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Traditional Tropes and Familial Incest in Banana Yoshimoto’s Kitchen

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Traditional Tropes and Familial Incest in Banana Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen*

*Kitchen*, written in 1983, by Banana Yoshimoto, contains one novella and one short story. The novella is entitled *Kitchen* and the short story which follows it is called *Moonlight Shadow*. In *Moonlight Shadow*, the structure of a Japanese Noh drama enfolds, wherein the ultimate end of the main character is to live on in a semi-incestuous relationship with her dead boyfriend’s brother. In *Kitchen*, the images that one is assailed by are those of desire coexisting with food, and love contingent on incest. The idea of food as a comfort conflagrates into that of a woman as comforting.

These two stories are very different in plot, but highly similar thematically—both concern the process of mourning for a loved one, and both offer a distinct tendency to offer a pseudo-incestuous relationship as the means by which one will overcome sadness. In this way, the two stories display a particularity for expressing a post-nuclear, post-modern family structure which can accommodate the shifting sexual boundaries of the teenage misfits unsure of both their identities and that of their “family” or lovers. Taking into account the semi-radical solution of incest within the context of this (admittedly) slightly juvenile, but egregiously criticized author, I plan on showing the traditional values to which Banana Yoshimoto assuredly clings in *Kitchen*. Traditional culture is transmitted and transformed both in her usage of conventional literary tropes—poetical allusion and Noh dramatic structures—as well as her redefining the state of the family as the space in which one finds, not only familial, but also romantic love.
Before discussing the (re)definition of family and Yoshimoto’s predilection for incestuous relationships, I shall establish the methods by which Yoshimoto retains a tenuous linkage to traditional Japanese literary values and styles. The second, shorter, story in the book, *Moonlight Shadow*, concerns itself with death—in this case the death of a boyfriend, as opposed to *Kitchen* which revolves upon the deaths of parental figures. The female protagonist experiences heart-wrenching nightmares and takes to running at dawn every day to escape her own dreams; or, perhaps not the dreams so much as the memories which the dreams evoke. In her descriptions of the awakening from a dream, Yoshimoto’s prose bears a striking resemblance to the classics of Japanese poetry. The character of Satsumi in first person narration says:

> My dreams were always about Hitoshi. After my painful, fitful sleep, whether or not I had been able to see him, on awakening I would know it had been only a dream—in reality I would never be with him again…I would feel abandoned in the chill and silence of dawn. It was so forlorn and cold, I wished I could be back in the dream. (Yoshimoto, 112)

This longing style of writing and thematic content evokes the famous poems of Ono no Komachi. For example:

> Thinking about him  
> I slept, only to have him  
> Appear before me—  
> Had I known it was a dream,  
> I should never have wakened. (Keene, 78)

One of the main criticisms of Banana Yoshimoto’s work is that it is too far removed from the Japanese traditional literary values. Her detractors say that she focuses on the international and cosmopolitan to the detriment of providing something uniquely Japanese, and go so far as to criticize “her characters' lives, full of foreign influences, as somehow un-Japanese,” (Gaouette, 13). While she will make slight comments drawing
heavily on American pop-cultural icons (such as Linus from *Peanuts* and a ride at Disneyland), Yoshimoto does also draw on a background of Japanese literary traditions such as poetry and Noh drama in order to encapsulate the lives of her characters. Indeed, Nicole Gaouette also writes in her article about Yoshimoto that “traditional sensibilities underlie those hip attitudes and this duality drives much of her work” (ibid).

Banana Yoshimoto is quoted in an interview as saying that, “In Noh plays, ghosts appear. And sometimes a character’s personality changes entirely. Just by putting on a mask, they suddenly become a demon. I think what I write is very close to that tradition,” (Pilling, 36). She even refers to her books as “modern versions of Noh,” (ibid); and nowhere is this more evident than in *Moonlight Shadow*. Just as Ono no Komachi whose poetry is quoted above had her mythicized life story turned into several Noh plays in order to work through unresolved issues, *Moonlight Shadow* offers itself up as a Noh play starring the main character of Satsumi whose boyfriend has died in a car accident and who she longs to see again. Satsumi can thus be seen as the *shite* of the play, the “doer”, who is searching for a way to resolve her past. The character of Urara, who Satsumi meets on a bridge and who leads her to the convergence of the human world with the spirit world in order to see her boyfriend one last time, is the *waki*, the one who is on the “side” and “watches”, (Terasaki, xi-xii).

In writing about five Noh plays from the *zatsu* Noh tradition, (miscellaneous group), Etsuko Terasaki makes special note of the absentee male counterpart to the female lead. Terasaki calls them “‘absentee heroes’; without physical presence, they exist mainly in the memories or fantasies of the protagonist, are represented as desire or a void in the women’s psyches,” (Terasaki, 12). Satsumi’s longing for Hitoshi is the core
of Moonlight Shadows; she becomes a shell of her former self, cannot sleep, doesn’t eat, and spends all her time running to the bridge where they used to meet, halfway between their houses.

Terasaki goes on to say that even though the male is oddly lacking, “his presence is powerfully evoked through a set of verbal constructs,” (37). Terasaki argues that this is most notably done through poetry in the Noh dramas: “A single poem drawn from a legend or literary pre-text acts as an impetus for the narrative development,” (33). However I would argue that the “narrative development” in the case of this short story is done through the element of sound. The story opens with the memory of a bell which Satsumi gave to Hitoshi as a gift before they started dating. He then attached this bell to his wallet and it became the common background sound for all their interactions with one another—meeting at the bridge, during fights, first time they slept together, etc. In referring to the bell, Satsumi says, “There was an electric charge between our hearts, and its conduit was the sound of the bell,” she goes on to say that, “I could hear it even when he wasn’t there,” (110). The bell informs us of everything we need to know about Hitoshi, through the story of its gift and through the faint sound of it which produces memory. In a way, the dead Hitoshi becomes the embodiment of a silenced bell. Just as she imagines she sees him in her dreams and wishes not to awaken, what she sees as imaginary and what she hears is also imagined. Hitoshi no longer produces sound or appears to sight, he is lost like the sound of the bell.

Into the life of Satsumi comes Urara, a strange and psychic young woman who claims that something that happens only every hundred years or so is about to occur on the bridge which symbolizes the split between Satsumi and Hitoshi. Urara appears on the
bridge out of nowhere and her appearance could be likened to that of a buddha: “Her eyes were too knowing and serene; the expression on her face hinted that she had tasted deeply of the sorrows and joys of this world. The air around her seemed somehow charged,” (115). However, when Satsumi goes to leave Urara on the bridge, she turns back for a last glimpse and sees something wholly different, “I saw her face in profile as she watched the river. It shocked me—it was not that of the person I had just talked with. I had never seen such a severe expression on anyone,” (117). At this point, Urara could be either a post-modernist version of the Buddhist priest who usually plays the role of waki in Noh, or she could be a demon out to cause trouble for Satsumi, a person who wears a mask in order to frighten and betray the protagonist. Ultimately it turns out that Urara is in fact the waki however as she brings Satsumi back to the bridge at the precise time of 4:57am in order to observe a dimensional shift.

At which point, Satsumi hears what she’d been longing for: “A bell,” (145). She closes her eyes in order to take in the sound of the bell, and only when she’s positive that it’s Hitoshi’s does she open her eyes to see Hitoshi himself across the bridge. Thus the sound of the bell becomes Hitoshi before the sight of Hitoshi does; and once Hitoshi appears, he does not speak, he merely waves good-bye. This is slightly different from Noh plays, where once the ghost is introduced to the scene, s/he takes the foreground and relegates the living to the background. Typically the ghost as the “other” is “(dis)placed outside the strongly conventional system of social norm,” (Terasaki, 13). Ghosts simply do no belong in the conventional world of living beings, but in order for Noh plays to function and reflect social mores, this process is reversed and social stigmas, or the socially marginal, become central. In Moonlight Shadow, though, Hitoshi remains
marginal—neither speaking nor fully coalescing. He remains a shadowy, insubstantial character relegated primarily to memory and the sound of the bell. Yoshimoto produces the marginal, but keeps “conventional” society as the focus of her story, the real-life, living people are more important than the deceased. The traditional structure is imported but then transformed for modern times.

Urara, as the *waki*, as the replaced Buddhist priest, serves the function of connecting the living world of Satsumi with the world of the dead where Hitoshi is. Terasaki claims that the Buddhist priest links the two dimensions in Noh drama where, “without the mediation of the priest, the dead cannot communicate its intentions,” (19). In addition, Terasaki, in writing about the itinerant priest character who frequently appears in Noh plays, claims that for priests like Honen (1133-1212), “His message was clear and gave people hope amid the chaos of the day,” (5). One of the distinguishing characteristics of Yoshimoto’s work is that they are ever upbeat and end on a hopeful note where, theoretically, one can perceive that everything is going to be all right, after all.

One may criticize this as saccharine, as some detractors do, but others, such as the psychiatrist, Machizawa Shizuo, distinguished Yoshimoto’s work from authors such as Osama Dazai whose works carry the potential to cause suicides among the literate public. Machizawa theorizes that the quite simple message of Yoshimoto’s at carrying on in the face of great tribulation is far more benign and beneficial to Japanese readers uneasy in their society, (Sherif). Particularly when contrasted against some of Dazai’s works, for example, which “glorify suffering, negativism, and death,” people can feel “encouraged by Yoshimoto’s novels, and find in them an optimism and brightness absent in their own
lives,” (Ibid). Indeed, at the end of the story, Urara counsels Satsumi, “Parting and death are both terribly painful. But to keep nursing the memory of a love so great you can’t believe you’ll ever love again is a useless drain on a woman’s energies...So I think it’s for the best that we were able to say a proper, final good-bye today,” (148). For someone whose books do endeavor for the greater part of a story to evoke a strong sense of nostalgia and a clinging to the past, Yoshimoto invariably ends up concluding with a forward looking ideology which doesn’t allow her characters to remain in the past. This becomes true when applied to Japanese society as well, in that the lesson to be learned is that nostalgia will only get you so far before being a “drain” on your forward momentum, and that perhaps it’s time to put such dreams aside and move ahead to face reality. Again, this reiterated the theory I cited in the previous paragraph that the living are more important than the dead, and more energy should be focused on them in the here and now than on basing existence in the past.

*Moonlight Shadow* and a portion of Noh dramas follow the same basic pattern of a main character who, helped along by a secondary character, experiences an otherworldly event which ties up their loose ends, followed by a conclusionary moral. The beginning of a Noh play is in “a ‘seed,’ from suitable traditional sources,” (Terasaki, 29), and the beginning of *Moonlight Shadow* is a piece of music by Mike Oldfield also titled “Moonlight Shadow,” as Yoshimoto attributes in her “Afterword”, (Yoshimoto, 152). Not so “traditional,” perhaps, but this is a post-modern reproduction of a Noh play which serves different purposes and people than the originals. Both Yoshimoto’s short story and Noh do utilize various tropes in order to actualize their message—the absent hero, the itinerant monk figure, poetical allusion, and some form of ghostly presence.
Terasaki highlights a quote from Shoshana Felman about the focal point of death in Noh, which echoes *Moonlight Shadow* equally well:

> Death appears not an end but as a starting point: the starting point of the transferal of the story, that is, of its survival, of its capacity to go on, to subsist, by means of the repeated passage it effects from death to life, and which effect the narrative. (Terasaki, 20)

The death of Hitoshi begins the story, and the decision by Satsumi to live on ends it. In Noh, it is a cycle between the main character reused in the play, drawn from traditional sources—mainly poetry—who becomes reincarnated in another form to work through his/her past life with the help of a monk. The essence of the nominal character is that they have already died, and yet are living again. In some sense, Satsumi died along with Hitoshi, and it is through surpassing her pain and her gradual letting go of Hitoshi—as advised by Urara, the “monk”—that she can live again at the end. Death is a key point in the narrative at the beginning, but life is equally important and it is life which triumphs in the end. This backwards methodology of going from death to life rather than the typical progression from living to dying, unites the basic precept of Noh with *Moonlight Shadow*.

In *Moonlight Shadow*, it is life, and continued living, that faces the reader at the end. Through the supplemental form of Hitoshi’s younger brother, Satsumi retains a link to her past which promises its own future. Though the relationship between Satsumi and Hiiragi, Hitoshi’s brother, is not explicitly a romantic one within the development of the story, the promise for it is there in their connection over the shared deaths of their respective boyfriend/brother and girlfriend/friend, and the connections that are made between this story and the first one in the book, *Kitchen*. 
Just within the course of this one story on its own, Hiiragi foreshadows the moralistic words of Urara when he visits Satsumi while she is sick. He tells her that she is thinner every time he sees her and her pretense that she is fine is, “a waste of energy,” (142). In Urara’s case she was making the point that it was a waste to never think you could love someone as much again; here where Hiiragi says it, he’s advising her to call him so that they can get together whenever she feels sad, implying that not only is he the one to make her feel better, but that he can replace his brother for her in that respect. In fact, Hiiragi has already been shown to hold the ability to replace Hitoshi. Earlier in the novel Satsumi and Hiiragi play a game beginning with her saying that something Hiiragi has done reminds her of Hitoshi and Hiiragi says, “I’ll do Hitoshi” and performs some action imitating his brother’s hand movements or tilt of head, (118).

When Hiiragi tells her that her pretense is “a waste of energy,” Satsumi makes the connection between Hiiragi’s words and expressions that he is treating her as one of the family\(^1\), however there is an implied sense of incest when Hiiragi goes on to say, “we’re all brothers and sisters when we’re in trouble, aren’t we? I care about you so much, I just want to crawl into the same bed with you,” (143). Even though Yoshimoto hastens to clarify that “his intentions were honorable” and not lustful, the idea has been introduced and is hard to put aside. Already, as seen through their interactions, Hiiragi is replacing Hitoshi for Satsumi, and most tellingly, at the end of the novel, the last “sound” heard is Hiiragi’s laughter as she makes a joke for him after giving him a present. The sound of the bell has been replaced by Hiiragi’s laughter, and this, more than anything else, signifies the ever-shifting passage of time as loves come and go, but life goes on.

\(^1\) Yoshimoto, 143.
In addition to the reasons above, another reason that exhibits the incestuous nature of Hiiragi and Satsumi’s relationship is tied into the companion novella in this book. In the novella, *Kitchen*, a huge portion of the relationship between its two main characters of Yuichi and Mikage revolves around food. Near the end of the novella, Mikage delivers *katsuden* to Yuichi via a long and expensive taxi ride. While eating the fried pork, Yuichi queries, “Why is it that everything I eat when I’m with you is so delicious?” To which, Mikage replies, “Could it be that you’re satisfying hunger and lust at the same time?” (100). He claims that hunger/lust is not the reason and that it’s because they’re family, but the two forces of hunger and lust are inextricably linked up in their relationship as pseudo-siblings. In *Moonlight Shadow*, when Hiiragi visits Satsumi, he brings her dinner and she realizes that, “I always enjoyed what I ate when I was with him. How wonderful that is, I thought,” (142). Coming where it does in the short story—right as Hiiragi treats her as family and makes a theoretically innocent remark, but one replete with lustful overtones—this revelation of food and eating connects too strongly with the previous story and indicates that Hiiragi and Satsumi are inevitably linked together and will ultimately end up together as Yuichi and Mikage do. Satsumi desires Hiiragi at first primarily because he provides a link to Hitoshi, but as time goes on she begins to desire Hiiragi for himself, for the way that he treats her, the way that he makes her laugh, and the way he makes her feel. They have become like siblings from the hours spent together hanging out at the house of Hitoshi and Hiiragi over the past four years. They are a make-shift family in the aftermath of losing two members, and they cling to each other as all they have left.
In the novella of *Kitchen* the storyline follows the “heroine”, Mikage, in the first chapter as she comes to grips with her grandmother’s death. The grandmother is Mikage’s sole surviving relative, and once she is dead, Mikage becomes an orphan taken in by the semi-dysfunctional, but operationally normal, family of Yuichi and Eriko. Yuichi is a fellow student of Mikage’s at university, (though she is currently on hiatus from studies), and he is also a part-time worker at a flower stall where Mikage’s grandmother purchased floral arrangements on a regular basis. Eriko is Yuichi’s mother-neé-father. Upon the death of Yuichi’s biological mother, Eriko, then named Yuji, effected a sex-change operation and became female and raised Yuichi as his mother. Thus, Yuichi was raised without an actual father figure, though he was raised by his father; and Mikage was raised by her grandmother as both her parents died when she was small, and her grandfather passed away when she was entering junior high\(^2\). Mikage moves in with Yuichi and Eriko and gradually becomes part of the family—elicited through her progression from formal to informal Japanese forms of address.\(^3\) At the beginning of the second chapter, Eriko has been murdered by a client (she owned and worked at a homosexual bar/club), and Mikage must watch as Yuichi copes with his own loss and descent into orphan-hood. The novel ends with Mikage and Yuichi getting together on an upbeat note—forming their own family out of the shambles of the deaths which have traumatized and liberated them.

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\(^2\) John Whittier Treat argues for the anti-Oedipal, *post-Oedipal*, nature of these upbringings evolving from a postmodern family structure, (Treat, 291-97).  
\(^3\) “When Mikage first meets Eriko, Eriko speaks to Mikage informally, and Mikage speaks to Eriko entirely in the formal ‘desu/masu’ form...Later on in the novel,...Mikage and Eriko both speak to each other informally, indicating that they’ve grown closer, and have a relationship more like family members.” (Howell, online)
Back at the beginning of this paper, I said that I would try to show how Yoshimoto’s use of incest as a familial prop redefining and reinforcing the family space was anticipated by women writers in Japanese literary history. In an essay on Japanese authors since the post-war period, Orie Muta claims that in breaking free of societal norms which were heavily masculine, women writers of the 20th century turned towards challenging social conventions and exploring topics such as androgyny, incest, and homosexuality, (151). She claims that even in the Meiji and Taisho periods, women writers had been toppling the twin standards for female suppression of marriage and motherhood, (151). In order to create an equal society, the male had to be relegated to androgyny, something “safe”, something de-phallicized. In Kitchen, the one “father” figure has willingly castrated himself in order to become a female, thus fulfilling all the hopes of androgynous-wishing women writers of the 1950-70’s. The parental figure around whom the small, insular family of Yuichi and Mikage revolves is no longer the “father”—the phallic center of the family has been devalued. However, the overwhelmingly powerful masculine nature of society is still predominant, hence Eriko is stabbed (phallic) to death by a male because of her unorthodox life style.

Mikage and Yuichi are also androgynous in a way as they are interchangeable. John Whittier Treat argues that, “One is struck by the absence of explicit sexual contrast—like the absence of sex itself—from Kitchen. Mikage and Yuichi, like the so-called boy-girl pairs in all of Yoshimoto Banana’s works, retain unarguable signs of maleness and femaleness only in the gender of their names,” (291). However, even in their androgyny, they do retain some semblance of a sexual quality in their interactions, which Treat calls their “quasi-sibling, quasi-sexual relationship” which “always teeters
on the incestuous,” (290). When Mikage first comes to really understand the sexual undercurrent in their relationship she thinks to herself, “although we have always acted as brother and sister, aren’t we really man and woman in the primordial sense, and don’t we think of each other that way?” (66). Yuichi and Mikage are sibling-lovers without any other family than each other, in a way they have to fulfill all the familial roles by themselves. Thus not only are they brother-sister, but also mother-son. The father-daughter relationship is never fully realized—most likely because Yuichi is not “man” enough; having been raised alone by a transsexual, he never escaped Freud’s Oedipal stage according to Treat, (Treat, 291).

In the scene quoted above which bore striking resemblance to the scene of eating in *Moonlight Shadow*, Mikage has just traversed the Izu peninsula in order to bring Yuichi a serving of *katsudon*. She climbs the outer wall of the hotel in which Yuichi is staying and slices open her hand in doing so. Treat likens her to having received a war wound in her ascent, and describes her as then watching Yuichi eat “with all the joy of a nursing mother.” (287). Her bloodied hand is a symbol of the female as mother, the menstruating bearer of children, while at the same time it’s also an indication of her mortality. Mikage is thus the juncture at which life and death meet, and she is also the beginning (mother) and end (lover, “*la petite morte*”) for Yuichi.

Muta describes love as being the “the task of measuring the distance and space between two persons. The incest motif indicates, on the metaphysical level, a desire to shorten the distance and space; in other words, a desire for the purest and the closest relationship of love,” (151). The idea that because someone is physically closer to you based on living situation is an indicator of a more pure love is a trifle absurd. However, it
does challenge ordinary social order and conventional moral values, which is what women writers post-World War II were trying to do according to Muta who cites the literary examples of Kono Taeko (1926-), Oba Minako (1930-), Sono Ayako (1931-), Ariyoshi Sawako (1931-1984), Takahashi Takako (1932-), Kurahashi Yumiko (1935-), Tomioka Taeko (1935-), Masuda Mizuko (1948-), and Yoshimoto Banana (1964-).

Ultimately, Yoshimoto’s two stories in *Kitchen*, build on previous traditions in Japanese society. Admittedly, one of them is far older and more established, but the other includes Yoshimoto’s writing within the ranks of an established group of female authors who write about the destabilization of the family and the advent of new family structures. Yoshimoto’s transmission and transformation of Noh and poetical allusion in *Moonlight Shadow* offers a concrete bond with Japanese literary tropes, while the incestuous undertones in both *Moonlight Shadow* and *Kitchen* carry on the pioneering work of Japanese women writers in the post-World War II era. By combining the two elements, Yoshimoto could be said to be skillfully weaving the past and the present, offering a nostalgic look at something which can no longer be attained while also showing the potential for what can. The past is abandoned in the two stories—in fact, the past has literally died in both—but the potential for an androgynous future reaffirming the revised importance of family is given scope and voice.
List of Works Cited


