



ARTICLE



<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01416-w>

OPEN

Hybrid narrative in Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen*

Dao Thi Thu Hang^{1✉}, Le Huy Bac¹, Le Nguyen Phuong² & Pham Thi Ha¹

The quality of impermanence between traditionalism and postmodernism gave birth to Banana's unique "hybrid narrative". There, people are caught between traditional values and the attraction of the postmodern lifestyle. Banana's character loves the kitchen and has a traditional belief in ghosts but is also openly LGBT-identifying—a challenge to modern binarism that is ready to confront random postmodern disasters. The character tries to escape but still seems to be stuck in the same place. This is similar to the situation that young Japanese have to face. In the eternal struggle of life, they need to be honest, live according to their own personal values and, more importantly, always show a willingness to help others with the most practical actions. Observing the world as a whole, Banana's novels and short stories are simultaneously new and old, and readers today are eager for her stories.

¹Hanoi National University of Education, Hanoi, Vietnam. ²Northern Kentucky University, Kentucky, USA. ✉email: hangdtt@hnue.edu.vn

Introduction

Hybridity is a unique style of writing in Banana's fiction, especially *Kitchen*. It is a combination of traditional and contemporary values and of reality and dreams. The narrative world in such writing is full of Japanese youths embarking on a path where traditional values are increasingly lost and alternative values are unfamiliar. As Sekine argues, "The protagonists/narrators in these stories are young urban adults in a largely Americanized and highly consumerist society, in which their self-consciousness is often overpowered by a materialistic affluence that forces them to adopt the same desires as everyone else" (Sekine, 2001, p. 500). Their lives seem to be frozen in a certain small space. However, it is the bewilderment of youth that gives the text multiple meanings. The reader also becomes an "author" in finding the meaning of the narrative.

Yuji Oniki made an interesting observation: "Reading a Yoshimoto story is a lot like watching a Japanese TV commercial" (Oniki, 1996). This idea points out hybridity in Banana's fiction. The hybrid narrative is related not only to postmodernism but also to traditional beauty and to the *shojo* culture that Carl Cassegård once interpreted. Summarizing Treat, he wrote, "Approaching her work through a discussion of *shojo* culture or 'cute culture' in Japan—the popular culture of young girls centered on the supreme value of cuteness—John W. Treat emphasizes the narcissistic and desexualized nature of this culture" (Cassegård, 2007, p. 76).

Although Banana humbly claims to write for "entertainment", the issues in Banana's works are essential for Japanese young people. These are "the exhaustion of young Japanese in modern Japan" and "the way in which terrible experiences shape a person's life" (Lee, 2014). Critics tend to compare Banana with Haruki Murakami due to their common postmodern style. Fuminobu Murakami analyzed the difference between them, noting that if Haruki Murakami's "early works try to keep a sense of detachment from others... in contrast, Yoshimoto Banana's work attempts to discover the difference in totality or commonness in individuality by changing the form of desire" (Fuminobu, 2005, p. 58). We agree with Fuminobu that inclusiveness is one of the foundations of Banana's hybrid narrative.

Banana's characters, variations of plot, and intelligent expression are postmodernist and more or less Americanized. However, Japanese traditional identity is still deeply present in her works. Despite being highly rated, Banana has her share of critics, including Elizabeth Hanson: "Unfortunately, the endearing characters and amusing scenes in Ms. Yoshimoto's work do not compensate for frequent bouts of sentimentality" (Hanson, 1993) wrote Elizabeth unsatisfactorily in the *New York Times*. Despite these critical takes, in general, Banana's works have become an indispensable part of humanity. In this paper, narratology and interdisciplinary methods are applied in the analysis of Banana's *Kitchen*, other novels, and short stories to express cultural values and humanist meanings in her hybrid writings.

Hybridity in postmodernism

Transgender identity, or a challenge to modern binarism. Modernists view the world in binary, divided opposition, whereas postmodernists view the world as a unity of oppositions. With modernism, men are men, and women are women; there is no such thing as a woman living with a male biological nature. Banana's postmodern vision offers a unique "hybridity" to her character's image. Eriko/Yuji is a genderfluid character. Banana uses them to defy traditional notions of masculinity, affirming the role of women. This character's gender identity manifests just how people freely express their gender. However, the death of Eriko/Yuji, on the one hand, shows the traditional Japanese

conception of ephemeral beauty, expressed by authors such as Kawabata or Mishima; on the other hand, the moment represents the fierceness of modernist views against the genderfluidity of postmodernism.

In fiction, historically, male impotence is an expression of gender ambiguity. The first fictional same-sex love story in the modern era may be *Carmilla* (1871), a Gothic novel by Sheridan Le Fanu. The novel describes a lesbian relationship through the image of female vampires. The other novel to depict homosexual love, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) by Oscar Wilde, also shocked audiences due to many plots describing same-sex sexual activities.

Influenced by the monism of postmodernism, the boom of homosexuality-themed literature occurred in the later decades of the 20th century, including *Cobra* (1972) by Severo Sarduy, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) by Leslie Feinberg, *Man Enough to be a Woman* (1995) by Jayne County, and so forth. This type of homosexuality-themed literature usually ranks among the "bestsellers", according to a study from *The New York Times*. Literature on transgender themes has been a hot topic in recent decades. It is certain that "changing sexual identity" has a close correlation to the feminism movement. The LGBTQ+ movement appears to grow in strength at the same time as the appearance of feminism. Fiction on gender identity worldwide has widely depicted two main trends, one focusing on transgender men (males assigned 'female' at birth) and one on transgender women (females assigned 'male' at birth), in which some studies have shown that books focusing on transgender women are much more frequent (Nolan, 2019). Trends in fiction make it appear that men wish to become women more often than women wish to become men. Therefore, Yuji in *Kitchen* changes his status from a "dad" to a "mom". This gender transition is a "typical case", not something special. Vietnamese LGBT literature also takes males as protagonists. *Một thế giới không có đàn bà* (A World Without Women) by Bui Anh Tan, *Sông* (River) by Nguyen Ngoc Tu, *Nháp* (Draft) by Nguyen Dinh Tu, and so on all describe transgender women.

Although *Kitchen* superficially tells the story of a father, or mother, who loves their child, it actually aims to warn that an overwhelming culture built around labor and consumerism that blindly goes after material needs will produce a generation of deformed people with no humanity. Having a passion for work is always a valuable quality, but working overtime to just make ends meet is abnormal. Banana is probably among the first novelists to determine this absurdity in the work mindset. It is such a hurtful warning when Eriko—the mother—is suddenly murdered by "a crazy man who was obsessed with her and killed her" (Banana, 1993, p. 44). It turns out that even when a person decides to change his gender to obtain love and live a peaceful life, there will be someone who disturbs this tranquility. This world is truly not peaceful, full of darkness and disasters.

As if they are warned about their loneliness beforehand, after the death of Eriko, Mikage and Yuichi become the loneliest humans. The letter his transgender mother left gives hints about her accidental death and helps readers better understand the unfortunate marriage of Yuichi's parents in a traditional Japanese environment. To marry Yuichi's mother, his father dared confront his then-potential wife's side. Then after their wife's death, his father decided to change his sex and turn into a beautiful woman. This is totally unacceptable for the maternal side of Yuichi's family, so Yuichi receives no recognition because of his father. The tragedy of Eriko does not just stop there: a weird man falls in love with and murders Eriko/Yuji. Life tragedies, according to Eriko/Yuji, are like paying taxes every day; no one wants to pay them, but it is a duty that we cannot avoid. A

similar theme pervades Franz Kafka's "dark humor": the harder we try to prove ourselves, the more we lose our lives.

The person bearing a double life of the responsibilities of both father and mother receives a tragic and unfair death after dedicating their whole life to raising a child. Yuichi thus becomes a brave, cool, and sentimental man. He sympathizes with Mikage's grandmother who loves flowers, an ephemeral beauty. Yuichi admires her. From their grandmother, Yuichi has a chance to meet Mikage, a daring and beautiful girl. Much like Yuichi, she is also an independent spirit and supports herself independently. While having a good and respectful relationship with the grandmother, Yuichi develops feelings for Mikage and wants to share some of his responsibilities with her. Traditional and postmodern elements are gradually being combined here. The Japanese tradition promotes compassion among people in the same situation (we can see that in Akutagawa's *Kappa*). However, the relationship between Yuichi and Mikage also has an LGBT theme: both of them seem uninterested in sex. Banana focuses on the ability to endure and implicitly asserts that suffering knows no gender. Biological gender identities are the two sides of the same earthly pain, yin, and yang. With this thought, readers can imagine Banana's "ontology of postmodernism" (McHale, 2004, p. 26).

Some love stories are also told in Banana's fiction. Unlike modern Japanese writers such as Jun'ichirō Tanizaki or Yasunari Kawabata, Banana did not write with the intention of fighting for feminism. This has its historical reasons: "Today, 'love marriages are more common than the arranged kind [...]. Writers like Yoshimoto Banana have a huge following of young readers who understand love quite differently than their grandparents did" (Goossen, 1997, p. xxiv). She writes about something beyond women's rights: transgender identities and the lost way of women in a postindustrial society when they owned their rights.

Banana's battle between modernism and postmodernism ended in a very postmodern way with no one winning. The transgender individual died, but that does not confirm the victory of modernism. Banana's genius is reflected in the crowning of traditional values under the postmodern view: people must overcome loneliness, uncertainty, and disasters.

Banana also seems to fight against postmodernism. Somehow, she tries to preserve historical memory. Her hybrid narrative reaches beyond postmodernism. Butler wrote, "Frederic Jameson points to a defining sense of the postmodern as 'the disappearance of a sense of history' in the culture, a pervasive depthlessness, a 'perpetual present' in which the memory of tradition is gone" (Butler, 2002, p. 110). In *Kitchen*, Japanese tradition is still alive.

Disasters: past and present. The hybrid narrative cares about ephemeral beauty in nature and humans, including sudden disasters. In *Kitchen*, the first story, *Kitchen*, has three characters, who are actually four if we count the deceased grandmother who still lives on in the admiration and love in the narration by the other characters. From this introduction, Mikage, the first-person narrator immediately shows signs of her incoming disastrous events. Placing these events at the beginning of the story leads the reader to a sad and miserable atmosphere. All the following events, which are mostly successive disasters, force Mikage to cope with them and become more mature.

The second story of *Kitchen* is *Full Moon*, which also centers around Yuichi and Mikage. The opening informs the readers of another disaster, the death of mother Eriko. Mikage at this time has overcome her loss, left Yuichi's house, and lived on her own; Yuichi takes a turn at coping with loss. The father–mother died. The two parts of the book start off with death. Banana seems to

demonstrate vulnerable cases that are very Japanese. From the traditional period to the present day, sudden deaths are mainly caused by detrimental earthquakes and tsunamis; if not for these two reasons, it is the two atomic bombs that destroyed two cities in Japan.

In Freud's theory, deep in the unconsciousness, artists have been affected by this kind of living environment, especially in the form of mental trauma. Maybe when writing, Banana did not think of these disasters, but she unconsciously cannot escape from the enchanting thought of death while writing her fiction. "Loneliness" and "sudden death" are similar to Japanese archetypes in this mindset. This fact can be suggested by the works of many famous writers from this nation known for its cherry blossom, from Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, Junichiro Tanizaki, Abe Kobo, Mishima Yukio, and Yasunari Kawabata to Haruki Murakami. They all write about disasters that are sudden and inevitable, that have barely understood causes or that are unpredictable.

From this cultural archetype, the readers may understand Banana's intentions when she placed two stories in her book (the stories of Mikage-Yuichi and Satsuki-Hitoshi), which is formally in three parts (Part I includes *Kitchen* and *Full Moon*, while part II is *Moonlight Shadow*). The three short stories are about a grandmother who dies because of her old age, a mother who dies due to a crazy man with an obsession, and a lover who dies due to a traffic accident. Instead of making the reader feel sympathetic to the survivors of these losses, these details lead to the impression that these people live on with their own situations. From a comparative perspective, we can view this as if it is an interior power of a hybrid narrative that is dominated by the impermanence of life.

Maybe this is the main idea that Japanese writers aim for. Getting accustomed to one's own new situation is the foremost rule of survival. The Japanese people are born in a land filled with death, so they have developed their strangely brave and patient characteristics. The same applies to Banana. While writing about disasters and accidents, she is fully aware of the spirit of the Japanese—they are ready to face their challenges calmly. This is how Banana tells the rest of humanity that the Japanese can overcome any injury. However, how do they overcome them? And if so, are they the winner in all cases?

As a matter of course, the Japanese suffered defeat many times. Even writers as great as Mishima and Kawabata sought death by suicide. These people are, in some ways, the quintessence of Japan, but from another perspective, they are out of line with the Japanese tradition. Have they drained all their soul and strength for their immortal characters to the point where they no longer want to live?

We are yet to know how Banana would act, but her characters are quintessentially expressive of love and patience. The view from the darkness of disasters always heads toward a brighter and more peaceful future, Banana seems to say, writing, "His sadly cheerful face radiated a dim glow. We moved deeper into the dead of night. I turned around to look out the window at the flickering lights below" (Banana, 1993, pp. 50–51). In addition, this is a positive and hopeful conclusion about a world that still contains unfortunate events and indications of future pain: "She made me realize that the human heart is something very precious" (Banana, 1993, p. 86). This type of problem-solving appears frequently in Banana's fiction. In the short story *Asleep*, the heroine, in a complicated and somewhat boring relationship with her married lover, still sees bright fireworks in the night sky as if bringing a happy moment of peace to her life. Banana described her perspective, "We felt a strange fondness for the tiny bursts of fire that we glimpsed from time to time off to the side of the skyscraper, and we kept our arms locked tightly together as

we stood there, fantastically excited, waiting for the next round of fireworks to explore” (Banana, 2000, p. 177).

The Japanese are famous for their discipline at work and are also highly pragmatic. This discipline brings efficiency to their work but also causes many disadvantages. Observing pragmatism in Japan before and after World War II, Kenneth G. Henshall pointed out the downside: “Pragmatism can lead to a loss of sense of direction, and in a moral sense to an unhealthy tolerance of corruption. Focus on the group can lead to a lack of responsibility at individual level” (Henshall, 2012, p. 223). Banana is the one of writers who is aware of traditional moral degradation and tries to correct its harm in her works. That has yielded certain results: her characters are always victims of fighting for property. They despise such behaviors, only choosing for themselves a simple life with a specific occupation just to earn a living, to maintain traditional Japanese values. Hajime in *Lid of the Sea* (Banana, 2017) is disgusted with the dispute over her grandmother’s house, choosing to make a living instead by creating dolls of her own.

Traditionalism in hybrid narrative

With the postmodernist inclusive approach, Banana uses traditional perspectives to deal with the issue of human loneliness and emptiness in life. Two aspects of traditionalism can be divided separately for the sake of showing a clearer picture of her interpretation: life’s impermanence and life/nature’s blessing.

“Impermanence” (mujō 無常) of life: loneliness and sudden death. Loneliness is the debt that Banana’s characters always carry. After her grandmother’s death, Mikage feels nothing. She does not know how to act and does not feel like she can determine what to do. Her thoughts are whirling in her head to such an extent that one day, after waking up, she observes that at some point a person will find no living relatives left, which is a bitter definition of happiness for her: “What I mean by ‘their happiness’ is living a life untouched as much as possible by the knowledge that we are truly, all of us, alone” (Banana, 1993, p. 59). The world surrounding Mikage seems to melt all away.

Banana tells the story of a kitchen, but the main idea is about the overcoming of loneliness and unhappiness in the postmodern era, where humans may even be absolutely free but still have their own troubles. *Kitchen* is not a very romantic setting for a love story in the unconsciousness of many Eastern cultures, especially the Vietnamese and Japanese. It is a romantic story between a couple who fall in love or seem to be as such. In short, they are highly likely to develop feelings for each other. They both love the kitchen, not just one that is clean but also whichever one has basic functions, even when it does not seem that clean. Two lonely people meet in a lonely kitchen. This kind of “Banana loneliness” seems to represent the Japanese people who view life as so meaningless that all effort to put their life together appears to be futile act.

Kitchen is a beautiful yet heart-breaking song of the great miseries of a lifetime. Beauty standards in Banana’s works share some similarities with Kawabata’s craftsmanship in *Beauty and Sadness* through extremely feminist lines: “the glittering crystal of all the good times we’d had, which had been sleeping in the depths of memory, was awakening and would keep us going” (Banana, 1993, p. 100). The kitchen sticks to tradition. In the wild, people slept by the fire. The kitchen is both a place of heating, preserving life, and a symbol of rebirth. In the postmodern era, the kitchen is still the anchor of peace for people.

Kitchen is shaped by two short stories, *Kitchen* and *Moonlight Shadow*. These two were written at different times, and the contents are also distinct: characters, plots, settings, symbols, and so on are unrelated. However, putting them side by side does not

reveal their literary values; they even complement each other with the theme of “eternal sadness” in their ideas. The link between “these guys” is the philosophical view about loneliness and despair for humanity in a world filled with materialism, workaholic, shopping, and death. People in this place work extremely hard just to exist and show off by beautifying themselves and buying whatever they want. Banana reflects the nature of people in this postmodern era, writing from the perspective of Yuichi’s mother, “I go shopping, I exist,” mocking the expression “I think, therefore I am” by René Descartes. This mother is occupied every day in her transgender shop to earn money for shopping. After work, they return to their kitchen, a symbol of traditional space. Day by day, year by year, their lives follow the circle of producing and consuming until one random day, death will take all away from them. There is a holistic philosophical view here. The kitchen is the place of birth and return. In that ephemeral cycle, people will always face loneliness and obstacles. Unless they make an effort to overcome the losses and loneliness they feel, people will be engulfed by a postmodern society.

Not only are the plot fragments connected to one another but also so do the characters. This more deeply expresses the loneliness of the human condition, even on the journey back to the kitchen or when out shopping. The narrator tells the story of a guy and a girl who are placed randomly next to each other, which follows a surrealist way of thinking. It starts with a girl named Mikage Sakurai, whose grandmother died. This opening is no different from that of a fairytale. An incident suddenly happens and the grandmother passes away. Mikage is alone in the world. This factor was just a challenge for the character in the past, but today, it is different. Banana uses this moment to initiate a series of events reflecting Mikage’s misery, which is necessarily neither a challenge for her mental willpower nor a conclusion that life will change in ways that one can never predict. The feeling of sadness pervades the story: “Why is it we have so little choice? We live like the lowliest worms. Always defeated—defeated we make dinner, we eat, we sleep. Everyone we love is dying. Still, to cease living is unacceptable” (Banana, 1993, p. 82). People seem to become lost between traditional and contemporary values.

The sudden deaths of beloved others also appear in many of Banana’s other works. Traditional Japanese writers are keenly aware of the mortality of humans. In *Lid of the sea*, the death of the grandmother drastically changed the fate of Hajime or in *The Lake*, the narrator Chihiro, a woman going on 30, also felt very sad after the death of her mother. Banana expresses Chihiro’s haunting loneliness in a thoughtful and simple style, just as Orthofer observed, “Presented in typical Yoshimoto-fashion, the style deceptively artless, the account seemingly straightforward and simple, the characters adrift” (Orthofer, 2011).

Mikage the orphan is lonely, having no one to lean on and no motivation to live on. At that time, her life is filled with emptiness. While losing her will to live, a “prince” Yuichi appears. The flow of the plot appears to be similar to a fairytale set in a peaceful kitchen.

Life/nature’s blessing: *Kitchen* and *Moonlight Shadow*. Continuing the topic of death, hurt, and overcoming, Banana uses her characters to reflect that “you could take the negative view and live in fear: Will it happen again? But it won’t hurt so much if you just accept it as a part of life” (Banana, 1993, pp. 139–140). The next story in *Kitchen* is *Moonlight Shadow* with four characters: Satsuki, who has just lost Hitoshi, her lover, and Hiiragi, Hitoshi’s younger brother, who also has just lost someone, Yumiko, his girlfriend; both of the deceased died in a car accident. The survivors are in a relationship with these dead people. Satsuki goes

jogging every morning to lessen her heartbreak. Hiiragi, on the other hand, keeps wearing the uniform of his dead girlfriend to class with the hope of keeping her by his side. This is also a connection between the two stories in *Kitchen*. While Mikage's story is about her trying to connect with Yuichi, this story of Satsuki is about her trying to find the silhouette of Hitoshi.

Even though the two stories are different, the similarities in the main idea and hybrid narrative make the reader see the immediate connection between *Kitchen* and *Moonlight Shadow*. The characters go through disasters and feel it necessary to discover the purpose and meaning of their lives. Moreover, the fight against these uneasy lives is supported with an appropriate mindset: "People aren't overcome by situations or outside forces; defeat invades from within" (Banana, 1993, p. 92). Overcoming setbacks is a challenging and praise-worthy feat. On the jogging track on a bridge every morning, with a hollow feeling due to this extreme remark, Satsuki tries to forget her deceased boyfriend but also wants to retain his image. She has become mired in her love.

The happy lives of the four are short. The car accident takes Hiiragi and Satsuki's lovers away suddenly. Therefore, they seem to yearn for an opportunity for the last good-bye, somehow, between the living and the dead realms. Belief in the grace of life/nature has kept them hopeful. The encounter with Urara on the bridge is similar to fate. Urara plays the role of a mysterious prophet. She can understand Satsuki's deepest thoughts, know Satsuki's phone number based on her intuition, figure out there will be a once-in-a-blue-moon event on this bridge, and so on. Their first conversation is such a surprise for Satsuki because it is as if Urara knows everything about her already. Satsuki is so overcome that she cannot react to the requests and conclusions about a miraculous meeting with someone that can only happen once in a hundred years.

The reader is fully convinced by this hybrid narrative. The feminine "graceful mystery" seems to create an immeasurable appeal to the story. The narrator uses a romantic reference traditional to Eastern culture, the seventh day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar, which is called *Tanabata* (たなばた) in Japanese culture. On this date, the deities Orihime and Hikoboshi reunite on the Milky Way. Whoever lives in this cultural field realizes that any separations of love have their limits and any love, no matter how difficult and distant, can be reunited, even in a moment. It seems that this humanist philosophy inspired Banana to create her tragic love story. Each sentence in *Moonlight Shadow* is covered with sadness for this compassionate love story. There is a self-awareness about one's own tragic fate. However, then, their fates change, and at the moment when the dimensions of their lives shift, as Urara says, the tinkling sound of the bell echoes, followed by the image of Hitoshi on the other side of the river. This sequence saddens both Satsuki and the readers. They meet at the time a natural love should come to an end, but they can promptly exchange gestures and images of love. In Urara's words, they can say farewell to each other kindly to move on in isolated spaces of life and death. Using tradition to clarify the problems of reality, Banana's hybrid narrative both reveals the fragility of human life and shows people's approaches and attitudes toward disaster.

Creating characters who share the same situation makes Banana's work always in-depth and leads readers to suspect a persistent, obsessive, and unending event might happen next. We know about the younger brother, Hiiragi, from the earlier story. Now, we learn that Urara also bears the same loss. It is just that the narrator does not reveal what Urara suffers from. We can guess from the conversations between Satsuki and Urara that Urara comes to the river to try for a chance to bid farewell to her friend who suddenly died. Satsuki and Urara both suffer from this loss of a person close to them, so it is easy for them to empathize.

From the reader's perspective, these two characters have a supportive role for each other: Satsuki's story is clearly in traditionalism while Urara's is more postmodern, which is presented with only a few clues for the reader to draw inferences. This narrative creates more mysterious tension, evocative of a miraculous fairytale, cause in part by the vagueness of their current lives. The postmodernist society, which obtains its symbol from the car accident, can end everything to create a tragedy for couples such as those in this story. However, in the end, it can never end their relationship, their love, and their interaction, even in the form of a dream. It is the miracle of life.

Japanese writers have a tradition of using dreams in narratives. Kawabata is an excellent master in this field. In *The Sound of The Mountain*, Kawabata lets Shingo, the old man, drowned in dreams. Every dream reminds him of a painful and regretful memory. In the newer generation of writers, both Murakami and Banana applied this method to reinforce the sense of mystery and vagueness in their stories. According to Freud, dreams are a gateway to our unconsciousness (Freud, 1913), where it is full of confusion, and people can only feel and intuit meaning rather than directly understand it. Dreams are a form of inclusiveness. Writers use dreams as though creating an underground scene lying below the main scene, a path that exists within other roads; no matter how professional the readers are, they can only guess a partial meaning. This vague narrative seems to be useful in creating more layers of meaning for the text. Because human dreams are always unpredictable, they have their roots somewhere deep in the dark realms of the soul.

From this point, it can be concluded that Banana describes traumatic events to let her characters escape and live the life of human beings. The banana creates a series of hardships for her characters to force them to fight for their lives. This is much like prominent writers worldwide, namely, Ernest Hemingway, "But man is not made for defeat. [...] A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (Hemingway, 1965, p. 95) or Kobo Abe in *The Woman in the Dunes*: sand cannot beat human beings (Abe, 1991). Placing humans in hardship is merely a means to make them assert their values. Life has too many pitfalls to prevent people from faltering, but these hardships only make them move faster toward the beautiful destinations of their lives.

Banana creates a hybrid first-person narrator. These people play two roles: following the lives outside and observing themselves. "I" compels the readers by being frank with both themselves and their surroundings. Therefore, this narrative always creates credibility and consistency in Banana's fiction and urges audiences to look at things from different perspectives. A certain tension is created in narrative parts: "The faint colors of his form, even the heat of the tears running down my cheeks: I desperately struggled to memorize it all. The arching lines described by his arm remained, like an afterimage, suspended in the air" (Banana, 1993, p. 146). The small happiness of Tsugumi's little family is similar to a kitchen that is always unstable. The moments they spend together consistently bear a likelihood of uncertainty and farewell. Even the father, who only meets his daughter, offers lessons that sometimes show his uncertain ego or feelings about the past. The daughter's ego, in parallel with the "I" of the narrator, has reflected a sweet paternal love while sketching the uncertain perspective of unpredictable things in the future. Banana's works, even though minimalist in the train of thought, are always warm and humane. Wong writes, "She is hence recognized as a 'Healing-Kei' writer—one who brings positivity, love, and warmth to readers" (Wong, 2016). Maybe this is the way Banana hopes her readers practice creating happiness for themselves and society.

The beauty in Banana's fiction may be traced back to the Heian tradition, but it is through an "I" voice characterized by smallness

and hybridity. In *Kitchen*, as well as many short stories such as *Dreaming of Kimchee*, *Asleep*, and so on, the main characters are all females pondering the reason for life and happiness. Banana always puts the characters in difficult situations so that they can reveal their good qualities. With Banana, no matter how difficult life is, her characters always choose the right direction with a positive meaning in life. We absolutely agree with Eric Margolis's opinion: "But despite the loss of her family and her constantly dissipating relationship with Yuichi, she eventually draws strength to face down human's greatest enemy: death" (Margolis, 2021).

Researching early 20th-century Japanese writers such as Hayashi Fumiko (1903–1951) and Miyamoto Yuriko (1899–1951), Donald Keene wrote, "The women writers of the 1930s and later, though strikingly different in their interests and modes of expression, shared many frustrations. Regardless of the nature of their books, these women were often known more for their love life than for their criticisms of society or the beauty of their prose styles" (Keene, 1987, p. 1114). To Banana, this statement is no longer true. While Banana still tells compelling love stories, social problems in her hybrid writing have brought a new face to Japanese women's literature.

Banana writes of disasters, loneliness, sudden death, and life/nature's blessing. She admitted, "I have in mind sensitive, somewhat adolescent people who are stuck between reality and fantasy" (Burdick 2012). Her beautiful hybrid style is youthful but doubtful about life. It is a kind of expression of *Kawaii* (かわいい) culture but an intelligent *Kawaii*. She thinks about the loss in life, the instability of the lonely lives who always hope to reintegrate with society, but all meetings and integration create the likelihood for loss and parting. The narrator does not mention the large-scale social events; instead, it is the small-scale story of three people in a small family that shows the deep influence of the era in which they live. Readers are immediately placed in a contemplative situation because the narrator has certain sections for the readers to ponder that are originally for the characters. An open, enchanted, feminine charm of Banana is in those.

Multimeanings in the hybrid narrative

The essence of the hybrid narrative is "saying more from less". That is, from a certain limited number of words, readers can create many layers of meaning in the text. The writer is very careful with words and considers how readers can be called to the possibility of co-creation. With that in mind, the images in Banana's fiction are highly symbolic.

Analyzing the *Temple of the Golden Pavilion* by Mishima, Gwenn Petersen compared the "temple" with the "moon" in Kawabata's work. He said, "The moon-in-the-water and the temple-in-the-water, however, are ominous images. Rather than *suigetsu*, Kawabata's lovely water moon, in Mishima's image it is *suihyō*, the duckweed that lies thickly on the surface of the pond" (Petersen, 1979, p. 268). We agree with the affirmation of the symbolic values of "moon" (Kawabata) and "temple" (Mishima). Banana also has her own symbol. It is a "kitchen" or a hybrid space, containing two criteria, "clean" and "bright", similar to Hemingway's aspiration in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*. However, the difference between Banana and Hemingway is that Hemingway's main characters are always male, while Banana's characters are female. While for Hemingway it was the stalemate of characters, for Banana it was always the desire and belief to overcome life's obstacles.

The hybrid narrative is multimeaningful. The story about a tiny kitchen depicts a clear way in which the Japanese people overcome hardship together. In the adorable plots of Mikage and Yuichi, it seems that they are in love; in fact, the relationship

between them is just human care, which is greater than any form of romantic love. The fact that Yuichi invites Mikage to stay at his house comes from a genuinely humane gesture during her hard time. Therefore, when Yuichi's mother dies, Mikage switches her position with Yuichi to help him with the same suffering. From *Kitchen*, the readers can realize that humans usually have to overcome challenges that are out of their control. During this lonely time, one always needs some form of caring from other people to light up the dark paths. This perspective influences the whole story. Both Yuichi's lover and Mikage's boyfriend cannot determine what kind of relationship exists between the two protagonists. These two supporting characters are simply selfish: they are not capable of comprehending the protagonists' hardships. People also need to respect the pricelessness of humane care more than the daily love stories of immature young people.

The hybrid narrative proved to be very attractive to readers. The signs in *Kitchen*, although used in a hesitant fashion according to postmodernism, are always multimeaningful. The readers can read on the surface of the text that there is a young couple who are finding out about each other to prepare for their possible marriage. However, at a deeper layer of meaning, one can find that the author uses love as a healing process for the painful and scary trauma in the subconsciousness of the Japanese. In a deeper sense, we can realize that it is an effort to escape the loss and loneliness of humanity.

Due to the complexity of the layers of metaphor, Banana's stories seem to barely have any connection, which, in fact, is untrue. Its complexity reaches an advanced level at which the characters themselves can produce different meanings as readers reinterpret and try to relate them to their personal lives. The storyline is written in a postmodernist style, and there are few details to create dramatic conflicts such as in older forms of narrative found in Akutagawa or Mishima's fiction. However, this does not mean that this story has no conflict. This narrative still maintains conflicts; they appear in the depth of cultural meaning instead of being expressed explicitly, creating forever internal conversations and making the "meanings" of the story change according to how the readers interpret it at different times.

In addition, the conflict of the hybrid writing shifts to interior feelings. We read the tension of a story through the tension of a character's mood. Older stories also have this characteristic, except in the hands of someone like Marcel Proust (*In Search of Lost Time*), there would just be a few dozen pages of interior monologue. Banana, meanwhile, needs only Mikage's empty stare into space in her rented house, which has just been cleaned up. The readers thus can figure out Mikage's feelings, as she feels her heartbreak for her grandmother, for the place that she used to live in, and for her unforeseeable future for which she does not know what to do next. The hybrid narrative is an infinite type, in which its meanings and implications are always open to infinity.

Creating meaning in literature is always based on interaction. The more interactions that occur, the more implications there are. From the reader's perspective, the hybrid style offers more interactions for them, which can be proven by the disconnected narrative, a highly discouraged method in traditional composition. Narrators in Banana's stories show their extreme loneliness and unhappiness through rambling lines: a story suddenly veers to another one. This technique is often used in conversations. Many conversations between Mikage and Yuichi are broken. These "broken" parts are untold stories, such as the change in the gender orientation of the father and the bothersome incident that Yuichi's lover caused. Therefore, the readers have more chances to "decide" what the full stories would be. Depending on the cultural and educational backgrounds, readers will have certain approaches to the implication of the writing.

Banana not only hybridizes her composition but also mystifies her diction to hide her true intention, making her reader feel unsure about her implication or meaning. This narrative approach, according to Umberto Eco, is an “open text” (Bondanella, 1997). Definitions for this openness can be varied. One of them is the vagueness of reading and interpreting. If we take the “kitchen” as an example, questions arise, including what is a “kitchen”? What does it symbolize? What is the true meaning of it? These types of questions will arise while the readers approach the text, which does not contain any single correct or final answer. The “kitchen” for Banana always changes. It is a bridge that connects tradition to the postmodern and memories to the future. The “kitchen” always opens paths for people to reminisce and firmly believe in a happy ending. The narrator often questions herself, “Why do I love everything that has to do with kitchens so much? It’s strange. Perhaps because to me, a kitchen represents some distant longing engraved on my soul. As I stood there, I seemed to be making a new start; something was coming back” (Banana, 1993, p. 56).

An “open” text creates various faces for the characters. The more the readers explore Banana’s works, the more they will find how she creates characters in this way. These characters are hopeless and negative while also positive, believing in a better future. “I” is the character who shows this contradictory characteristic the most: “I felt a strange, sweet sadness” (Banana, 1993, p. 104). However, this “sweet sadness” has made the story both clear and complex in meaning, requiring readers to decode the story more than once.

The main topics of *Kitchen* are eating, cuisine, and *changing gender orientation*. Banana has an interesting combination and somehow “shifts” the focus. Murakami Fuminobu analyzed the story as follows, “In doing this, Banana’s story subverts the borderline between sexual and food desires and consequently brings out ‘something else’, which is neither sexual desire nor food desire”. In addition, he asked, “What then does the deconstruction of the boundary between sexual and food desires indicate in the current cultural discourse?” (Fuminobu, 2005, p. 61). This question illustrates Bakhtin Circle’s cultural dialog (Bac et al., 2021), which frequently occurs in Banana’s discourse. It not only evokes many ideas for the reader but also gives the text multiple meanings.

Conclusion

Banana said, “I want to write in the more easy-to-read style” (Banana, 2022). In fact, Banana’s *Kitchen* is not easy reading. The narrator tries to hybridize the events and emotions in her stories. The purpose of the hybrid narrative is to bring art closer to life. In depicting life, the writer tries to tell it as it is. Banana has done this. In addition, she tries to reach a totality including both traditionalism and postmodernism. Her characters are not only happy in the kitchen but also excited when shopping.

The hybrid narrative expresses the hesitation in artistic thinking between tradition and postmodernism. In *Kitchen*, the female writer interweaves traditional elements in postmodernity and vice versa. She points out that loneliness, disaster, the multiplicity of life, and the desire to escape, which existed long before, are now exploding in the postmodern era. People need to seriously consider their behavior so that life is not destroyed by human greed and carelessness.

The difference between Banana and many postmodernists, such as Raymond Carver and Haruki Murakami, is that she uses hybrid writing to reflect the world. Banana’s writing is post-modernist but owes much more to tradition than other Japanese writers. Readers who find in the narrative the impermanence of creation will still have faith in salvation; in the chaos of life, the

stories still contain a moral order of human life. “Kitchen”, “food”, and “dreams” are the frequent topics of discussion in her stories. This is a world of hopes and feelings. Banana’s characters seem to live in dreams and believe in life/nature’s blessing. Dreams lead them to the hidden parts of their life and unconsciousness to speak boldly and persistently about the changes in life.

Interpreting the influence of Japanese culture on the world in the first half of the 20th century, Dore confirmed, “Japanese Zen has become the archetypal form of Buddhism for the questing, alternative-culture-seeking youth of Europe and North America” (Dore, 1981, p. x). In our opinion, Banana’s hybrid narrative will become the style that many writers will imitate in the world. Viewing postmodern society from a traditional perspective, Banana has created a writing style that covers many issues not only of the current era or of exclusively Japan. The writer has planted in the reader’s heart a desire to live honestly and tolerantly.

Banana, Haruki Murakami, and Ryū Murakami create a well-known trio of contemporary Japanese writers among world-leading authors, with impressive contributions to both Japanese and international culture. Their works have met the rigorous demands of different reading cultures. Even though their influences can be different, each writer creates their own commentary that readers cannot forget. For Banana, it is “the hybrid narrative”.

Data availability

All data analyzed are contained in the paper.

Received: 18 April 2022; Accepted: 13 October 2022;

Published online: 30 October 2022

References

- Abe K (1991) *The woman in the dunes*. Vintage Books, New York
- Bac LH, Hang DTT, Phuong LN (2021) The Bakhtin Circle’s dialog in Vietnam. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 8:159. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00840-8>
- Banana Y (2022) FAQ in the interviews. http://www.yoshimotobanana.com/question_e/. Accessed 3 Feb 2022
- Banana Y (1993) *Kitchen* (trans: Backus M). Grove Press, New York
- Banana Y (2000) *Asleep* (trans: Emmerich M). Grove Press, New York
- Banana Y (1995) *Lizard* (trans: Sherif A). Washington Square Press, New York
- Banana Y (2017) *Nap bien [Lid of the Sea]* (trans: Hoa DT). Writers Association Publishing House, Hanoi
- Bondanella P (1997) *Umberto eco and the open text: semiotics, fiction, popular culture*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Butler CH (2002) *Postmodernism: a very short introduction*. Oxford University Press Inc., New York
- Burdick K (2012) Interview: Banana Yoshimoto. <https://www.mhpbooks.com/interview-banana-yoshimoto/>. Accessed 7 Jul 2022
- Cassegård C (2007) *Shock and naturalization in contemporary Japanese literature*. Global Oriental Ltd., UK
- Dore R (1981) Foreword. In: Kato S (ed) *A history of Japanese literature, vol 1* (trans: Chibbett D). Kodansha International, Tokyo, New York, London
- Freud S (1913) *The interpretation of dreams* (trans: Brill AA). The Macmillan Company, New York
- Fuminobu M (2005) *Postmodern, feminist and postcolonial currents in contemporary Japanese culture: a reading of Murakami Haruki, Yoshimoto Banana, Yoshimoto Takaaki and Karatani Kojin*. Routledge, New York
- Goossen TW (ed) (1997) *The Oxford book of Japanese short stories*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Hanson E (1993) Hold the Tofu. <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/01/17>. Accessed 3 Feb 2022
- Hemingway E (1965) *The old man and the sea*. Bantam Books, New York
- Henshall KG (2012) *A history of Japan: from stone age to superpower*, 3rd edn. Palgrave Macmillan, New York
- Keene D (1987) *Dawn to the West*. An Owl Book, New York
- Lee A (2014) *Kitchen*. The Japan Times. <https://www.japantimes.co.jp>. Accessed 25 Jul 2022

- Margolis E (2021) How the English language failed Banana Yoshimoto. <https://metropolisjapan.com>. Accessed 3 Feb 2022
- McHale B (2004) *Postmodernist Fiction*. Routledge, London and New York
- Nolan IT, Kuhner CJ, Dy GW (2019) Demographic and temporal trends in transgender identities and gender confirming surgery. *Transl Androl Urol* 8(3):184–190. <https://doi.org/10.21037/tau.2019.04.09>
- Oniki Y (1996) A brief overview of J-Pop fiction. <http://jpop.com/feature/02fiction/yoshimoto/html>. Accessed 8 Jan 2022
- Orthofer MA (2011) The complete review's. Review. <https://www.complete-review.com/reviews/yoshimotob/lake.htm>. Accessed 3 Dec 2021
- Petersen GB (1979) *The moon in the water*. The University Press of Hawaii, Honolulu
- Sekine E (2001) Japan: modern period 1945 to the present. In: *Encyclopedia of life writing: autobiographical and biographical forms*, vol 1 (ed Jolly M). Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, London
- Wong C (2016) Banana Yoshimoto's improbable literary journey from waitress to writer. <https://theculturetrip.com>. Accessed 15 Jan 2022

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number 602.04-2020.307.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

This study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

This study did not involve human participants.

Additional information

Correspondence and requests for materials should be addressed to Dao Thi Thu Hang.

Reprints and permission information is available at <http://www.nature.com/reprints>

Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2022