

Kitchen – the Real Companion

Dr. V. Sangeetha, Professor and M. R. Sripriya, Ph.D. Research Scholar

Food is the third most important requirement to live in this world after air and water. It is common to all living beings. It is the basic and essential need for survival. It reveals a person's culture, personal identity and social origin. Dishes are tasty when a person cooks with love, interest and patience. Mostly people's celebrations are centered on good food. Preparation, production and serving of food are culinary art. One who enjoys cooking would definitely experiment with various flavours and combinations. It has been scientifically proven that tasting good food can lift a person's mood and it produces endorphins.

Food offers a powerful imagery. Food and literature are inseparable in life. After world war, Japan, the land of rising sun was crushed with no identity. But they sought intellectual identity and they found the purpose of life with their hope. Food in contemporary Japanese literature helps one to understand their tradition, religious perspectives and cultural background. Eventually, Japanese literature started developing their unique style.

This paper focuses on Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*, which combines traditional Japanese culture and American influences. She used kitchen and food as symbols to overcome pain. Her sharp observation on society and culture is remarkable. Kitchen is the symbol of comfort, support, warmth, security and peace for Mikage Sakurai, the protagonist.

Companionship plays a major role in everyone's life and the same is shared by Bertrand Russell in his *Marriage and Morals* which states that those who had never known the deep intimacy and the intense companionship of mutual love have missed the best things that life gives. Only a real companion would brighten up the soul when one is in a difficult situation. Yoshimoto portrayed kitchen as the real companion for Mikage Sakurai when she was in distress and lonely. Only the kitchen inspired her soul up.

Pain of losing dear ones in life is quite difficult to overcome. Yoshimoto helps the reader to overcome such pangs of loneliness through her young characters. Though Mikage felt no connection with the outside world, she questioned about her purpose of living. When she was in deep grief she helped herself to overcome through the kitchen and cooking. The opening line of the novel *Kitchen* is "The place I like best in this world is the kitchen. No matter where it is, no

matter what kind, if it's kitchen, if it's a place where they make food, it's fine with me” (Yoshimoto 1).

Mikage Sakurai lost her grandmother, the only surviving relative in the beginning of the novel. She was in such deep depression and had no strength. She spent all her time in her kitchen. She slept in the kitchen besides the refrigerator- the hum of it kept her away from loneliness by comforting and giving her company. Kitchen is her only supporter. Mikage says, “Now only the kitchen and I are left. It's just a little nicer than being all alone” (Yoshimoto 1). She always wanted to breathe her last moments in her kitchen.

Yuichi Tanabe, classmate of Mikage visited her home. He had a part-time job in her grandmother's favourite flower shop. He helped Mikage during her grandmother's funeral. He visited Mikage's house to mitigate her grief. He also invited her to his apartment for dinner by telling that he and his mother were looking forward to her coming. When she was in Tanabe's home, Mikage found that his mother looked different and beautiful. She felt in her, a strange beauty. Later she comes to know that his mother is not his real mother but his father. After Tanabe's mother died Yuji changed his gender and became his mother and father. Tanabe's transsexual mother Eriko-San was a kind hearted woman.

When Mikage visited Tanabe's house, instead of gazing at the architecture and interiors she keenly observed the kitchen when he prepared tea for her. Though the kitchen was not arranged she still fell in love at first sight. For Mikage kitchen is not just a place but her companion. The following quotations portray her observation of his kitchen, “I took everything in: the good quality of the mat on the wood floor ... A Silverstone frying pan and a delightful German-made vegetable peeler— a peeler to make even the laziest grandmother enjoy slip, slipping those skin off” and the finest quality of “Porcelain bowls, gratin dishes, gigantic platters, two beer steins” (Yoshimoto12). Opening his small refrigerator, she found it neatly packed. There were no table and carpet in the kitchen. Through Mikage's observations one can feel the admiration.

Being an elderly woman, Eriko invited Mikage to stay with them in their house because she liked her. Mikage too liked her. As she felt is too expensive for a single person to stay in her grandmother's house, so she shifted her things to Tanabe's house. This shows the transformation as it is unusual for a woman to stay in somebody's house in Japanese culture. She planned to stay until she was able to find a convenient and secured house for herself. Eriko bought a packed magnificent juicer for her and insisted that freshly squeezed juice gave good health and beautiful skin. Along with it she also gifted a pretty glass that was decorated with a banana motif and insisted Mikage to drink lot of juice. Further Tanabe told her to drink banana juice in it.

After the huge loss Tanabe and Mikage understood that they cannot change their past but they can change their future. They both found food to be a great healer. They both had lost their dear ones and neither family nor relatives are there to support them. In this terrible situation they heal themselves through food. Yuichi asked Mikage to make him a professional dinner and she planned enthusiastically a magnificent feast. She started listing out in a paper to buy the needed items. To overcome such grief they both planned to deviate themselves through cooking. Food made them feel better. It healed their miseries. Kitchen and food played the role of a true companion and helped them to overcome their grief.

As kitchen was close to Mikage's heart she once dreamt about his kitchen- she listened to the sound of water splashing on the stainless steel, scrubbing the sink in his kitchen and Tanabe is mopping the floor and they both are singing a song and enjoying in that silent kitchen. He asked her a dish, ramen in that dream. When she woke up in the middle of the night, she saw Tanabe. She told him about her dream but there was no response. She did not stop there by explaining her dream. The love for food tempted her to cook in that midnight. So she went to the kitchen and chopped vegetables to make ramen in her favorite place - the kitchen. When she slipped the noodles into the boiling water, she felt amazed.

As Mikage found her love for kitchen, she begins her career in the culinary field after many painful and lonely nights whereas Tanabe takes to alcohol to escape from the real world. Here Yoshimoto presents a new woman through Mikage. Though she herself was in deep grief she comes out of her pain and helped Tanabe to overcome from his pain and the habit of alcohol. For Mikage kitchen is the representation of some distant longing which engraved her soul. She is a culinary teacher and she had an inborn interest for cooking. She had taught herself. She indulged in cooking to distract herself from the worries which have happened in her life, so she bought three books to learn cooking; they were fundamentals, theory and practice. She read one by one to improve her skills in culinary arts. She showed her involvement and started reading theory, memorizing caloric content, temperatures and raw ingredients. Her leisure time was spent on cooking.

Cooking gives Mikage a great feel and enthusiasm. She spent all her earnings from the part-time job into it. Whatever her mood though happy, sad, angry or cheery she spent her time solely in cooking. In the beginning, she learnt cooking with biggest flaws. It lacked precision. Her dishes turned out bad because of lack of proportion. For example, when she cooked in an oven before it had come to its temperature, she took the dish out for chopping and it got spoilt. She was confident that her dinner was not worse than those of the average house wife. Initially, she started cooking dishes like boiled pork, cold Chinese noodles, cucumber salad, omelets and vegetables.

Mikage would wipe out bowls carefully and replace those caps on the spices every time. She arranged everything neatly after use. She had the habit of charting out the steps in advance to avoid mistakes. As days passed, she learnt to handle situations patiently by correcting her mistakes. This shows her understanding towards life and how her love for cooking toned her. She not only taught in cooking classes but also worked in the television and magazine. She became famous. In Mikage's perspective those who learned cooking would never know the real joy of cooking as herself. She felt the value of cooking and realised its tremendous positive impact on her life. However, these students learnt only for the sake of marriage, without realizing the value of culinary art. "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." (Yoshimoto 83).

Mikage was never afraid of burns and scars while cooking. She no longer suffered from sleepless nights. She was thrilled with the simple pleasures of everyday. She spent her days by eagerly waiting for the challenges and to face them boldly. Both Mikage and Tanabe suffered from the loss and death of their loved ones. They both avoided talking about such sufferings and pains. Instead they stepped forward with hope in their life. They both had deep understanding and a kind of telepathy. They were not sure about their relationship whether they are friends or lovers, but they acted like a brother and sister of the same family.

Mikage planned to go to Izu peninsula to do some research with her fellow assistants Sensei, Nori and Kuri. Nori and Kuri are Mikage's seniors by one year. They had graduated from the same university after completing four years of culinary study together. They are best friends and they both have good taste for dressing. They are good friends and supporters of Mikage.

Before Mikage goes on a trip she met Chika who was a head girl at Eriko's night club. She called Mikage to Sarashina, the soba shop. They spoke about Eriko's death. Meanwhile Chika enjoyed soba noodles with fried bits of tempura batter and Mikage ordered extra thick noodles with chicken. Chika spoke about Tanabe's emotions after his mother's death. Chika made her realize that they are in love. But Mikage did not concentrate on that talk though Chika gave her address to visit him because he was faraway.

Mikage called Tanabe over phone when she was in the restaurant; she remembered him and asked about him and his food. Yoshimoto expressed places and food in Japan. Tanabe described about the place and food in Isehara:

“Well, there’s a Denny’s. Ha, ha, just kidding. Let’s see, there’s a Shrine on the mountaintop; I guess it’s famous. At the base of the mountain there’s this inn that serves nothing but tofu— what they call ‘monk’s food’ – which is what I had for dinner.

“What kind of food is that? Sounds interesting.”

“Oh, right, taking a professional interest, are you? Well, it’s tofu, tofu, and more tofu. Savory custard, tofu baked with miso, fried tofu, citron, sesame seeds – everything with tofu. Even the clear soup is served with – surprise – egg tofu floating in it. (135)

After the call, she had a katsudon in that restaurant. She never tasted such delicious katsudon in her life time. She perked up and split her chopsticks. When she tasted it she felt the taste was incredible with good quality meat, the eggs and onions cooked well, excellent broth, rice with right degree of firmness. Overall the taste was excellent. She felt like calling the cook and appreciate for the delicious dinner. It was flawless with unusual skill. She ate well and told him to pack one more katsudon as parcel. She bought that for Tanabe. She hired a taxi to Isehara where he stayed. Throughout the night she travelled to meet him. When she enjoyed the taste of katsudon she remembered him. She reached his place after many struggles and finally she met him. He was shocked and surprised seeing her. When he tasted the katsudon he just put down his chopstick and looked straight into her eyes and said, “This is the best katsudon I’ve ever had in my life,” “It’s incredibly delicious.” ” (Yoshimoto 151). The very night she returned to her place.

In Izu, Mikage enjoyed her research work. She ate sashimi, prawns, wild boar and gained weight. When it was time for her to leave for Tokyo after completing her research, her love for Izu food made her parcel jam with wasabi, pickle and eel pies and sent them all to her apartment in Tokyo through express mail. Despite sending the courier she also phoned Tanabe and conveyed her arrival and also about the food. She was also generous enough to share her favourite food with him.

Thus, Banana Yoshimoto has effectively portrayed the personal tragedies of the two young characters Mikage and Tanabe, in her *Kitchen* with the symbolic representation of food and kitchen. The solace that the protagonist Mikage attains through food and kitchen has been the central part of the novel. She not only overcame her pain but also helped Tanabe to recover from his mother’s loss. The companionship with food made them both escape from the miseries of the living world.

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Dr. V. Sangeetha
Professor and Head
Department of English
Periyar University
Salem 636011
Tamil Nadu
sk19@periyaruniversity.ac.in

M. R. Sripriya
Ph.D. Research Scholar
Department of English
Periyar University
Salem 636011
Tamil Nadu
sriyasublime18@gmail.com