her mourning friend, who we are to assume becomes her lover (613-14). Likewise, Heather Stephenson also assumes a budding romance between Mikage and Yuichi that provides sustenance, both literal and figurative, for each other at the novel’s conclusion (171). For the opposing view, see Buruma 29; Varley 350.

<sup>10</sup> The unsigned review in *The Economist* also suggested that *Kitchen* was immensely popular in part as a reaction against the nostalgic pessimism of so many postwar Japanese novels, asking: “Has the Yukio Mishima school of writers lost its power to enthrall?” (93). I would agree that even with its emphasis on death and loneliness, *Kitchen* is essentially an optimistic novel.