

# Nourishing the spirit: Ethics of care and normative dimension in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

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## Abstract

Culinary literature connects the sensory experiences with the symbolic meanings, which enables food to serve not only as a basic necessity but also as a significant metaphor for identity, culture, and ethical relationships. In many literary works, the processes of cooking and sharing meals often go beyond mere nutritional purposes, but as a moral expression of care, empathy, and cultural remembrance. Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* has a rich narrative which incorporate themes like domestic life, grief and human relationships which positions the kitchen as a sacred and emotional realm. Though the novel has garnered considerable attention for its insights into loss and recovery, there still exists a notable deficiency in comprehending how its culinary themes correspond with ethical frameworks especially Carol Gilligan's Ethics of Care.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Care, Culinary, Moral Expression, Healing

This paper explores the narratives of the novel which expresses a moral philosophy that is inherent in the acts of cooking and sharing food. Utilizing Gilligan's ethical framework as a foundation the novel *Kitchen* sets out as a representation of care ethics by illustrating the culinary activities which facilitate the processing of grief, promote intimacy, and reconstitute personal identity within a relational moral context. Previous research on the novel *Kitchen* has focused primarily on its depiction of loss, urban disconnection, and nontraditional family dynamics. However, the importance of food and the environment of the kitchen has frequently been addressed solely in symbolic or cultural contexts which lacks a comprehensive ethical framework. Gilligan's "The Ethics of Care" addresses the shortcomings of justice-centered moral theories where it provides a compelling interpretive perspective. The Care ethics seeks attention to relational interdependence, empathy, and attentiveness to the needs of others especially in a relationship with the culinary actions portrayed in *Kitchen*. Consequently, the research question focuses on the insufficiently examined connection between the culinary aspects of *Kitchen* and the moral theory of care, with the objective of integrating literary critique with ethical philosophy in a manner that is relevant to both fields.

Carol Gilligan's Ethics of Care emerged in the 1980s as a response to the prevailing frameworks of moral development developed by scholars such as Lawrence Kohlberg. While Kohlberg's approach emphasized justice, rights, and abstract principles, Gilligan contended that care-based reasoning holds moral significance, focusing on relationships, context, and emotional responsiveness. In her seminal work, *In a Different Voice* (1982), she suggested that moral reasoning is not uniform but can take a relational trajectory, rooted in awareness of others' needs and the preservation of human connections.

The theory challenges the notion that morality is principally concerned with resolving disputes through universal principles but it posits that moral actions arise from the acknowledgment and response to the unique needs of specific individuals within particular contexts. Gilligan's work complemented the idea, which conceptualizes care as both an ethical perspective and a practice something that is performed through continuous interactions instead of being articulated in theoretical terms. In the view of literary analysis, care ethics serves as a methodological framework for examining how characters react to vulnerability, express empathy and to maintain relationships. When it is applied to culinary literature, the Ethics of Care highlights the preparation of food and sharing the food as an ethical action that reflect attentiveness, responsibility, and connection. In the novel *Kitchen* the protagonist's mental state of suffering seeks expression for a solace through the environment of kitchen space which brings her emotional rejuvenation also.

Culinary literature regards food as a semiotic system where it communicates cultural codes, negotiates identities, and forges social connections. In literature, food transcends its basic definition; it embodies history, memory, and morality encapsulated in a consumable format. Academics like Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson has observed that culinary writing can serve as "a form of social discourse" that encompasses ethical considerations, ranging from the politics of food sourcing to the interpersonal relationships involved in dining and cooking.

In the novel *Kitchen*, the protagonist Mikage Sakurai experiences a sense of disorientation after the death of her grandmother, who was her only remaining of her family. Her sense of grief, pain, loneliness was spent in kitchens, where she discovers solace in the aromas, textures, methods and patterns of culinary preparation. This connection transcends nostalgia and an innate acknowledgment of the kitchen as a means of nurturing and a life sustaining support.

When the protagonist receives an invitation to reside with Yuichi and his transgender mother, Eriko, the communal living environment evolves into a platform for ethical transformation. Mikage's intention were pure and she also engages in culinary activity not as a sense of duty but from a genuine desire to nurture and provide solace to the people who consumes that food. This incident portrays the practical manifestation of Gilligan's care ethics. In the novel a significant moment, serves as an example for her selflessness and her ethics of care where she remains awake late into the night to prepare a meal for Yuichi by sensing his need for comfort even before he expresses it. In this context, care transcends mere obligation; it embodies a proactive awareness of another's unvoiced needs, which aligns seamlessly with Gilligan's premise that care is fundamentally about responsiveness grounded in relational dynamics.

Food in *Kitchen* serves as a mechanism for healing. According to the protagonist, Mikage the act of cooking enables her to navigate her grief by directing her energies into actions that celebrate life. For Yuichi, the experience of receiving these meals fosters a feeling of being appreciated and discerned. These substitutions epitomize Gilligan's notion that moral behavior is more about nurturing connections during vulnerable moments than about adhering to strict rules. Likewise, the novel challenges the commercialization of food. Mikage's culinary practices are personal and non-commercial, rooted in intimate relationships rather than economic exchanges. Against this backdrop the novel acts as a transactional perspective, reverberating with care ethics that prioritize human connections over detached systems.

The ethical aspects of the novel help to transcend its characters, providing a wider deliberation on how food influences moral relationships within literature. By conceptualizing cooking as an act of

care, Yoshimoto implies that the kitchen serves as a moral environment where relationships are fostered and identities are retailored. The novel *Kitchen* propels readers to move beyond mere symbolic interpretations of food towards an ethical analysis that acknowledges the moral effort inherent in culinary practices. It also illustrates Gilligan's principles within a specific cultural context, spotlighting that care ethics can be realized through the sensory and material aspects of daily life. In a worldwide context, where the fast-food culture and industrialized farming habitually belittles the relational elements of food preparation, the novel *Kitchen* represents an alternative narrative. It functions as a reminder to readers that the acts of cooking and sharing meals can embody ethical practices that confront alienation and promote a sense of community.

While the space of *Kitchen* unfolds in the gentle rhythm of daily existence, its ethical implications extend well beyond a single narrative. When juxtaposed with Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, a perspective emerges that positions literature as a dynamic force in cultivating the moral imagination of its audience. Yoshimoto's narrative transcends a mere depiction of sorrow, resilience, or the comfort found in cooking where it serves as an intricate reminder that the environments we live in and the traditions people sustain are fundamentally linked to the principles that represent. By connecting the personal act of culinary creation to the collective quest for human dignity, *Kitchen* provides a tool for empathy that transcends borders, languages, or cultural contexts.

The ethical function of a narrative is not to provide definitive solutions but to foster environments which is conducive to contemplation, empathy, and a sense of shared humanity. These environments play a significant role where abilities can develop and thrive. In this vein, Yoshimoto's narrative serves as both a reflection and a model it mirrors our existing moral landscape while encouraging to envision a more enriched and interconnected future. Engaging with *Kitchen* ultimately presents a subtle yet powerful challenge to live in ways that respect the nourishment of both the body and the spirit, and to acknowledge that such nourishment constitutes, in itself, an act of moral bravery.

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