

Love—a glimpse into  
a cloudy sky



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Set in postmodern Japan, the novella *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto is a tale of two young people struggling to find a means of self-expression.

Suspended in a fast-paced society that often isolates them in a state of constant restlessness, the main characters Yuichi and Mikage seek solace within each other; their profound love shows that individuals can find a sense of belonging and core identity in life through unconcealed displays of emotion and sincere interactions with others.

The absolute, sincere nature of Yuichi and Mikage's love shows readers the importance of authenticity in not only building relationships, but also in living life. In one scene of the novella, Mikage compares the conversation she had with Yuichi to "a glimpse of stars through a chink in a cloudy sky", ruminating that "perhaps, talks like this would lead to love" (30). This comparison of a conversation to a "glimpse of the sky" shows that genuine human interaction allows individuals to identify deeply with others, and leads them to experience 'celestial-like' revelations sharing profound thought.

Having experienced death and long, dark moments of loneliness, Yuichi and Mikage understand that conversation is not just trivial banter—it is the vehicle for visceral vivification of emotion, by which individuals can seek spiritual consolation through identifying with others. Indeed, the conversations between them grow increasingly profound and honest. In one of the most memorable scenes of the novella, Yuichi asks Mikage earnestly within the enclosed space of an apartment elevator whether she thinks that "seeing such a beautiful moon influences what one cooks...in a more human sense" (61). In the intimate proximity of an elevator space, the words of Yuichi are laden with a profundity that exposes his innermost love for

beauty. The candid directness with which those words are pronounced surprises Mikage, as “[her] heart faltered for an instant” and she confesses, “he spoke as if he knew [her] very soul” (61). Seeking solace and spiritual connection with others, both Yuichi and Mikage unsheathe their pretensions and speak candidly. It is this down-to-earth attitude that brings their love to surpass the ordinary romantic relationship, at furthest remove from that expected of two young college students. Yuichi and Mikage’s love, almost divine in its complete honesty, contributes to the idea of eros, a deep form of love that, when shared between people with a common pursuit or ideal, forms a bridge of immense understanding. The open interactions between Yuichi and Mikage show that ideally not only love, but all emotion, should be without pretense and authentic in nature.

While both Mikage and Yuichi are vulnerable in their display of unmasked emotion, it is Yuichi’s absolute sincerity that elevates their relationship to one profound beyond question. Through Mikage’s perspective, readers encounter Yuichi’s androgynous sentimentality; when expressing his musings on the moon, Yuichi “agreed with himself again and again, carrying on a one-man conversation”, to which Mikage replied, “you’re just like a child” (61). Mikage continues to describe Yuichi’s character as being almost child-like in its complete sincerity, anecdotally commenting on the way Yuichi would look Mikage straight in the eye and speak with the sincerity of “someone trying to persuade a murderer to turn himself in” (37). Here, Yuichi’s emotions are almost palpable as he pours with intensity his reverberating feelings towards his conversations. This characterizes him as a ‘lost child’ who has the naïve conviction that the rest of the world wants to

equally share their deepest emotion with him. Yuichi's deep-rooted trust in the display of emotion often gives the impression of being a vulnerable, ingenuous child, as children's shameless displays of emotion are often viewed as being 'unsophisticated'. However, it is specifically this heartfelt sincerity that equips Yuichi with an unfaltering strength. Through Mikage's perspective, she believes that if "[she wanted] to see the moon over Arabia right now, [Yuichi] would say, 'let's go'" (75). Yuichi, empowered with his unwavering sincerity, is thus portrayed as being Mikage's protector despite having experienced agonizing grief. Depicted as "a willow beaten down by the driving rain" (62), Yuichi is compared to the graceful and lithe tree fighting fearlessly against the penetrating, 'driving rain' to show both the feminine and masculine traits of his persona. Yuichi is androgynous in the juxtaposition of his unconcealed display of sentimentality, with his healing role in Mikage's life. Through the androgyny of Yuichi, the author suggests that individuals should strive for absolute self-expression and seek connectivity with others. Just as Yuichi and Mikage were initially confounded by bouts of loneliness, failing to seek connectivity with others would lead to losing grasp of one's true identity.

Mikage and Yuichi's sincere self-expression in their profound love helps them find a sense of core identity to bring spiritual gratification. The connectivity that they sought for shows that in the absence of profound love, the individual's sense of identity may be lost. Given the rampant consumerism gripping modern day Japan, the younger generation is plagued with an incessant restlessness, leading to feelings of isolation in the postmodern society. As Mikage observes, "Yuichi hated spare time"—the characters

initially try to seek the ' Other' within themselves, but to no avail and the loneliness remains uncured (28). Unable to bear the time spent alone, Yuichi's inner mind lacking the connectivity with another individual is presented as a gloomy, maze-like structure, directly mirrored by the sinuous makeup of the hotel Yuichi escapes to. Yuichi's room is described as " another world...the covers on the futon from which [he] had risen still bore the shape of his body" (98). The futon still in the tangible shape of his figure provides evidence that his ' escape' is only a physical one, and that without the spiritual connection to another person—the sincerity of love—the sense of self-identity will be lost in a consumerist society that only nurtures self-absorbed people who seek solitude through tangible objects. Ultimately, Yuichi fails in escaping the lonely calls of his own mind, and realizes that the solution towards finding himself and his true identity is through the meaningful interactions with Mikage, a profound relationship that will efface the emptiness.

The sense of identity provided by modern Tokyo's affluent culture is bestowed upon the young generation through participating in the consumer culture driven ' utopia', rather than through seeking the abstract breakthrough within themselves. Thus, Yuichi and Mikage must find a more personalized sense of identity, and do so through profound love. By candid self-expression in their relationship, both characters find connection with something dynamic and positive, bringing purpose into their lives.

While the simplicity of Yoshimoto's novella Kitchen may seem to confine it to consumerist writing like Shojo manga, its core values, such as candid love, are indeed counterculture in their immediate authenticity. The sincere

relationship shared by Yuichi and Mikage transcends the idea that through unconcealed display of emotion and interactions with others, individuals may find a sense of belonging and a core self identity. Yoshimoto shows readers it is human nature that we seek raw emotion and self-expression. Even though the society we live in today is perhaps excessively capitalistic, it is not a dystopian world—the authentic love found in Kitchen suggests that in every human being lives the small echo of raw naivety, a natural predilection of emotion over reason.