



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

“Banana-mania”

Gender Politics in Yoshimoto Banana’s Works and Contemporary Japan

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Inga Mekkin Guðmundsdóttir Beck

Maí 2011

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Japanskt mál og menning

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Abstract

Yoshimoto Banana, a popular female writer in Japan, writes stories about Japanese adolescents finding their way in Japan. A great majority of them are female and must face a culture where there are basically separate worlds for men and women, the domestic and the corporate. The characters do not seem to experience this even if it is evident in the texts. Banana's writing shows that women and men have a real hard time relating to each other, resulting in alienation in their divided worlds. Her female protagonists are focused on being independent individuals, in control of their own lives. These women are most often without a proper father figure to rely on and look up to and the men around them are feminine and more often than not weak men. The most feminine of them would be Eriko of *Kitchen* who has actually gone so far as to surgically turn himself into a woman and in that form takes on the bringing up of a son on his own. The idea of gender in Yoshimoto Banana's writing follows no conventions except in bearing a resemblance to popular culture of the *shōjo*. The alienation her characters feel and the lack of the masculine are a reflection of the divided society in Japan while the gender blurring and individuality represent the changes that are taking place and need to be continued and developed in Japan today.

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Introduction

“I am the only one in the world who knows what’s best for me.” Those are the words of Chikako, the female main character of Yoshimoto Banana’s short story *Blood and Water* (“Lizard” 113). Most of Banana’s stories focus on young women in Japan taking some of their first steps as independent adults and the emotional struggle that follows. On top of that already tough situation they must also face a rapidly changing society. Central in those changes and what this essay will focus on are the ideas of gender roles and interaction.

Yoshimoto Banana immediately became extremely popular with the publishing of her first novel *Kitchen* and only two years later in 1989 she had four books in the top ten best seller list. Twice nominated for the Akutagawa Price and the winner of the Izumi Kyōka price, amongst others, her unbelievable popularity made her somewhat of a phenomenon and the word “Banana-mania” has been employed to describe this craze. A distinctive feature in her stories is their lack of masculinity. Father figures are absent or non-existent and male characters are often greatly effeminized even to the extent of actually being women (e.g. in *Kitchen*). Her writing, said to bear some resemblance to graphic novels or *manga* especially in relation to the *shōjo* culture, have brought people, such as Saitō Minako, as far as to claim that to “conventional literary critics, Banana was an alien from an unknown country” (168).

This dissertation will look shortly at gender politics in Japan before and after Banana’s debut, within and outside of the domestic sphere and how her stories touch on the subject through their protagonists and their dealing with their surroundings. The first chapter will look briefly at Japanese society before Banana’s debut; the second chapter looks at Banana’s writing, her characters, sub-sectioned in accordance with different focus points, their alienation, independence, lack of father figures, gender definition and relation to popular culture; and last but not least the third chapter gives an idea of the position of women in Japan today, after the climax of Banana’s popularity.

Japanese Women before *Kitchen*

Women in Japan, just as women across the world, have been struggling to get recognition in a male dominated society. Their situation however is complicated. Japanese women haven't been oppressed for centuries as some sort of slaves. In fact in the pre-modern agricultural society women had their share of power. "The male household head was expected to represent the household to the outside world, whereas the female household head was actually the head of the household" (Ueno, "The position of Japanese women reconsidered" 77). Those were extended family households headed by the eldest son and his wife, where brothers, sisters and any other family members were really nothing more than slaves. As convention moved from agricultural society to industrial society so did the family structures change from extended family households to the nuclear. With that change all married women could be heads of their own households even if that household only contained wife, husband and child. These changes had many complications. Women became more isolated from each other when all they did was stay home and take care of the children instead of working with the rest of the family. Then later with the economic stagflation in the '70s, households required an additional income and most middle class wives needed to add part time work on top of their housewife duties to keep up their middle-class lifestyle (Ueno, "The position of Japanese women reconsidered" 78-80).

The expectations of men and women in Japan created a stereotype of what an "ideal" Japanese couple should be: the hard-working husband who only comes home late at night after a long day of work and a night out with co-workers or customers, and his loyal housewife who stays at home, takes care of the children and greets her husband warmly when he comes home and tends to his every need. The two of them, in spite of living together and having children, lead almost entirely separate lives, she at home, he at the company. That is the ideal Japanese couple, the Japanese dream which has been (and still is for some) fed to

children and girls especially, from early childhood. This can be traced back to the Meiji slogan “good wife and wise mother” (*ryōsai kenbo*) which clearly summarizes the gender ideology which is dominant in Japan. Even if it doesn’t say anything about women as a workforce it implies that it is the natural role of women to become “good wives and wise mothers” (Tamanoi 27).

A scholar named Tajima Yōko wrote an article in the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* in 1993 stating that women are simply foreigners or “*gaijin*” to Japanese men, something alien that is too sharp a contrast to themselves to be able to understand it. She further claims that “only when Japanese men have learned to deal with women as ‘*gaijin*’ successfully, will they be able to say they have achieved the qualifications of a true ‘internationalist’ “ (qtd. in Kelsky 34). Internationalism is the idea that nations should co-operate no matter how different because what they have in common is more important. In this case of course we have genders or individuals instead of nations, genders that have such a gap between them that measures must be taken to bridge that gap.

Some women have chosen to leave Japan to find equality and better opportunities. Karen Kelsky in her essay *Gender Politics of Women’s Internationalism in Japan* speaks of how much easier it is for a Japanese female to get ahead as a career woman in western countries than it is for her in Japan. Kelsky’s argument is that for women to get ahead in Japan and move out of the home does not require a change in the women but rather a change in the men. She notes Japanese feminist Ueno Chizuko’s observation that “women are not interested in an equality that requires the “masculinisation” of women, but rather seek the “feminization” of men” (Kelsky 31). Ueno further states that “Japanese women are asking that men come back to the family sector instead of devoting themselves to the economic imperialists” (Ueno, “Japanese women’s movement” 180). There is a need to transform

Japanese conventions. Things need to be levelled out so that women can have more opportunities in the job market while men more time to be home with their families.

While women are a large part of Japans labour force it is not a part easily obtained for them, especially to wives and mothers. In Jane Condon's book *A Half Step Behind*, published a couple of years before Banana's short story collection *Lizard*, there are stories from Japanese women who describe their experience of the job market in Japan and in other countries. A woman by the name Kiyomi Saitō mentions that although it is illegal for Japanese companies to have rules against women working after marriage or childbirth, it is a fact that many women are forced to quit one way or another. She gives an example of a friend who had gotten married and wished to stay on with the company. None of her fellow employees showed up for her wedding and even if she stayed on with the company for two years after that, in the end she was made so uncomfortable that she gave up and quit (Condon 185). So legally she could have continued working as long as she wanted, but few have the strength to put up with years of organized bullying.

Saitō also gives her own perspective and describes her experience as a career woman. First of all, after she was married she was no longer referred to by her own name. Instead she was simply Tadakawa-san's wife. No one ever asked her what she was doing anymore, only enquired after her husband. She felt she had lost her personality. Later she divorced and got a job as a secretary for the co-founder of Sony. Those kinds of jobs are usually given to women because they won't be promoted and managers are afraid of men in a similar position getting too much power. Another reason she gives for her getting the job was the fact that she was divorced. As a divorcee living alone, she was not expected to want to marry again and could therefore give her all to the job. But no matter how hard she worked she never got recognition for her work and she realised that the job was a dead end one.

Yet another problem with being a career woman in Japan is mentioned by Saitō. That problem is the Japanese language. There is a difference of how the Japanese men and women talk; it automatically gives them different levels of importance or status, the man above the woman. Saitō prefers speaking English. That way she doesn't have to humble herself constantly but can talk at the same level as the men. Not all male co-workers however will accept her as an equal. Those who can accept her as a successful career woman are the men high up within the companies. They are the ones that are secure with their own specialities and don't have to worry about her being more successful than them (Condon 184-193). So it would seem that the only men capable of being "internationalist" are the ones that are not in danger of having their own status compromised. Which brings us back to the idea introduced by Ueno that what is required is for men to be brought closer to the women rather than the other way around. The woman should not stand behind the man, but beside him. Their common goal or interest needs to be realised and accepted by individuals and government alike (this division of course has been provided by the modern industrial society and not by tradition), the most basic being the objective of taking care of your family and being good Japanese citizens. And what better way to reach a goal than as a team rather than through completely divided roles as men and women.

The gap between men and women was not brought on by Meiji slogans alone, there was a number of outside influence as well. To try and further explain this distance between men and women we might go back to the years following World War II. The war left Japan in a terrible state. Two cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, had suffered nuclear attacks and dozens of cities had also been bombed "conventionally" and suffered vast destruction with large numbers of casualties. So at the time of occupation by the United States the Japanese economy, just as the country itself, was in a grim state. The broken economy, however, improved greatly and at impressive speed starting with the Korean War, changing from a

broken, starving nation to a country of prosperity. Their (geographical) position made them the most convenient source for war supplies for the Americans which got people back in employment. It was an amazing economic recovery. But while it may sound like it all came easily, it demanded great effort and hard work of the people (Gordon 238-243).

The economic miracle and industrialisation came hand in hand along with hard work of the people and good organization and discipline. At the same time the move from extended to nuclear families took place as men could easily find work and keep their own wife and home regardless if they were a firstborn son or not. With all the development and progress of the industrialisation women got left behind as “good wives and wise mothers”. Instead of the before dominant small family businesses or farms where the whole expanded family household worked together in running the business, the home and raising the children, large industries and companies spread out. In those the men found work while women stayed at home, isolated with the family which consisted of parents and children only and as men spent very little time in the home it could even be said that the family was only mother and children while the husband and father was simply the breadwinner. Each in their own universe, man and woman, the gap between them got bigger and bigger, resulting in feelings of alienation.

“Banana-mania”

As mentioned in the Introduction, Banana was a phenomenon and one that baffled critics, who did not know quite how to approach her writing. As some have even ignored her work it has been suggested that “critics cannot discern anything in Banana’s works to discuss, i.e. that they are functionally ‘illiterate’ when it comes to reading her” (Treat, “cultural logic” 276). However Banana became quite popular abroad as well as back in Japan with global marketing raising a considerable “curiosity about an Asian young woman named after a tropical fruit” resulting in the so named “Banana-mania” (Treat, “cultural logic” 278). Yoshimoto Banana is something quite special in the world of literature as we shall see in the following chapters on her fascinatingly inconsequential characters and their sometimes trivial surroundings.

The woman alien. Banana herself is not alone in being the “alien” as Saitō calls her. Her stories very often have characters experiencing a feeling of alienation from others, be it from one person or the entire world. In Japan this is something quite real, especially to women who in the post-war economic miracle became somewhat isolated and almost ignored.

Considering these ideas of the ideal Japanese couple and the transformation that has been taking place towards equality it seems vital to start with a look at Banana’s short story *Newlyweds*. Evidently it is a story about a newlywed couple, the homemaker and the working husband. What makes this story worth a closer look is the narrative point of view Banana uses. It is not a story told by a happy housewife who goes around her monotonous daily chores as if they were her only calling in life, receiving her husband happily after a long day of work to their perfect little home. Neither is it a story of a woman desperate to get ahead in the corporate world of Japan, struggling against stubborn men in charge who are determined to keep their spot as the more powerful person and gender. No. It is told through the husband’s eyes. He is the one whose feelings the reader feels and relates to. This young man finds

himself sitting in a train on his way home from work but is reluctant to go home to his wife of one month. As he confides in a fellow passenger we find out he's living the 'Japanese dream', he has a happy housewife at home who takes care of him and welcomes him after a long day of work. They are the stereotypical Japanese married couple. He describes his wife, what she does when he comes home in the evening:

She comes down to meet me with a nice smile, as if she were on a divine mission. She'll have a vase of flowers on the table, or some sweets, and the television is usually on. I can tell that she's been knitting. She never forgets to put a fresh bowl of rice on the family altar every day. When I wake up on Sunday mornings, she'll be doing laundry, or vacuuming, or chatting with the lady next door. Every day she puts out food for the neighbourhood cats, and she cries when she watches mushy TV shows. [...] Thanks to Atsuko's ways, we have a happy home. (6-7)

In spite of having this happy efficient wife he does not seem as happy, "sometimes it's so much fun at home that it makes me want to puke"(7). It seems too much of a cliché to him, too conformed. He is unable to relate to his wife's happiness or to her in general.

[S]ometimes I feel like we live in totally different worlds, especially when she goes on and on about the minutiae of our daily lives, anything and everything, and a lot of it is meaningless to me. I mean, what's the big deal? Sometimes I feel like I'm living with the quintessential housewife. I mean, all she talks about is our home. (10)

He doesn't seem to think the "quintessential housewife" is the real *ideal* woman. As he pictures in his head the station he usually gets off on he imagines a crowd of people, among which a "perfectly made-up secretary passes by, yawning as she walks... I imagine that she's on the way back to the office from an errand. I can tell that she doesn't want to go

back to work; the weather is too nice for that” (14). In spite of being unable to relate to his own wife he can easily relate to the working woman. He can imagine the feeling of being tired after a long day at the office and the longing for being able to enjoy the nice weather outside. Next in his imaginary station scene his wife Atsuko comes into view. As she does, his way of thinking seems to become more negative, he describes her as looking “dowdy” she’s squinting in the sun and wasting time on unimportant decisions such as which shampoo to buy. “Come on, Atsuko, they’re all the same. Just pick one. You look so serious! Shampoo is not something worth wasting time on” (15). Finally we can see how he sees her as something else than a fellow human being, how she scares him and how he is truly unable to understand her or relate to her:

Our house is Atsuko’s universe, and she fills it with small objects, all of her own choosing. She picks each of them as carefully as she did that bottle of shampoo. And then Atsuko comes to be someone who is neither a mother nor a wife, but an entirely different being.

For me, the beautiful, all-encompassing web spun by this creature is at once so polluted, yet so pure that I feel compelled to grab on to it. I am terrified by it but find myself unable to hide from it. At some point I have been caught up in the magical power she has. (16)

The story is a perfect example of both the stereotypical couple (the husband who has stayed late at work and the wife who takes care of the home in his absence) and the changing attitudes (his annoyance with his wife’s simplicity). His statement that she is “neither a mother nor a wife” is also curious, she’s not the “good wife and wise mother” which society expects her to be, neither is she the working girl which he can relate to. Yōko’s previously mentioned idea of “*gaijin*” does ring true for *Newlyweds*. Atsuko could just as well be some green extraterrestrial making him dinner and washing his clothes. She is an inapprehensible

being to him, her motives unclear: why does she spend so much time trying to choose a bottle of shampoo? This feeling of alienation however is not apparent when he has the vision of the working woman, it is almost as if she is his female equivalent, he can transfer his own thoughts and ambitions to her and understand her as a fellow human being. Given the choice he would probably prefer if his wife, rather than being the quintessential housewife, was a determined, goal-oriented career woman. Perhaps this ease with the career woman suggests that the feeling of “*gaijin*” men feel towards women is controlled more by fear of domesticity rather than fear of women.

The woman her own master. For Banana a male hierarchy is not the norm and in some of her stories does not exist at all. She may not write about ambitious career women but her female protagonists are independent from their male counterparts or at the least their equals in more than one sphere. Sometimes her male characters even appear almost wimpy, which makes the women even stronger and more independent in comparison.

One of Banana’s short stories that show us an independent young female is her *Blood and Water* from the short story collection called *Lizard*. Chikako, our heroine, spent a great part of her life living in a religious sect with her parents as she was growing up. Feeling isolated and restricted in the village she decides to leave it and move to Tokyo to start her own life. While the fact that she gets a job with the help of a married man she dated doesn’t give us much confidence in her as a woman, she is very independent and in control in her later relationship with a man she meets called Akira. She herself describes Akira as “a little wimpy” (111). He is unemployed and makes little objects of wood and metal which Chikako sells for him since he doesn’t like being out amongst other people.

The two of them are obviously not the “ideal” Japanese couple, which is mostly non-existent in Banana’s stories. They are rather a bit of a twist, a reverse of the “normal” male-

female dynamics. Banana does seem to focus more on the individual Chikako rather than the woman. “So I didn’t have such a hard time fitting in with people in the city, because I was fully aware of the scars my upbringing had left on me. I knew why I had left the village, and I tried to remember where I had come from and where I was trying to go” (99). She is very much aware of herself as an independent human being. “I was who I was and could never become the child of any other mother and father” (105). She accepts who she is completely and doesn’t seem to try to fit into some mould of Japanese femininity in any way. “Akira often gets mad at me because he thinks I’m too nice to strangers, and cold as a fish at home. What can I do? He’s right, but that’s the way I am” (110). Akira himself is no ordinary person either, no ordinary male. His little amulets according to Chikako are very special.

I wish you could have a chance to hold one in your hands, too. ... Perhaps it’s a similar sensation to when a baby suckles at her mother’s breast and feels the nipple in her mouth for the very first time. That gentle shove toward the realization that someone accepts you totally and unconditionally. Akira’s pieces have the power to communicate that. (105)

This description connects Akira directly to that idea of the feminization of men, of bringing men into the home. He has the power to create things capable of giving you the feeling of complete acceptance as a child feels from its mother, as any child should have from a parent, and here emphasizing that this feeling can be provided by a masculine figure (a father figure) just as well.

When he was home, Akira was just an ordinary guy, even a little wimpy, in fact. Sometimes when I saw him like that, I wondered where inside that small body lay the strength to create such amazing objects, objects that had the power to heal. (111)

Here Akira is given even more feminine attributes, creating objects in “that small body” suggests pregnancy; she implies these are things coming from within him.

Chikako seems very focused on individuality and mentions that before she met Akira she “had not yet become [her] own person, even though [she’d] been living apart from [her parents]” (112-113). She points out that moving out from your parents house or getting married does not necessarily go hand in hand with being independent, there are many “who are still carrying around their parents’ legacy ... they’ve never really grown up” (113). They are carrying on in a cultural rut, accepting their stagnation instead of moving forward. She realises the importance of being your own person.

Only after I met Akira did I truly understand what they mean when they say that all you really have is yourself ... I am the only one who knows what’s best for me. I’m just here, deciding things I need to decide for myself ... I am my own home, and this is where I belong, and things keep going forward, endlessly (113).

She at times reminds us of the idea of the woman alien, how different men and women can be, but how we can use it to our advantage. “He and I fit together so well, like the swirl on the yin/yang symbol-his tough resilience and my resilient toughness” (120). This resonates Kelsky’s idea of true internationalism, they are absolute opposites but working together equally towards a common goal is what matters.

Banana is not known for some mainstream conventional characters or situations. Inescapably some oddities and bizarre facts must sometimes be overlooked since going into too much detail in those would demand a much larger project. One such case would be Banana’s short story *Lizard* where we have an example of a man and a woman who appear to be equals, both career-wise and in their personal life. *Lizard* does not have the same upside-down male-female dynamics as we get in *Blood and Water*. Nevertheless we have here

another example of a dependent effeminised male. The woman however is equally dependent upon him. The story is told from the man's point of view. When he first sees Lizard as he calls her he has just been dumped by a married woman he was seeing (remember in *Blood and Water* it was the female who was seeing a married man). This gives the reader right away an idea of a quite effeminate man, an idea backed up by the fact that he works with children and that at the beginning of the story he is sleeping at home when Lizard comes to his place in the middle of the night. He is in complete awe of her: "I felt overwhelmed by the strength of this small woman" (21). The two of them are emotionally dependent upon each other, she on him especially. "I've become her sole outlet, the only person she can relate to" (20). That does not mean that she is a weak woman who does not associate with other human beings, but she is very different, "Lizard seemed ... of a different breed" (24), and far from perfect, "her cheeks were dotted with freckles, and she wore too much makeup" (28). In the story he learns that she can heal people with her hands and that she herself discovered that when her mother was attacked in front of her when Lizard was a child. Both have had horrifying experiences as children, Lizard seeing her mother being attacked with a knife by a lunatic and him seeing his mother commit suicide making them even more extraordinary characters. However, no matter how extraordinary and strong they are, she healing the sick and him working with children with mental problems, they need each other. She buries her face in his chest to feel comforted and he feels rejuvenated. "Her every gesture, every move, brought life to me, a man who had been dormant for so long" (42). In a horrible world, all they have and count on is each other, constituting for them a family.

Without a father. John Whittier Treat discusses in his essay on Banana and *shōjo* culture that “there are no stereotypically “perfect” families” in Banana’s stories but rather what seems to be a never ending supply of “dysfunctional” families (369). He further notes that “[t]he father is always distant or missing entirely in Banana’s stories” (370). In his example story the novel *Tugumi* (Tsugumi) no regret is expressed over the lack of the father figure but that does not go for all of Banana’s stories.

Considering Treat’s assertion of the missing or distant father we can have a second look at Banana’s *Blood and Water*. The father appears in the story and, however distant, is mentioned more than once. His masculinity and influence on the protagonist’s life however is debatable. Chikako, our main character, lived with her parents in a village founded by a religious sect for years. Her parents had moved there after they had had all their money stolen from them by a friend and business partner of her fathers. Instead of starting over again and continuing to work hard as most do after a shock, they get involved in this sect and end up selling their house and going to live in the village the sects leader founded. This does seem to show some lack of masculinity in the father. Turning your tail to flee when the going gets tough instead of staying and fighting is not exactly an example you would want to set for your children. But at the same time it gives your protagonist Chikako a part in her father’s life and an insight to his character. He is actually involved in her life. But so was everyone else in the small village. “Though I hadn’t attended regular school, I had learned lots from people in the village ... Everyone in the village had time on their hands, and they were more than willing to share their knowledge with others” (99). But not all of her experience there or feel of the place was good. “At some point, it struck me that the village and my parents reeked of defeat, and that I did too. A village full of losers” (95). In spite of having cowards for parents Chikako finds the strength and determination to go to Tokyo to start her own life away from the sect. She finds herself a young man quite similar to her own father. Someone sensitive and

unwilling to deal with the outside world but with whom she has a chance to bond and spend time with. Both men, boyfriend and father, are greatly effeminized in their actions, and with that giving the female Chikako independence outside the home. They also give her the chance to realise her power over her own life and being. “Despite my mother and my father and the village, despite the apartment I share with Akira, I am the only one in the world who knows what’s best for me. I’m just here, deciding things I need to decide for myself” (113). So Treat is indeed right that the father is a distant figure, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t have a purpose. It is a fact that with the economic miracle men seemed to disappear from the home. The small family businesses, run from home by the family disappeared and men moved out into the offices while wives stayed behind taking care of the children and the home. They became the “good wife, wise mother” with whom the children grew up. But here Banana goes back to that close-knit family, that idea of staying together and learning from each other in the nest of their small community. She then has Chikako, a fully-fledged hatchling, leave that nest completely capable of learning from and dealing with her surroundings and making her own way in life. She is an independent woman in balance with herself in a way she might not have been had she not had that access to both of her parents, cowards or no.

A contrast of the present but distant father of *Blood and Water* is the complete lack of the father figure in Banana’s novel *Amrita*. The narrator Sakumi is a young woman who lost her father as a child. Her mother, years later, remarried and divorced and their home “once the perfect union of ‘father-mother-an-child’ vanished ... became something of a boarding house” (5). The household consists of Sakumi, her mother and little brother, her cousin and a friend of her mother’s called Junko. Sakumi had a sister as well but she died after drinking a fair amount of alcohol, taking an excessive amount of sleeping pills and driving into a telephone pole. Sakumi says a very interesting thing in relation to her sister: “if the same people don’t spend enough time in a home, even if they are connected by blood, their bonds will slowly

fade away like a familiar landscape” (6). Her sister had gone into show business very young, modelling and acting and it had become her home. It’s the same thought as has been going on in Japan in relation to their work arrangements. Men are spending way too little time at home and too much at work losing their place within the family. For this girl the lifestyle has resulted in suicide. Not having had the proper upbringing of mother and father she didn’t have the ability to deal with the world and life with the added pressure of fame. Yoshio, Sakumi’s little brother from their mother’s second marriage, is living in this twisted family environment as well and his chances of having a normal life is stated by young writer called Ryūichirō: “The poor kid’s surrounded by women three or four times his age. Anyone put in that situation is bound to turn into a freak” (19). Yoshio is very young and after his mothers divorce is left without a father figure in his life. Ryūichirō also turns out to be right, Yoshio is no ordinary child, later on in the story he requests to be admitted into an institution for “special children” after developing a sort of second sight which troubles and confuses him.

Sakumi seems to be the only one who has a slight chance of a normal life as she falls and hits her head, losing all her memory and is in a way re-introduced to herself and literally has to learn who she is and what to do with that knowledge. As she gradually retrieves her memories and life back she forms a relationship with her late sister’s boyfriend the writer Ryūichirō who becomes a bit of a father figure or role model for Yoshio who is in great need of one. Sakumi tries to point this out to her mother

Yoshio’s absolutely enthralled with Ryūichirō. He listens to whatever Ryūchan says. Yoshio’s back in school because Ryūichirō convinced him to be there. It’s hard, you know, for the four of us women to encourage him like that, since all of his life we’ve treated him like a baby doll. (173)

Her mother on the other hand doesn't seem to agree or want to accept Yoshio's need for a male role model. "You're wrong ... Yoshio listens to what Ryūichirō has to say because he's an outsider in our home; it has nothing to do with the fact that he's a man" (173).

Only once in the whole novel does a father make an actual appearance and that is when Sakumi takes Yoshio to meet his dad and they take a walk in Chinatown. "Yoshio was walking with 'Father.' They were holding hands. Both faces were shining: 'Father's' face as he explained what was going on in this shop or the other, and Yoshio's face as he earnestly tried to listen" (346). It is a simple scenario but very important to that little boy and the topic as a whole. Everyone needs their parents and this simply emphasizes what Yoshio has been lacking in his life. A father figure is just as important as a mother to any child. The only other real mention of a father in the novel is when Sakumi remembers an afternoon with her father she had as a young child. Her memory is a clear reference to the exceedingly strenuous work demands that the Japanese have.

My father had gone for the results of a medical exam ... I'm sure his medical reports were already threatening him with a shadow of death, clearly recording signs of his high blood pressure and overwork ... I remembered my father had already put on an unusual amount of weight. Everything was crazy at his job.

He'd stayed the night there a few times. (442)

As a little girl she failed to recognize what she sees now as an adult and to understand her father's words to her. "even more than trying to fathom you as older, I think it's harder for me to see myself as being there when it happens ... I really don't think I'll be here when you and Mayu grow older" (443). At this point Sakumi remembers screaming in objection, but then asking her daddy for a doll. He is an important figure to her, but he is overworked as many in Japan and knows he won't be around much longer. Because of his high blood pressure and over demanding work ethic he will not be there to see his daughter grow up.

Treat, yet again, claims that with the disappearance of the “conventional household” and the father’s nonexistence in the home, his authority disappears as well and “all fathers, their power and their appeal, are rendered moot” (“Shojo culture” 370-371). While their power may indeed disappear it is still a fact, and one that shows in these two stories discussed in this chapter, that the father is still an important figure to anyone. He is replaceable, he is not indispensable but he is vital to a healthy upbringing of any person on their way to adulthood. This is backed up by some scholars to whom the effect that the absence of the father in the home can have on modern Japanese youth has been a matter of worry:

Paternalists blame the interconnected phenomena of paternal deficit and maternal excess not only for the problems riddling Japanese families, such as violent crimes committed by youths, prostitution by middle-class teenage girls, and the refusal of children to attend school, but also for a broad range of economic, social, and political upheavals that the nation has seen in the past decade. (Yoda 239-40)

They feel that the root of the problems of today’s youth is that children are being smothered by their mothers and deprived of fatherly care and attention. They also claim that it is the root of recent political turbulence. It must be changed so that Japanese society can keep evolving and become a better place, a place of equality and harmony.

All in all both *Amrita* and *Blood and Water* alike are a cry for bringing the man and father back to the family sector. And as has been discussed earlier that should be achieved through the feminization of men rather than masculinisation of women.

Neutral gender. In Banana's writing at some point we reach a certain blurring of genders. What is male, what is female and what is somewhere in between? Is there ever a neutral gender? According to Yoda Tomiko the idea that Japan is a "maternal society", which has been dominant in all discussions relating to gender issues in Japan through the years, is a potent cliché that needs to be reconsidered (239). The children are raised by the stay-home mother while the father (the man dominating the corporate society of Japan) works all day. The role of the husband as a father and figure of authority in the home has diminished greatly in post-war Japan. But how would a man handle being a single parent, how would a child turn out in those surroundings? Banana wrote a story of such a scenario which will hardly be considered very common or even realistic but the idea is interesting none the less, raising a question of what gender really is.

Mikage's declaration of love to kitchens of the world at the beginning of Banana's popular novel *Kitchen* is something, had it been written by a man, that would cause the most radical of feminists to let out a battle cry in a declaration of war. But for Banana this is simply a natural earnestness that shines out through most if not all her stories. What is more important for this story *Kitchen* however is her portrayal of the male characters. Banana brings this idea of feminisation of men and bringing man back into the home onto a whole new level. With this story she combines mother and father in one with the transgendered Eriko. Mikage, a young student left alone with the death of her grandmother is invited to stay with a fellow student, Yuichi, an acquaintance of her grandmother, and his mother Eriko. Eriko however is actually Yuichi's father who decided to undergo major surgery after his wife died. Yuichi casually tells Mikage about Eriko's decision:

After my real mother died, Eriko quit her job, gathered me up, and asked herself, 'What do I want to do now?' What she decided was, 'Become a woman.' She knew she'd never love anybody else. She says that before she

became a woman she was very shy. Because she hates to do things halfway, she had everything 'done,' from her face to her whatever ... She raised me a woman alone, as it were. (14)

Yuichi doesn't seem to lament any of this, having grown up with a caring parent. His parent however worries about him and how he was raised.

You know, I haven't been able to devote myself full-time to raising him, and I'm afraid there are some things that slipped through the cracks ... He's confused about emotional things and he's strangely distant with people. I know I haven't done everything right ... But I wanted above all to make a good kid out of him and I focused everything on raising him that way. (19)

Even if she has worried of her son and what he has grown up to be, she does not once express regret over her decision to become a woman. Although of course it hasn't been easy for her:

It's not easy being a woman ... I learned it raising Yuichi. There were many, many difficult times, god knows. If a person wants to stand on her own two feet, I recommend undertaking the care and feeding of something ... By doing that you come to understand your own limitations. (41)

Not many people have experienced being both male and female but the formerly male Eriko has. She became a woman and raised a son on her own. Yuichi's claim that she knew she'd never love anyone else implies that she was determined to give her son a mother, and since she couldn't imagine being married to anyone else than Yuichi's deceased mother she took on the task herself as literally as she could. Her admirable independence, stubbornness and the decision however are what cause her premature death. A man sees her and falls for her beauty but is shocked to find out she is actually a man. He harasses her, comes to her club many times but instead of getting help to get rid of him Eriko is determined to take care of the issue herself. One evening he goes completely crazy and attacks her with a knife, giving her a

deadly wound. She manages to swing a barbell at him, beating him to death. “There! ... Self-defence, that makes us even” are her last words (45). For Yuichi however, the last words he gets from his mother are in a letter she wrote to him when she was afraid of her life. The letter however is from Yuji the father as well as Eriko the mother.

Just this once I wanted to write using men’s language, and I’ve really tried. But it’s funny - I get embarrassed and the pen won’t go. I guess I thought that even though I’ve lived all these years as a woman, somewhere inside me was my male self, that I’ve been playing a role all these years. But I find that I’m body and soul a woman. A mother in name and in fact. (52)

The fact here is that men are fully capable of “mothering” their children and caring for them on their own. They don’t have to go as far as Eriko, formerly Yuji, and actually change genders, but if there is will there are possibilities. In spite of the unconventional parent, Mikage, who Eriko thinks of as a daughter after she comes to stay with them, and Yuichi are quite capable of dealing with the outside world, and even more so if they stick together, the two orphans uniting in their loneliness.

Mikage, Yuichi and Eriko have many things in common with other characters covered so far. Mikage’s realisation that “on this truly dark and solitary path we all walk, the only way we can light is our own” (21) reminds us of Chikako of *Blood and Water* and her declaration “I am the only one in the world who knows what’s best for me”. They are both finding their footing in the world, learning to stand on their own as young independent women, perhaps in unconventional circumstances, but they turn out more independent in consequence. Yuichi resembles Chikako’s boyfriend Akira, closing himself off from the world. When Eriko dies it takes him a long time to contact Mikage to tell her what has happened, too scared to face reality and he spends his time alone at home, drinking. He’s even a little bit like Sakumi’s little brother Yoshio who doesn’t feel he belongs anywhere, stops going to school and is

terrified of losing the only parent he has. Yuichi, when he finally tells Mikage of Eriko's death, is terrified she will get angry and never want to talk to him again. Eriko however is a more difficult case. She, or he, like Sakumi is concerned about the upbringing and emotional life of those around her, in Sakumi's case her little brother Yoshio, in Eriko's case, her son Yuichi and the stray Mikage. Eriko however is much more than just a parent. She is the man brought into the home and family life, she is the independent woman, raising a child alone and owning her own business, a gay bar. Eriko's decision to become a woman never seems to have had anything to do with sexuality. She simply realised she "didn't like being a man" (81), as a man she was always very good looking, and she used those good looks and charm in running her bar. Her sexuality is never in question, nor is it really even mentioned, it is clearly stated that she would never fall in love with anyone after the death of Yuichi's mother. So in spite of her age and experience, she, like Mikage, is somewhat of a *shōjo*. In her years as a woman she is really just an adolescent and she is cut off from any established ideas of gender.

Banana and popular culture. Banana, born Yoshimoto Mahoko, is a daughter of Yoshimoto Takaaki an important figure in the intellectual world of post-war Japan. Banana, however, in spite of her father's presence in the literary world, claims that her inspiration to become a writer did not come from her father but rather from her reading of *manga* (Treat, "Shōjo culture" 359). John Whittier Treat describes the novel *Kitchen* as a "first work by a woman slighted by many critics at home for its kinship with comic books and other teenage schlock" ("cultural logic" 274). A characteristic feature of Banana's writing that links her to the world of *manga* is that idea of the *shōjo* culture. The *shōjo* is in essence the female adolescent consumer to whom a certain genre or kind of *manga* is targeted. The *shōjo* is also Banana's most common protagonist and her largest readership. Defining the *shōjo* as "female adolescent" is of course a gross simplification. To make use of the image given by Treat the basic purpose of human kind, as with any other species, is producing more of us. In that sense the child is a product of the parents who are producers. As the child grows up and gets married it becomes a producer and the circle continues. The *shōjo* however is neither child nor parent, she (or it) is a commodity with the potential of becoming a producer, she has hit puberty and is therefore no longer a child but until she gets married she will remain in this unproductive stage of *shōjo*. With the *shōjo* is a certain idea of innocence, the thought of Hello Kitty is in her mind more appealing and more common than the thought of starting her own family. She is a pure consumer of culture and life. Treat points out that translating the term into a simple English phrase is impossible, "young girl" would be incorrect since it can include infants and "young woman" can imply "a kind of sexual maturity clearly forbidden to *shōjo*" (Treat, "Shōjo culture" 364). Thinking back on those stories already mentioned here and even some others, sex is something rarely mentioned by Banana's female protagonists. Chikako of *Blood and Water* has and mentions her relationships with two men but doesn't mention sex in relation to either of them. Only once is that mentioned in the story that is when

she thinks back on all the things which the people in the village taught her, including “the pleasures of making love in the great outdoors” (99). Even there it has a certain level of innocence attached to it. Sakumi of *Amrita* also seems far removed from the idea of this kind of grown up relationship between man and woman, even though sex is certainly mentioned more than once it is never of any importance. Her entire narrative seems to focus much more on her finding her own identity as a girl in the past, as she has lost her memory, and woman in the future and in the meantime trying to maintain some kind of balance in her abnormal and somewhat random family life. Then there is Sakurai Mikage of *Kitchen*. She is an orphaned young woman (*shōjo*) who is welcomed into another partial family and tries to keep a normal relationship with her pseudo-brother Yuichi even after his parent has passed away. The relationship however after that death ceases to be a brother-sister relationship but they continue to find comfort in each other which never becomes in any way sexual in the story. The *shōjo* could almost be considered a third gender on its own, the neutral, “neither male nor female but rather something importantly detached from the productive economy of heterosexual reproduction” (Treat, “Shōjo culture” 364).

Japanese Women since Banana

As in all civilization, progress in Japan is inevitable. As a nation with a reigning emperor as the head of state, where the male bloodline is kept in charge, women have been somewhat in the shadows. There have been debates however concerning princess Aiko, who is the only child of Crown Prince Naruhito and Crown Princess Masako, that she should be allowed to ascend the throne and that laws limiting succession to men only should be changed, a clear sign of the growing expectations of women (Yoshida n.pag.). With the *ryōsai kenbo* ideology (good wife, wise mother) being the governing idea of gender relations, expectations of women, outside the domestic sphere especially, have not been high. “Many agree Japan’s greatest untapped human resource is highly motivated women wanting to utilize their intellect and creative power and to be recognized for it” (Futagami 11). Japanese culture has held back progress for women, not just with the *ryōsai kenbo* ideology but also with conventions which can be summed up with the Japanese proverb *deru kui wa utareru*, literally ‘the stake that sticks out will be hammered down’. In other words: it’s better to conform than stick out.

Japanese companies want men in career positions and hire women for shorter-term or part time work as they are expected to quit their jobs after marriage and childbirth. While those views are changing and it is possible for women to take a year of child care leave (since 1995) from work, it still is difficult for them since not much support exists for them to make work and family life work together and their pay is still considerably lower than that of men. Women however, after generations upon generations of caring for family and children, can be very resourceful when they feel they have to.

Necessity is the mother of invention. Women have come to realise that when there isn’t a ready place for them that is willing to meet their needs and give them proper jobs, they must create those themselves. They aren’t a group that must stand and fall as a group in anything and everything. They are individuals and they can do what they want with their own

lives. While entrepreneurship has not been very big in Japan which favours more secure lifetime employment systems with large companies, female entrepreneurship is on the rise. That is the ideal way for a woman to balance work and family, by having your own business where you can control your hours at your own convenience and your families, and even work from home. The internet is the perfect sphere for this kind of business. A case study by Shiho Futagami and Marilyn M. Helms looks at one such company, Digimom Workers, which specializes in Internet projects, and the staff consists solely of mothers. (14) When Noriko Teramoto started the company her husband was against the idea, but slowly he came to terms with it.

Fighting against convention and changing attitudes is a difficult and slow process, but it's a fight that Japanese Women have been fighting diligently, albeit subtly, for decades. Getting legal rights and changing a national mind-set are two battles that go hand in hand. While Noriko Teramoto is a very good example she is far from being alone, there is Tomoko Namba who is CEO for DeNA, a successful mobile internet company which owns Mobage, the most visited site in Japan. There is Keiko Iida, President of Photonet Japan, an online photo server for cellular phones and the list goes on (Griffy-Brown n.pag.). Not to mention Yoshimoto Banana herself, a phenomenon, an icon, a hugely successful and popular writer amongst these same young women who must face Japan today with all its hindrances and opportunities.

Conclusion

Japan is a country rich of culture where standing together as a group is important. Being loyal to your company and family is a responsibility that weighs heavily on the people. Amidst it all it is difficult for an individual to flourish, especially a woman. Banana Yoshimoto's stories however focus solely on the individual and her or his reality. Banana's characters do not worry about how they can best serve their society but how they best serve themselves for their own person to grow and mature into an independent being and those closest to them, their family. Most of them experience themselves to be very alone, alien in their own environment, which is something they must overcome, or learn to live with. Same goes for women in Japan. The society and attitude is changing, somewhere it still remains the same, rigid, difficult for women to get what they want in terms of job security and respect as there is a different role expected of them. But this won't stop them. The gender gap is something that must still be bridged, to improve possibilities for women when they are ready to step outside into the corporate world, and also to improve family life by letting the men step back a little into the home. Banana describes it very vividly, while her characters are not visibly demanding in terms of human rights they show traces of feminism, or more clearly, her characters and plot all build on a certain amount of equality. Men are not superior to women anywhere in Banana's stories and that is how it should be, equal. Men and women deserve equal consideration and can both be sensitive and amazing regardless of gender.

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