

The Portrayal of Culture in Banana Yashimoto's Novels *The Kitchen* and *The Lake*

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Abstract : My research is based on Japan's contemporary period novelist Banana Yoshimoto's *The Kitchen* and *The Lake*. Japan's modern period begins with the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and continuing through to the present. In the Japanese system of dating, modern period encompasses the Meiji Period (1868-1912), Taisho Period (1912-26), the Showa Period (1926-89), and the Heisei Period (began 1989). Modernity for Japan has been a process of seeking definition in its cultural and political relationships with other nations, both Asian and Western, Japan's intensions toward the West during the Meiji period can be described as a attempt to achieve Western industrial standards and to absorb Western culture. The short novel *Kitchen* is set in 1980s urban Japan. It has many influences from Japanese culture and society from Yashimoto's time period. The original Japanese novel was published in 1988. This is one of the most famous Japanese postmodern novels. *Kitchen* is critically recognized as an example of contemporary Japanese literature. Yashimoto's characters in *The Lake* seek relief in humble comforts of the body in order to shield themselves from an abiding darkness, and Yashimoto approaches their struggles, loneliness, nostalgia, grief with tenderness. Her fiction is full of actual orphans, haunted by the ghosts of their parents. She takes as a theme the power of family. Yashimoto's style is noticeably influenced by Western writers and authors. She has stated herself that her writing is influenced by American writers.

Index Terms - Culture, Contemporary Period, Modernity, Kitchen, Lake

I. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

II. Banana Yoshimoto is the pen name of Japanese writer Mohoko Yoshimoto. Her father is the famous poet and critic Takaaki Yoshioto. Her debut work, *Kitchen* (1988), had over 60 printings in Japan alone. It received the 39th Recommendation by the Minister of Education for Best Newcomer Artist. Her works include 12 novels and seven collections of essays which have together sold over six million copies worldwide. The short novel *The Lake* (2005) deals with grief, death and fear during an intense romance. Her themes include love and friendship, the power of home and family, and effect of loss on the human spirit. Her major themes in works are the exhaustion of young Japanese in contemporary Japan, and the way in which terrible experiences shape a person's life. Her important works are *Moonlight Shadow* (1986), *Kitchen* (1988), *Goodbye Tsugumi* (1989) *Asleep* (1989), *Daisy's Life* (2000), *The Lake* (2005).

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How the contemporary culture affected the Yashimoto's *The Kitchen* and *The Lake*?
- Examine how Japanese culture is represented through fictional narratives.
- In what ways did the events of modern Japan influence writers of twentieth century period?

III. INTRODUCTION

The short novel *The Lake* is written by Banana Yoshimoto. It deals with grief, death and fear during an intense romance. Translated by Michael Emmerich, it stands out amongst other, fluffier romances for its crisply described settings, realistic and reserved characters, and intelligent meditations about the nature of intimacy. Her novels are littered with characters with premonitory powers, inspired by people she claims to have met in real life. She gathers her own ideas from dreams. Yashimoto's style is noticeably influenced by Western writers and authors. She has stated herself that her writing is influenced by American

writers. From her works, readers are inspired to overcome everyday hardships and emotional struggles. She is hence recognized as a “Healing-Kei” writer one who brings positivity, love, and warmth to readers.

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Yashimoto’s characters in *The Lake* seek relief in humble comforts of the body in order to shield themselves from an abiding darkness, and Yashimoto approaches their struggles, loneliness, nostalgia, grief with tenderness. Her fiction is full of actual orphans, haunted by the ghosts of their parents, and offers a more general view of youth itself as a kind of orphan hood; the young will always be abandoned by their elders; they must find or make whatever they can manage in the wake of this desertion. In *The Lake*, as in a number of her novels, Banana Yashimoto takes as a theme the power of family. The journey to the lake reveals some nearly mystical and mysterious emotions.

Author is speaking in the voice of two young people and that voice is very realistic. It’s also conveying the moral that no matter how cold and callous the modern world is, we can always find places and things that make it worth living. The characters live in an ever flowing present that is constantly redefined by an evolution in their emotions.

Its protagonists are young girls discovering the world around them via emotional experimentation. Its romance is based on familiarity and understanding, rather than on heterosexist tropes. Its time and space are ever flowing, yet ever familiar. *The Lake* takes on seminal aspects of Yoshimoto’s work. It is not the romantic love story that Western literary relies on, where passionate connections must struggle with external factors in order for characters to live happily ever after. It is a story of two individuals who are looking for a place of their own, where their broken selves can heal together.

The Lake shows off many of the features that have made Yashimoto a popular novelist. It is full of vivid and quirky characters, simple yet nuanced prose, a tight plot with an upbeat pace it’s also one of the most darkly mysterious novel she has ever written. It tells the tale of a young woman who moves to Tokyo after the death of her mother, hoping to get over her grief and start a career as a graphic artist she finds herself spending too much time staring out her window, though until she realizes she’s gotten used to seeing a young man across the street staring out his window too. And as the two young lovers overcome their troubled past to discover hope in the beautiful solitude of the lake in the countryside. The lake is primarily a romance, Yoshimoto inserts supernatural elements to provide mystery.

Yoshimoto’s settings especially *The Lake* itself are written with realism that they overshadow the flashy dreams and oracles. The characters themselves are compatible opposites. There are just two characters slowly, hesitantly sharing their lives with each other. That uncertainty is the more realistic and compelling aspect. The Lake has the finality and accessibility. The Lake resonate is how these two find happiness in each other despite their distorted lives.

As Yashimoto is a female novelist writing mainly about women in contemporary Japan, it will be interesting and important to explore more deeply the type and role of the women she portrays in the novel *Kitchen*. While she seems to describe the lives of independent women, she put them into a mostly traditional setting in the house. She writes mainly about women’s relationships, feeling, and thoughts in relation to Japanese contemporary society from a woman’s perspective, the paper will research these aspects of her female protagonists lives.

It generates a variety of problems including loss of a meaningful context of life and the lack of a social support system for the individual. She describes the resulting feeling of instability, in which the individual often stands alone facing a sometimes threatening world of tragedies to cope with and difficult choices to make. Her characters have to deal with the death of loved ones and other challenging situations without having any support from either family or society. Her real interest is a psychological one. The characters have to endure hardships and sufferings. This experience, however, also has its positive component. It initiates the process of searching for one’s own identity and enables the individual to grow mentally. Thus, the novel describe a healing process after a tragic incident or difficult situation, which leads to personal growth.

The novel depicts two stories of Young Japanese women dealing with loss and finding comfort in modern Japan’s shifting cultural landscape. It was about omnipresent grief and a kind of pre-sexual adolescent love. It tells about, transsexuality, bereavement, kitchens, love and tragedy in contemporary Japan. Her work evidently played on some deep cultural chord. It might be considered a reflection on contemporary Japanese society. It is not overtly about food, but as the title suggests, it very much revolves around how cooking, meals, and food can parallel and often even influence emotions and relationships.

As most of her characters in the novel *Kitchen* face extreme challenges in their lives, they search for and eventually expose their innermost feelings at extreme. Thus within her concept of individualism, Yashimoto supports not a radical but a very strong feminist point of view. Her female characters stand alone and find their own way in life. In her works, there's a lot of gender shifting a man turns into a woman. This work will interest those concerned with post war and contemporary Japanese culture, society and literature.

Her style of writing is considered to be magical realism, means that there is a miracle in our life and it may happen every day. *Kitchen* itself is a story about dealing with death of the beloved. It deals with death, we will be able to appreciate the sacredness of life. In *Kitchen*, Yashimoto's style is noticeably influenced by Western writers and authors.

The novel discusses themes of joy and happiness. For the protagonist *The Kitchen* was a reflection of herself. The Kitchen was the place where she could express her feelings and hide from the crowded urban town in the late twentieth century. Traditionally, *Kitchen* represent domestically and a woman's place in society. The Kitchen represents a welcoming place of comfort. The old fashioned Kitchen revealed the low status of the women who spent much of their time there. Kitchens are the showcases of Japanese consumer affluences. Cooking as symbols of confront and womanliness, yet trying to live independently.

The author indicated that one cannot know true joy without knowing true despair. At the same time, the novel discusses the struggle to overcome despair. The novel also goes on to discuss complacency in modern society and the limitations people set on their own happiness. This novel is one that accepts that life is a mixture of both good and bad, positives and negatives. Each character displays a sense of optimism, a hope for survival and the determination to fight back. The author utilizes the theme of contrasts within the story.

According to the author herself, the main themes in her work are the exhaustion of young Japanese in contemporary Japan and the way in which terrible experiences shape a person's life. Issues explored in *Kitchen* include transexuality and the loneliness inherent in modern Tokyo life. Yashimoto develops a theme of the importance of family in one's life, by using protagonist, as a vehicle to epitomize the struggles one experiences without a family. She conveys that individuals need some sort backing and support from family in order to live happily. Kitchens are constantly presented in a positive light by doing so family life is also portrayed in a positive manner, *Kitchen* had transformed her feelings from the darkest despair to feeling wonderful. This portrays the Kitchen as a place of healing, a place that is always uplifting, and soothing.

IV. CONCLUSION

Hence I would like to conclude author writes about youth problems and urban existentialism. Many of her characters are trapped between imagination and reality, but they seem to be attached to life and almost always find the meaning and bravery to live in the end. It is not necessarily a realistic depiction of Japanese everyday life, the observations so far seem to suggest that she captures some essence, undercurrent feelings and ideas and societal tendencies of life in contemporary Japan in the novel. In postmodern society this concept changed as the traditional family lost its strength.

To comprehend the change that has taken place within the role of women in Japanese literature and possibly Japanese society, we must examine more closely the concept of society and culture as it is in Japan today and in the literature of Yashimoto. Women in particular are left alone and searching for new ways in a seemingly unstable world.

Familyless children, lesbianism, incest, telepathy and violent deaths are part of many of Yashimoto's novels, these situations are exaggerations that reflect a changing reality in Japan today. The feminism of Yashimoto's characters comes through subtly, subsumed in the grim universalities of life that the young female narrators must confront and modulated by a web of communal caretaking. *Kitchen* explores the varied conflicts faced by contemporary Japanese women. The *Kitchen* might be considered a reflection on contemporary Japanese society.

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