

# “*Kitchen*”: Self-construction Under the Influence of Others

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Banana Yoshimoto, a renowned modern Japanese novelist often hailed as the “Queen of Japanese Literature”, gained widespread acclaim for her masterpiece “*Kitchen*”, which was honored with the 6th “Kaienn Sinnjinn Literary Award” and the 16th “Izumi Kyoka Literary Award”. Within Yoshimoto’s “*Kitchen*”, there exists an aesthetic charm reminiscent of traditional Japanese literature while also incorporating Western writing techniques. This paper is grounded in contemporary cultural contexts and Japan’s traditional cultural framework, and employs postmodernist and feminist theories. It interprets the relationship between the other and self-construction within “*Kitchen*” from two dimensions: cultural subjectivity and female subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Banana Yoshimoto, “*Kitchen*”, self-construction, feminism

## Introduction

In Japanese literature, the works of Banana Yoshimoto have consistently been recognized as “healing literature”. Emphasizing the awakening of women’s self-awareness, the pursuit of self-value and self-reconstruction, her works represent a departure from traditional Japanese literary conventions, while also upholding the traditional Japanese aesthetic sensibility through the fusion of modern Western writing styles, sparking a global phenomenon known as the “Banana Yoshimoto Boom”.

This paper combines the background of the creation of the work, centering on the theme of “self-construction”, and tries to interpret the dialectical relationship between the other and self-construction embodied in “*Kitchen*” from the two dimensions of the culture and female.

## The Interplay of “Other” and “Self” Cultures in “*Kitchen*”

### Literary Creation Influenced by the “Other” Culture

In the backdrop of post-modernist ideologies and the rapid economic advancements since the 1970s, Japanese society has undergone a significant departure from conventional norms, ushering in an era of ideological flux. Coming of age during this transformative period, Yoshimoto imbued with multicultural influences demonstrates a pronounced Western undertone in her works.

Within “*Kitchen*”, an examination of the impact of other culture reveals itself through unconventional character portrayals, Manga-style scenario, surreal narrative trajectories.

The portrayal of unconventional characters is a prominent aspect of Yoshimoto’s novels. In “*Kitchen*”, there is a unique third-gender character named Eriko, who undergoes a sex reassignment after the death of his wife as a way to commemorate her. Assuming the roles of parents, Eriko shoulders the responsibilities associated

with these parental roles. It is worth noting that at the time, there was no precedent for gender reassignment surgery in Japan. The inclusion of such an unconventional character influenced by Western ideals challenges the traditional male authority within the confines of a conventional family structure.

Manga-style scenarios and surreal plots are also important reflections of Yoshimoto’s postmodernist literary creation. Yoshimoto had loved comics since she was a child, and this has had a great influence on her creative style. In *“Kitchen”*, she boldly incorporates manga elements to bring readers a different sensory experience. For example, she creates a beautiful girl with male characteristics, which is an amazing imagination that can only be found in manga. In addition, she often breaks the traditional concept of literary language by using comic dialogues such as colloquialisms, exonyms, and abbreviations, so that readers can enter the literary world created by the author as easily as reading comics. At the same time, there are many surreal episodes, such as Mikage and Yuichi entering the same dream and meeting in the kitchen and the new family model of replacing parental roles with transsexuals. Manga-style scenarios and surreal plots are also important reflections of Yoshimoto’s postmodernist literary creation.

Taking the trivialities of daily lives as a source, Yoshimoto captures the personal experiences under the influence of pluralistic values, and incorporates her own perceptions of society into her works. Her unique approach to literary creation, incorporating the element of “other” into traditional Japanese literature, has brought Japanese literature to new heights.

### **Literary Creation Under the Influence of “self” Culture**

As mentioned above, Yoshimoto’s works are very westernized and bring novel feelings to the readers. Her works are not completely detached from the Japanese traditional culture. In the following, Yoshimoto’s inheritance of Japanese traditional culture will be grasped from two aspects: the traditional literary creation and traditional Japanese spirit.

From the aesthetics of “material sadness” to “private fiction”, traditional Japanese literature has always emphasized the depiction of inner emotions. This kind of literature accounts for the majority of Japanese literature, reflecting the traditional Japanese aesthetics. For example, in *“Kitchen”*, the author opens with a character’s monologue, “In this world, I think my favorite place is the ‘kitchen’” (Yoshimoto, 2022, p. 3). The first-person tone of the novel unfolds the narrative through the psychological description of the characters, following the traditional Japanese literary techniques.

In addition to “private fiction”, Yoshimoto’s works contain many aspects of traditional Japanese spirituality, such as the impermanent concept of life and death, the aesthetics of grief, and the concept of nature.

In Yoshimoto’s novels, death is everywhere, such as the death of Mikage’s family member, and the death of Eriko at a later stage of the story. Yoshimoto describes the deaths of the characters in a very plain tone, as if death is a common thing in daily life, which is very much in line with the Buddhist concept of impermanence of life and death. In *“Kitchen”*, there are also many descriptions of plants and natural scenery, such as the warm rain at night, the balcony of Yuichi’s family, which looks like a tropical jungle, all of which reflect the changes in the mood of the protagonist, and this kind of aesthetic mood in which human beings and nature are blended together reflects the aesthetic interest of the Japanese materialistic sadness and the view of nature of “the unity of the nature and mankind”.

It can be seen that in *“Kitchen”*, author consciously conveys traditional Japanese beauty and insists on the dominant position of Japanese traditional culture, which is also a kind of insistence on the “self” culture.

### **The Process of Integration of the “Other” and the “Self” Culture**

In the development of Japanese culture, it has gone through many stages of absorption and integration of other cultures. It can be said that the development of Japanese culture is a process of fusion of the “other” and the “self”. Although there are strong Western influences in Yoshimoto’s works, she always expresses the inner emotional experience of the characters with the unique oriental creative techniques, such as traditional emotional writing, in which the Eastern and Western cultures, tradition, and modernity can be perfectly fused. In her works, there is a perfect fusion of East and West, tradition, and modernity, and in the competition between “other” and “self” cultures, realizes the self-reconstruction.

### **The Self of Female From a Feminist Perspective in “*Kitchen*”**

#### **Deconstruction of Gender From the Perspective of the “Other” Discourse**

The famous French thinker Lacan once put forward the concept of “mirror theory”. According to him, the establishment of consciousness occurs in a mysterious moment when the infant has not yet acquired the ability to speak, which is the “mirror stage”. 6-18 months old infants can recognize their own images in the mirror, and although at this time the infant is not yet able to control his or her own body movements, he can be aware of his own bodily integrity through the mirror. In this process, infants initially recognize the image in the mirror as another person, and then slowly recognize themselves through the other person in the mirror, and from the “mirror stage” onwards, infants slowly become self-aware. In other words, infants can only realize the recognition of “self” through the recognition of the external “other”, and the recognition of “self” needs to be based on the relationship with the “other”. The “other” in this context refers to all people, events, and things that are different from the individual “self”.

In any society or era, the self is always constructed through the constant interpretation of the opposite other. In male society, women are always in the position of “other”, and men rely on women’s “other” status to confirm their existence and show their male superiority, while women become objectified objects, and their perception of the self is distorted by social definitions, and women unconsciously regulate themselves by male standards.

In Yoshimoto’s novels, the “other” of women in the eyes of men is constantly being dissolved, and the gender gap is constantly being narrowed. In her works, there is a great change in the image of men compared to previous literary works, and these men lose their traditional aura and are even gradually feminized. In “*Kitchen*”, Yuichi is one such character. He is not only “clean-cut”, but also extremely emotional, crying at the funeral of a stranger, whom he has met several times, and showing vulnerability and helplessness after the death of his “mother”, which are all character traits that are considered to be traditionally female. By feminizing these male characters, the author subconsciously narrows the gap between the two genders.

There is also a very iconic male character in “*Kitchen*”; Eriko was originally Yuichi’s father, but chose to change his sex to female because he could not accept the shock of his wife’s death. Two transformations occur in the character’s body: One is from male to female, and the other is from father to mother. Both of these shifts in identity are a reflection of the author’s sense of femininity. Under the natural gender, men and women are two natural opposites, and the physical differences between the two have a powerful social role in addition to their biological role. The emergence of a male-to-female transsexual character breaks the traditional idea of male superiority and is an impact on the traditional gender system. And the role change from father to mother, which downplays the pivotal role of the father in the traditional family, also highlights the subjective position of women and enhances women’s right to speak.

The way in which Yoshimoto feminizes the male characters in her book subverts the previous stereotypes of gender in a patriarchal society, blurring the gender differences and reflecting the idea of equality.

### Focus on the Situation of the "Self" of Female

Yoshimoto's novels are written from a woman's standpoint, exploring the process of women's "self-healing", and highlighting women's unique charisma. She also uses a new style of language to break the shackles of female writers who can only use male language to create their works, and bring readers into a female perspective, breaking the traditional stereotypes of women and reconstructing their identities through the female characters in her novels.

In the traditional concept of the family, women are often portrayed as "good wives and good mothers", playing the role of a husband and raising children, not participating in social activities or in a marginalized position in society. However, in Yoshimoto's works, women are no longer subordinate to men and their families, and they no longer rely on the birth of children to maintain their families; instead, they strive to be independent, participate in society, and have their own self-worth.

In "*Kitchen*", Yoshimoto introduces the concept of the "food family", a non-blood family, which breaks the traditional model of the blood family and liberates women from the traditional family form. In "*Kitchen*", Mikage is an orphan whose family members have passed away one after another, helping her take out of the family form. The appearance of the transsexual Eriko also breaks the male-centeredness of the traditional family in which the father holds the absolute right to speak, creating a new family model that is more reasonable, in which women are able to find their own value, no longer centered on men, and to realize their own self-construction.

### The Process of Constructing the "Self" of Female

**Loss of self.** In "*Kitchen*", there are many references to the "kitchen complex" of Mikage. Kitchen is a comfort zone for Mikage, where she can feel the warmth of home. After the death of her grandmother, kitchen is transformed into a refuge for Mikage's soul. However, while this refuge seems to protect Mikage, it actually imprisons her self-growth.

Feminist spatial theory states that space is significantly gendered. Traditionally, kitchen has been regarded as the exclusive space for women. In "*Kitchen*", the setting of characters is always limited to the intimate relationship between family members, and the construction of scenes does not escape the space of "family". Mikage closes herself in the kitchen, and even though she accepts Yuichi's invitation to move in with him, she only finds a similar space to replace the kitchen of her grandmother's house, but she is not really healed, and her self-worth is not manifested either. Confined in this space, Mikage remains in an objectified and marginalized position, losing independent personality as a woman.

**Self-search.** In "*Full Moon*", the sequel to the "*Kitchen*", Mikage moves away from Yuichi's family and gradually moves out of kitchen and into the "social kitchen", where she finds a job as a cooking assistant, leaves the domestic space, and begins to move into the social space, finding her self-worth in the process of making food. In the process of making food, she realizes self-healing.

**Self-construction.** In the process of the awakening of women's self-consciousness, women are gradually abandoning the traditional role of being regarded as subordinate to men and creating their own value in various fields. In Yoshimoto's works, there are various women who are engaged in their favorite work and independent in life and spirituality, who are not bound by the socially defined image of a perfect woman, daring to detach

themselves from male values, do not depend on men economically and spiritually, and maintain their own subjectivity.

In “*Kitchen*”, Mikage goes through a very painful period, and under the guidance of Eriko, she has the courage to face the future again, and becomes independent. She turns her feelings for the kitchen into a way for her to find her self-identity, entering the social space, realizing self-worth through cooking, and completes self-reconstruction. After Eriko’s death, she comforted and cheered Yuichi up who has lost his “mother”.

By restructuring the relationship between the male and female protagonists in the work, Yoshimoto breaks the traditional narrative structure of the rescuer-rescued relationship between men and women, portraying the woman as the rescuer and the man as the rescued, which dissolves the woman’s situation of being othered, unearths the woman’s self-worth, and realizes self-reconstruction.

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