

## Romantic Love in the Early Fiction of Banana Yoshimoto

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Romantic love does not exist in traditional Japanese literature, or where it does, it always meets with objection and too often ends in tragedy. Murasaki Shikibu's writings reflect more affection and sport than love in Heian courtship, playwrights like Chikamatsu Monzaemon perpetuate love suicides in seventeenth century stories of store clerks and prostitutes,<sup>1</sup> and twentieth century fiction abounds in characters who may or may not be married but whose romantic sentiments are repressed or thwarted.

Aside from the Buddhist belief that love is a worldly attachment that is to be renounced, the usual hindrance to romantic love in literature is the characters' social standing from which all kinds of political consequences stem. While romance may thrive among lowly, simple people, it fares less successfully in higher society influenced greatly by courtly and samurai mentalities. As a result, the stream of traditional Japanese literature seemingly mirrors romantic love in only two possible ways: with gloomy cynicism or with an overwhelming sense of the tragic.

Of course, as not a few critics have observed, Banana Yoshimoto's writing is not exactly traditional.

When 'Banana Mania' exploded in Japan and across the globe in the early 1990s, the adulation that met Mahoko ("Banana") Yoshimoto's work was accompanied by wonder, if not downright skepticism. While she made use of the conventional first person narrative, her writing seemed too pop-ish, too devoid of social consciousness. Her concerns dwelt repeatedly in the domain of uncannily familiar young metropolitan men and women whose depictions were interwoven with ponderous life philosophies. Indeed, the recurring world in her fiction is such that write-ups of her more recent novels have spoken of a typical Yoshimoto girl—a twenty-something, sensitive, introspective, modern heroine ("Review of Yoshimoto's *Goodbye Tsugumi*"), and heavy themes of love, death, mysticism, gender, beauty and tragedy have become regular ingredients of "the typical Yoshimoto work" ("Book review: *Kitchen*"). A certain kind of freshness—offbeat, trendy, pop culture-based—is also said to pervade Yoshimoto's fiction, a freshness that seems to give her stories an international atmosphere, that is, free of a limiting, strictly Japanese ambience.

A closer look reveals that romantic love in Yoshimoto's stories alongside other elements in her fiction, however, bears characteristics of a culture unique to Japan: that of the *shoujo* which literally means "girl". The *shoujo* market targets both girls and young women, and has been analyzed by Ann Sherif and John Treat in economic terms. According to Sherif, the values in the *shoujo* world include "cuteness, innocence, naivete, nostalgia and consumerism" ("On Yoshimoto Banana's Place") while Treat deems the *shoujo* as "a point in the commodity loop that exists only to consume" (in Sato, "The Basics"). These views reflect the state not of girls merely but of Japan's contemporary people; however, without postmodernist readings, they seem to have little to do with the aesthetics towards which *shoujo* is inclined. *Shoujo* culture necessitates emotion, innocence, fancy and fantasies. Youthfulness is also a mark of *shoujo*, but this concept of youth is not just external: it is found in a nostalgia for the past and the lost—reminiscent

of classical Japanese aesthetics like perishability — *mono no aware*—and an innocence due not only to plain naivete but also to a kind of sexlessness.

The *shoujo* comes to life primarily in comics, or *manga*, where nostalgia, innocence, feelings and dreams are played out fully in as many as several volumes long. Because the *shoujo*'s emphasis is on characterization—the person's thoughts, feelings, hobbies, relationships, et cetera—there are many possibilities for romance. Unfortunately, *shoujo manga* is notorious for repeating themes, particularly of love stories that are comparable to soap operas or Harlequin romances (“Shojo Manga”). This reputation it hardly deserves, however, especially because many *shoujo manga*, sub-genres of which can range from sports to science fiction, involve resilient young women for whom romance is merely another item to be dealt with in a hectic everyday schedule (Arnold).

*Shoujo manga* isn't typified simply by pages and pages of pretty boys and girls with hair in curlies, and big, expressive, long-lashed eyes with stars in them. On the contrary, this genre makes good use of its own semiotic codes, the same codes which appear in Yoshimoto's writing. One code is the use of an irregular narrative sequence. Events are seldom drawn chronologically or linearly, but rely on flashbacks and reflections to carry the story forward. Another code is the diversity of paneling which breaks away from traditional block panels in progression. The comics' frames vary in shape and size, and borderless frames are not uncommon. Similarly, words and captions may not be contained in balloons and boxes to create a more pensive atmosphere. The drawings of one or more characters may also be superimposed over several frames and backdrops, while delicate lines may illustrate the *manga* art, making the material seem fragile and even immaterial.

What these peculiar codes do in the telling of a story is to transgress reality: time, body, and space itself, and Yoshimoto's fiction does exactly this. Treat compares her work to the concept of *shoujo* by calling the former “topos of neuter, neutral sign” and the latter, “more discursive than material, an adolescent space without substantive or fixed subjective content” (in Sato, “The Basics”). As the genre focuses on human relationships rather than linear action, conflicts tend to be more psychological than physical. This tendency can be seen in Yoshimoto's elliptical narratives of memory and introspection. In *Kitchen*, for example, Mikage weaves in and out of the present:

Dream kitchens.

I will have countless ones, in my heart or in reality. Or in my travels. Alone, with a crowd of people, with one other person—in all the many places I will live. I know that there will be so many more. (43)

A memory of Eriko, the saddest one of all.

Of all the many plants in her terrace window, the one she had acquired first was the potted pineapple. She told me about it once. [...] (79)

Appearing almost out of the blue, these passages create a sense of unreality, and to add to this impression, some parts of the book showcase fantastic elements, such as Mikage and Yuichi sharing the same dream in *Kitchen*, or the transvestite Eriko beating her murderer to death with a barbell before she dies, or as in the story “Moonlight Shadow,” Satsuki joins the psychic Urara in witnessing a rare time-space warp. In *N.P.*, folkloric elements recur, and in *Lizard*, there are characters who morph or have healing powers or who again share similar dreams. Indeed, all these warp reality to varying degrees, and it is a quality present in her stories. Perhaps, fact is stranger than fiction especially for fans of Yoshimoto, for it is apparently the lack of a sense of reality that makes her writing all the more real (Sato, “Kitchen”).

Just as elements in her work seem to transgress reality, Yoshimoto herself is a transgression in Japanese literature, albeit a successful one. Traditional literature, Alwyn Spies notes, is written but not read, whereas Yoshimoto's fiction, almost totally a product of popular culture, is devoured worldwide.

Since much of Yoshimoto's writing admits to similarities with Japanese comics, it is interesting to see the extent to which romantic love in her fiction is *shoujo*. However, one cannot relegate her work as 'only *shoujo*', for the concept of *shoujo* itself is complicated. Studies done on Yoshimoto's success have dug out both literary and sociopolitical issues about angst in contemporary Japan. An example of this is what the critic Mitsui Takayuki terms as the "vacuity of the present" in her writings, or what Treat says is the absence of center, an absence which is perhaps exactly what young people find profound. If there is one thing that can be considered even slightly fixed and immovable in Yoshimoto's fiction, it is the persistent existence of some romantic relationship.

In studying some of the remarkable characteristics of romantic love in Yoshimoto's stories, I will focus mainly on two books. *Kitchen* consists of two novellas that deal with grief and survival: the title story features Mikage who moves in with Yuichi and his parent after her grandmother's death, while the other story "Moonlight Shadow" shows young Satsuki struggling to get over her boyfriend's fatal accident. Yoshimoto's story collection *Lizard* is comprised of six tales of the city. A minor reference will be made to her second novel *N.P.*, which is premised on the belief that the unpublished ninety-eighth short story written by the deceased expatriate Sarao Takase seems to be cursed, since those who attempt to translate it become so depressed they commit suicide. All three books reveal Yoshimoto's Tokyo of young men and women whose sorrows, dreams and loves often bear a striking resemblance to the characters in *shoujo manga*. And, as in *shoujo manga*, such human relationships can never be absent in the fiction of Yoshimoto because romantic love serves as the window through which personalities and philosophies can be successfully observed.

*Romantic love is adolescent.* This is a stigma often applied to anything *shoujo*—that it is an "adolescent space": evanescent, undeveloped, and therefore not to be taken seriously. But adolescence, that period between childhood and maturity is the most delicate road to growing up, for in this phase is formed most of a person's ideas about adulthood. Here is when she is old enough to dream dreams, but too young to be disillusioned by the occasional failure of its coming true. This is also the time when she first makes sense of her body—a blossoming, so to speak, of self-awareness.

*Shoujo* refers not simply to "female child" nor to "woman", but to the young girl traversing these two boundaries. The kind of appeal that Yoshimoto's writing owns has been considered *shoujo*, but she hasn't been aiming her works specifically at the young female market which is where *shoujo* consumables go. In the world of *manga*, there is *shounen manga*, or boys' comics, and *shoujo manga*. In comics for females, there is *shoujo* and *redisu komikku* or ladies' comics. The former deal with young girls' innocence, the latter unabashedly delight in the sexual pleasures of grown women. Technically, Yoshimoto's heroines aren't *shoujo* because aside from having gone past the technical young girl age, they aren't exactly virgins (Spies). In *Kitchen*, for example, as Mikage contemplates her relationship with her old boyfriend, she remembers "how wildly he tossed in his sleep" (Spies), revealing that they had been in bed together. In the short story "A Strange Tale from Down by the River," Akemi professes that sex used to be a hobby before she contracted a liver disease, possibly hepatitis. Yoshimoto's stories aren't of the ladies' comics type either because while her heroines may be sexually experienced, they do not indulge in sexual fantasies or pornography. In fact, what is *shoujo*

about these stories is the psychological *and* emotional treatment of sex. Yoshimoto's heroines stop short of feeling carnal desire; they are simply young, wistful women who try to make sense of their experiences:

I was too sad to be able to sleep in the same bed with anyone; that would only make the sadness worse. But here was a kitchen, some plants, someone sleeping in the next room, perfect quiet...this was the best. (*Kitchen* 16)

If you'd only been a bit gentler just now, and less jaded, if you hadn't assumed that vulgar familiarity when you talked with me, I might have let down my defenses, and gone to spend the night with you somewhere. We could have run away together, just the two of us, and hidden out for a month or maybe even more. We'd have found a cozy little flat where we could have made love, day and night. Forgetting everything, ruining my plans for marriage—even if it had meant that—I might have gone with you. (“A Strange Tale from Down by the River” 155-156)

It is interesting to note that in Yoshimoto's fiction, the relationships between heroines and their leading men seem almost platonic.<sup>2</sup> Again, the rarity of explicit physical contact is very *shoujo*, but this is not to mean that sexuality does not exist for the *shoujo*, because it does. In *shoujo manga*, sexuality takes the form of sensuality: the unintentional meeting of gazes, fingers brushing accidentally, an impulsive embrace. A young girl's shy yet growing awareness of physicality is part of what heightens the tension among characters. There is never explicit sex, and anything sexual is bleached and disembodied, cleansed of malice and bodily filth, and thus the 'sexless' *shoujo*.<sup>3</sup>

It is the absence of sexual relations and the presence of *sensual* connection that make the interaction between characters more intriguing. For instance, in *Kitchen*, the only activity that Mikage and Yuichi ever do together is to feast on Mikage's culinary creations. And the most they ever touch of each other is in a brief but exhilarating scene when Mikage snuggles against Yuichi's arm because of the cold:

“Okay, that's what I'll bring you.” I smiled and opened the car door.  
Suddenly a freezing draft came blowing in.  
“It's cold!” I exclaimed. “Yuichi, it's cold, cold, cold!” I buried my face in his arm, gripping it fiercely. His warm sweater smelled of autumn leaves.  
“Surely it'll be a little warmer in Izu,” Yuichi said, almost contemplatively. I kept my face pressed to his side.  
“How long did you say you're staying?” he said, not moving. His voice resonated directly into my ear.  
“Four days and three nights.” I gently pulled myself away.  
“You should come back feeling a little bit better, and we'll go out for tea again, okay?” He looked at me, smiling.  
I nodded, got out of the car, and waved goodbye. (78)

This passage is one of the finer examples of Yoshimoto's writing and possibly one of the most *shoujo* in its charm. There is a frank innocence in Mikage's actions, inviting readers to guess at what may have rushed through Mikage and Yuichi's minds in those fleeting moments of contact. Such a spare, physical action entails the uncertainty of it being repeated, producing a sentiment of yearning for the moment that was present and then lost. One reason this type of clean, restrained, momentary contact in love stories is so popular with young girls is that it wells up with potential, with beginnings. We know that so much more is going on beneath the superficial interaction, and the knowledge stirs our curiosity and urges us to expect happier developments. A second and perhaps more potent reason is that controlled physical connection is safe—safe from malice, safe from disenchantment, safe from possibilities of heartbreak and

bleak futures with other partners. This is adolescent romantic love: confusingly exciting in its discovery, restrained by both innocence and hesitation, and in the transitory quality of things, true—at least for the moment.

*Romantic love is semiotic.* Another way in which Yoshimoto imitates *shoujo* writing is in using the technique of unreality. In her stories, female narrators speak in a language pervaded by an overwhelming sense of ambiguity: no detailed description of people's faces or clothes, no ardent emotion, no actual geography. We are left clueless as to any peculiarities about the characters' profiles or the particulars of addresses and neighborhoods. Yoshimoto gives us cinematic images which convey more mood than objective information. What results is, in place of factual and descriptive reality, a general dematerialization conditioned by signs.

According to Sato, familial connections in *Kitchen* are disembodied, along with sexual intimacy and other human relationships with respect to conventions of *shoujo* culture. Empty, clean signs take the place of such relations. When Mikage loses the last of her family, she finds that she feels less lonely in kitchens; thus "kitchen," Mikage's sanctuary, becomes the sign for "family." Sato also cites the idea of friendship as signified by an inorganic object: a sofa, which the Tanabes offer Mikage when they take her in after her grandmother's death. Love fares no differently, as the growing romance between Mikage and Yuichi is represented by *ramen* and then *katsudon*. Indeed, parallel to that in *shoujo manga*, physical intimations in romantic relationships are de-emphasized. The nuances of romantic love are only made known by inanimate signs, such as food and eating which Mikage teases Yuichi about:

When was it that Yuichi said to me, "Why is it that everything I eat when I'm with you is so delicious?"

I laughed. "Could it be that you're satisfying hunger and lust at the same time?" (*Kitchen* 100)

*Kitchen* isn't the only Yoshimoto story where food items suggest the nature of love. In the *Lizard* collection, "Dreaming of Kimchee" tells of the conflicting emotions that trouble a young woman whose relationship with her husband began as an extramarital affair. Issues are suddenly resolved on their own with no obvious trigger, although the clarity occurs the night her husband brings home some Korean kimchee. The kimchee which they share begins to symbolize their relationship:

It felt good putting my feverish head down on the cool pillow, scented with kimchee. As I drifted off, I thought of our common dream, and the food, the odor, and the vibes in the room that had brought it about. Despite being bound as separate physical entities, we could share these aspects of daily life, and I knew that sharing, this kind of connection, was what constituted our life together. (*Lizard* 91-92)

The spiritual healing power of love between Chikako and Akira in "Blood and Water" takes the sign of an amulet. The amulet itself is never even precisely described; Chikako herself says, "I don't know exactly how to describe the shape" (101), but attempts to explain how Akira fashions the amulets from wood and metal bent "like those spoons you see with the curved handles" (102). What is special about Akira's amulets is that they seem imbued with spiritual power that lightens Chikako's psychological and emotional burdens:

The first time I held the amulet in the palm of my hand, I could feel a squall of warm tears pass through the sky of my heart. It felt so nice and sweet that it made my hand tingle. It reminded me of a time long ago, when I was a little girl, and someone had given me a newly hatched baby bird to hold. (105-106)

Chikako's relationship with Akira heals her suspicion of spirituality and rejuvenates her trust in people's religious faiths. She is aware of human weakness and the restiveness of time, but because of Akira's love, she learns to at least believe.

The story "Moonlight Shadow" makes distinct use of symbols as well. A little bell that Satsuki gives Hitoshi when they were in high school is witness to the couple's togetherness. As Satsuki narrates:

There was electric charge between our hearts, and its conduit was the sound of the bell. [...] For nearly four years the bell was always with us. Each and every afternoon and evening, in each and everything we did. [...] (*Kitchen* 110)

The bell stays with Hitoshi until the end, when it is lost with Hitoshi in a car accident. The bell then signifies love, the loss of which is the end of life itself for Satsuki. Satsuki lives like a half-zombie for months and recovers only when a mystical phenomenon allows her to say goodbye to Hitoshi properly:

I had a feeling that I heard something faint, far away. [...] The river, myself, the sky—then, blended with the sounds of the wind and the river, I heard what I'd longed for.

A bell. There was no question, it was Hitoshi's. [...]

Across the river, if this wasn't a dream, and I wasn't crazy, the figure facing me was Hitoshi. Separated from him by the water, my chest welling up, I focused my eyes on that form, the very image of the memory I kept in my heart. (145)

The tinkling of the bell heralds the return of Hitoshi's spirit, and this time, when Hitoshi and the bell disappear, Satsuki is able to begin to move on. The river signifies life which surges on and on, unmindful of who has gone and who is left behind. In Satsuki's farewell message to Hitoshi she says, "The flow of time is something I cannot stop. [...] I must keep living with the flowing river before my eyes (150).

In Yoshimoto's fiction, romantic love is signified effectively by inanimate materials. This semiotic quality removes the physical part of love—disembodies it—and thus allows us to better understand its other more telling aspects.

*Romantic love is bishounen.* Possibly the star of the pop culture scene, the *bishounen* is an androgynous character of either sex, extremely beloved by many girls and young women, whether "he" is a man or woman, heterosexual or otherwise. One reason for his popularity with the young Japanese is that he is the ultimate fantasy of sexlessness: the *bishounen* can be an effeminate boy or a masculine girl, wherever applicable, and therefore breaks free of the traditional gender roles assigned to them (Sherman, "Love and other appliances"). Also bearing none of the crassness, brutality and occasional decadence that has come to be associated with the heterosexual male, *bishounen* are safe to fantasize about for they uphold the qualities that *shoujo* desire in their object of affection: beauty, gentleness, sensitivity, and a certain reticence that many women find irresistible. This personality isn't celebrated only by the young, however, as print media has long immortalized such historical heroes as Minamoto no Yoshitsune. After all, the Japanese are in love with the evanescence of youth and beauty which meets the exact requirements of the *bishounen* and as a result, as Ian Buruma phrases it, he is also something "sinister." Youth and beauty perish easily and for this reason, the *bishounen* keeps in or around himself sadness, anger, mystical power or death.

Romantic love in some of Yoshimoto's stories have the tendency to be androgynous or perhaps, as others would prefer to call it, bisexual. In *N.P.*, the narrator Kazami, whose

boyfriend kills himself after translating an expatriate author's ninety-eighth story, falls in love with the mermaid-like charm of the expatriate's estranged daughter Sui. Akemi of "A Strange Tale from Down by the River," bride-to-be and reformed sex enthusiast, tenderly recalls romantic intimacy with a married woman. Again, there is nothing in the stories that will cause the reader to squirm uncomfortably because the treatment of romance and sex is clean and free of pornographic elements. In this sense, their romantic relationships are more androgynous than bisexual for in these cases, love transcends sex and gender, verging instead on the metaphysical rather than the corporeal.

However, the *bishounen* manifests himself in Yoshimoto's stories in ways other than androgyny. *Kitchen* features Eriko, Yuichi's transvestite father/mother whose surgical beauty far surpasses that of the ordinary belle. But it is Yuichi rather than the middle-aged Eriko who comes close to the *bishounen* ideal, that is, "very young, very handsome, very pure of heart, devoted to their mothers, [...] frightfully sincere, endearingly naïve and full of what the Japanese call *stoisizumu* (stoicism), meaning that they rejected female love" (Buruma 129). Yuichi is "a year younger" (*Kitchen* 6) than Mikage, and is "a long-limbed young man with pretty features" (8), whose "tears fell like rain" (7) during the funeral of Mikage's grandmother. While Yuichi doesn't exactly reject female love, he does tend to distance himself from his female friends, first from his old girlfriend and then from Mikage. When Eriko dies, he acts indifferently for a while, as if oblivious to sorrow, meriting remarks like "you hid it well" (63) from everyone including Mikage. Mikage then takes on an almost motherly role: cooking for Yuichi, consoling him—and this too is part of the *bishounen's* charisma. Whether it is his youth, his beauty, his naivete, or his apparent stoicism, the *bishounen* awakens the woman's maternal instinct and makes him all the more attractive.

In the novella "Moonlight Shadow," the kindness and refinement that Satsuki finds in Hitoshi is almost *bishounen*, but the real *bishounen* in the story is Hitoshi's younger brother, Hiiragi. Hitoshi had been driving Hiiragi's girlfriend home when an accident kills them both, and while Satsuki deals with her grief by going jogging, Hiiragi takes comfort in wearing his girlfriend's sailor-style uniform to school. While Satsuki and Hiiragi's family are uneasy about it, his classmates, especially the girls, are sympathetic. Hiiragi tells Satsuki, "And the girls are crazy about me. It must be because, wearing a skirt, perhaps they think I understand them" (120). Satsuki gives this description of Hiiragi:

In his own clothes, he was good-looking enough to turn people's heads. Wearing a black sweater, he was walking along like he always did—tall, long-limbed, calm, cool, and light on his feet. No wonder, I thought as I watched him from behind, the girls couldn't get enough of him. Yumiko had died, and he was wearing her uniform in her memory. It just didn't happen that often, losing one's brother and girlfriend at once. It was the epitome of unusual. Maybe I, too, were I a carefree high school girl, would long to be the one to restore him to life and would fall in love with him. Girls that age find nothing more attractive. (134)

Like Yuichi, Hiiragi strikes a chord in the women around him, even arousing in Satsuki that motherly instinct that so often leads to romance. It is not so difficult to imagine then that Satsuki and Hiiragi, on the road to recovery from their grief, can eventually end up together.

Yoshimoto's heroines always seem to take *bishounen* for their partners. Akira in "Blood and Water" is a small, sensitive guy who can create objects that have the power to heal the spirit. In "A Strange Tale from Down by the River," Akemi meets her fiance during his father's funeral, and she was immediately attracted to him, feeling a great need to comfort him. Yoshimoto never quite puts a macho man acting like a knight in shining armor in the leading

man's role. Instead there is the young, beautiful and gentle boy whose anguish invites the heroine's understanding, and soon thereafter, her love.

*Romantic love is magical.* No doubt about it, the feeling is magical, the kind that would inspire fireworks—or, as in *shoujo manga* and *animé*, showers of rose petals and cherry blossoms. In Yoshimoto's fiction, love literally holds astounding healing powers as it comes to her young men and women just when they need it most: Yuichi and Mikage consoling each other in *Kitchen*, the two doctors in "Lizard," and Akira's amulet for Chikako in "Blood and Water." From "Dreaming of Kimchee" comes this description of the effect of love:

Love had given me energy and clarity of vision. Everything appeared vivid, and I felt sure that I could triumph over everything. (*Lizard* 86)

Of course, it is not only romantic love that seems magical. Yoshimoto's fiction abounds in weird events and other oddities, along the line of Yuichi's mother/father being murdered by a crazy person but still managing to beat her killer to death with a barbell before succumbing to stab wounds. This offbeat quality, that is, the absence of the mundane, is part and parcel of what makes Yoshimoto's writing tick.

However, these fantastic occurrences play a bigger role than spicing up her fiction. They serve as catalysts that bring about the characters' togetherness. For example, the story of "Kitchen" opens and ends with events that are too good to be true but which set Yuichi and Mikage's relationship in motion. After the death of Mikage's grandmother, Yuichi, a boy whom Mikage hardly remembers from school, suddenly shows up on her doorstep to ask if she'd like to come live with his mother and him. Near the close of the novel, Mikage instinctively pinpoints the hotel room where Yuichi is staying and even manages to climb up to his window in her quest to deliver him *katsudon*. Even more fantastic is the dream they share where Yuichi and Mikage clean a kitchen, drink tea and sing a song together. They note this coincidence happily but never discuss it. Mikage thinks:

While what had happened was utterly amazing, it didn't seem so out of the ordinary, really. It was at once a miracle and the most natural thing in the world. (*Kitchen* 41)

To Mikage, the amazing dream was "the most natural thing"—which, paradoxically, reveals a mystical view of love, a love in which persons involved are kindred spirits brought together by cosmic energies, the same cosmic powers that bring to life all the ordinary and extraordinary things in the world.

The magical dream-sharing also occurs in "Dreaming of Kimchee" but more incredible incidents pervade the *Lizard* collection. In "Newlywed" there is a concrete magic element in the person of a Trickster (Sherman, "A Reflection"), an archetypal character whom the discontented, newly married male narrator meets while on a train. The Trickster first appears as a bum but since the narrator, however drunk, will not talk with him, he morphs into a beautiful lady. The ensuing conversation enlightens the newlywed; he realizes that his wife, their home, their train stop have all embedded themselves in his consciousness and that he could not imagine life without them. Chikako of "Blood and Water" ascertains the predominance of magic even in something as casually shared as a lover's words. To pacify Chikako's worries about losing the amulet he gave her, Akira says, "If you lose this one, I can always make you another. I'd do that for you" (*Lizard* 106), about which Chikako reflects:

When you're that moved by someone else's words, part of it has to be good timing, because what Akira said to me, or the leader to my father, might well have



sounded trite or hackneyed to somebody else. It just rolls off the other person's tongue, as if it had no great significance, but I imagine that they realize somewhere deep, deep inside the power of what they've just said. You can feel that they've brought those words from some distant beautiful place just to give away to you. (107)

The title story "Lizard" is even richer with magic, considering that its protagonists are both doctors. Lizard is an acupuncturist who heals with her hands, a gift she discovers when she was a child rushing to help her mother who had been stabbed by a crazy man. In her anger, she wished him dead, but now guilt overcomes her and she tries to redeem herself by healing the sick. The male narrator is a child psychiatrist who has his own demons to battle since he was born out of an act of rape and for which his mother eventually kills herself. Because of the violence both of them witnessed in their childhood, the two characters seem destined for each other:

And now all these confessions about the past. I actually found it shocking to realize what the two of us had been through. Our mutual attraction suddenly made sense and seemed inevitable. (47)

The novella "Moonlight Shadow" in *Kitchen* is also marred by violence in the form of the car accident that kills Hitoshi. However, Hitoshi's abrupt passing away is corrected by "The Weaver Festival Phenomenon [...] where] the residual thoughts of a person who has died meet the sadness of someone left behind, and the vision is produced" (147). This is the miracle that allows Satsuki to catch a final glimpse of Hitoshi to bid her love a proper farewell.

The prevalence of magical circumstances alongside vestiges of tragedy in Yoshimoto's fiction is something to marvel about. It unveils the worldview that her writing undertakes, which is actually the same view that has possessed Japan for most of its history. Fate is the master of all; there is no escaping its blows, just as there is no escaping the rigid expectations of Japanese society. But fate has no face and the Japanese can find no one to blame in the way that Christians would question God. This undoubtedly leads not only to resignation over the unpredictable twists and turns of life but also to a deep helplessness, such as what Lizard despairs over:

"I just wish there were someone, like God or somebody, who was in charge of what went on in this world[...] But there is no higher power, so we have to do it ourselves.

"Even when bizarre things happen to people around us, we just have to believe that anything is possible.[...] I wish someone would just make it stop, so there'd be less suffering." (*Lizard* 49-50)

The pervasive belief that destiny is unknowable, inevitable, and infinitely powerful accounts for many of the depressing conclusions in the storylines of Japanese fiction. Perhaps it is for this reason that Yoshimoto, in true pop lit/transgressive form, consistently includes marvelous events in her stories. In her writing, bad things continue to happen to good yet passive people, but instead of only tragedies, magic comes their way as well. Yoshimoto thus balances the destructive nature of fate by juxtaposing grievous events with happily fantastic episodes.

Love is never incidental in the stories of Yoshimoto. There can be no true coincidence in a world where people are victims of fate. In her fiction, unbelievable occurrences and marvelous events comprise a universe where the element of magic, of the fantastic, arranges for lovers to be together. These magical devices are Yoshimoto's means of subverting traditionally-held notions of love.

*Romantic love is hopeful.* According to a review of *Kitchen*, Yoshimoto works with a “self-professed goal of providing an upbeat ending, that lead to criticism of her work as derivative and saccharine” (“Book review: *Kitchen*”). Now, there are two words in that review that invite debate, these being ‘derivative’ and ‘saccharine’. If there is anything that Yoshimoto’s fiction is a by-product of, it is the stream of Japanese thought and contemporary popular culture through which she encroaches on traditional writing. And if there is anything saccharine about her work, namely, her propensity for happy endings, it is brought about by that supreme transgression called ‘hope’.

Hope is the fantasy that the contemporary *shoujo* believes in. As opposed to older *manga* like *The Rose of Versailles*, the modern *shoujo* culture advocates that a story’s main characters should at least have a chance to live happily ever after, whether or not they are together. Sailormoon must end up with Tuxedo Mask, Tamahome must be reborn to be with Miaka in the twentieth century,<sup>4</sup> Hitomi and Von must delight in the knowledge of their love for one another even if they do have to exist in different dimensions.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the *shoujo* is once again a transgression, because romance seldom succeeds in Japan where arranged marriages are still a practice and many traditional stories still end in lovers parting or in the culturally-understandable suicide.

Nothing like love suicide transpires in the fiction of Yoshimoto. The closest that her characters get is in *N.P.*, where Sui, upon realizing she is pregnant, contemplates suicide with her lover and half-brother Otohiko. But the narrator Kazami changes Sui’s mind: she chooses to leave Otohiko and Kazami to begin a new life with her baby. In the conclusions of Yoshimoto’s other stories, with the exception of “Moonlight Shadow” where as the happy ending, Satsuki moves on after Hitoshi’s death, lovers enjoy the prospect of being together for a long time. This isn’t to say that there is no sadness in her characters’ romantic relationships because after all, grief, discontentment and some angst or other pervade their psyches. In addition, a strong sense of *mono no aware* flavors her writing, giving romantic love the unmistakable aura of nostalgia. A striking example is this passage from “Blood and Water:”

[...] The only thing that scares me is time passing, like when the soft branches of a willow tree are warmed by the sunlight one moment and then ripped by a typhoon the next. As when the cherry blossoms bloom, only to fall to the ground. That this moment will end, with the warm orange sunlight streaming in onto Akira, as he lies curled up, watching his video, and night will come. That is the saddest thing to me. (*Lizard* 120)

Here we see a traditional Japanese aesthetic at work: perishability, the evanescence of things. However, puzzling enough, the above passage is followed by this, the story’s conclusion:

I would go out with Akira and forget, for a brief while, the sorrow that clings to life. I would pretend for a moment that my sadness might someday disappear. (121)

*Forget. Pretend.* Such key words may be the reason for the criticism against Yoshimoto’s writing as being “derivative and saccharine”. To forget sorrow, after all, is to escape, just as the recurrence of fantastic elements in her fiction escapes the logic and order of narrative reality.

However, that may be why Yoshimoto is such a success. She plays with fantasy and reality, ultimately giving her readers hope. We must remember that the universe in which her characters move is ruled by non-anthropomorphic forces beyond the comprehension of human beings. In such a universe, “anything can happen,” as *Lizard* says. Sadness is an inextricable aspect of life, and a person can react to its unwavering presence in two ways, as Mikage’s

thoughts in *Kitchen* exemplifies. One is to despair, as Mikage echoes a friend's words in the wake of Eriko's death: I can't believe in the gods.<sup>6</sup> (86)

The other way is to hope, as Mikage expresses to Yuichi:

“[...] After this you and I may end up seeing nothing but suffering, difficulty and ugliness, but only if you'll agree to it, I want for us to go on to more difficult places, happier places, whatever comes, together.[...]” (101)

Without hope, happiness cannot exist. In the case of Chikako in “Blood and Water,” pretending that sadness can someday disappear is the only way she can be happy. The use of the words “forget” and “pretend” in this context is understandable because, after all, sadness is a constant in life. To pretend in this sense is to hope for happiness.

Hope is also instrumental in the triumph of love. Without it, Mikage and Yuichi will forever dwell at the door to the grave, Satsuki will waste away, Chikako will remain faithless, Akemi will wallow in the mire of her past. They will be unable to believe in joy or kindness, let alone love. Hope, being the sole weapon in the struggle to survive tragedies, allows the characters to believe in themselves and their beloved. Hope subverts the ugly realities of despair and helplessness, and becomes the unreality—the fantasy—that for readers and fictional characters alike need to come true.

Yoshimoto shocked critics who thought her “the product of an abandon completely indifferent to literary traditions” (“On Yoshimoto Banana's Place”). But her writing is revolutionary in light of the stream of Japanese literature that precedes hers, one distinction being the evidence of codes and qualities of popular culture in her work. My brief study of romantic love in Yoshimoto's fiction reveals features of the *shoujo* world: the emphasis on interpersonal relations, beauty, youth, innocence, nostalgia, the atmosphere of dreams and reflections. More importantly, in my discussion of adolescence, symbolism, androgyny, fantasy and hope in Yoshimoto's take on romantic love, I see the methods in which she subverts traditional Japanese sensibilities. Indeed, it can even be said that Yoshimoto elevated the status of romantic love from its conservative insignificance under the collective known as Japanese Society to its sublime, regenerative power in the hands of individuals.

No society exists for Yoshimoto's romantic love. Whatever social restrictions there may be are ignored or overwhelmed by the lovers' inevitable attraction to each other. Love succeeds in her writing because of this very transgression. To lift oneself above the limits of convention—to discover, to disembodify, to transcend the body, to heal, and finally, to believe in happy endings—this is love according to Banana Yoshimoto.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> According to Ian Buruma in *A Japanese Mirror*, Chikamatsu Monzaemon was inclined to be a moralist with his portrayal of love affairs between simple characters who at some point in the story will succeed in preserving their dignity, usually by killing themselves the samurai way (85).
- <sup>2</sup> Or ‘incestuous,’ as Treat prefers, since these normally begin in pseudo-sibling relationships.
- <sup>3</sup> In regarding the *shoujo* as sexless, Treat defines her as an ‘empty symbol’, filled with dreams but devoid of libido. Spies, on the other hand, argues that defining the *shoujo* as a symbol ‘conveniently precludes having to actually talk to one.’
- <sup>4</sup> *Fushigi Yuugi*, animé version.
- <sup>5</sup> *Vision of Escaflowne*, animé version.
- <sup>6</sup> The term ‘gods’ here refers to benevolent beings who control fate in the sense that the Christian God does. But, of course, to the story’s grief-stricken characters, they cannot exist.

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