

Tarik Onalan

Calvert

English

19 January 2015

Discussion Reflection

Kitchen by Banana Yoshimoto, translated by Megan Backus

Word Count: 397

Kitchen was a novel that I, at first read, could not understand. I did not understand what Yoshimoto meant to represent with her out-of-the-ordinary characters. Growing up in an age where identity—specifically sexual—is viewed as fluid, I did not understand how the existence of a transvestite, Eriko, was supposed to be “shocking”, or otherwise odd. Not knowing the idea of a traditional family in Japan, I did not see how Mikage and Yuichi living together as friends was “weird”. I did not see how a murder was supposed to be a surprising matter, growing up in a country where gun homicide rates are 20 times higher than any other developed country.

In the class discussion, I learned how the mere existence of a transvestite in Japan was surprising. The first gender reassignment surgery in Japan took place in 1998; Yoshimoto writes of a man who undergoes gender reassignment surgery in **1988**. However, the big surprise came from learning about the traditional Japanese family unit: a dominant father, a mother, the children. Yuichi at first lives with his transvestite “mother”, Eriko, and a girl “friend”—Mikage; after Eriko’s death, Yuichi lives with Mikage, still in a non-romantic fashion. Yoshimoto challenges almost every element of the Japanese family tradition, and, through the discussion, I understood that this is Yoshimoto’s purpose: shock-and-awe mixed with a reality check, that families—companionship—can exist in many forms.

After gaining a basic understanding of Yoshimoto’s characters, I was able to decipher the symbols Yoshimoto chooses to use in *Kitchen*. Yoshimoto’s recurring references to light and dark at first made me picture good and evil, though it did not feel appropriate to the novel. After learning that Yoshimoto was emphasizing the importance and universality of companionship, I

revised my thoughts; light and dark were focused not on good and evil, but companionship and loneliness, respectively. Similarly, Yoshimoto's references to the kitchen were lost on me. I did not understand why, for example, Yoshimoto would have Mikage sleep in the kitchen. However, I had only the vision of the common American kitchen, not the small, much more intimate Japanese kitchen. After learning about the centrality of the Japanese kitchen in the home, I was able to understand why Mikage had such an intense attraction to kitchens; they served as a starting point for her emotional reconstruction while dealing with loss, a place to experience all of her emotions.