INTERNATIONAL PREMIER JOURNAL OF LANGUAGES & LITERATURE (IPJLL)
VOLUME 4, ISSUE 3 (s2), 2026 p-ISSN: 3007-2336 e-ISSN: 3007-2344

FOOD, MEMORY AND HUMAN CONNECTIONS: A BARTHESIAN PERSPECTIVE OF BANANA'S *KITCHEN*

Sabrina Abid Sabrinaabid1021@gmail.com	MPhil Scholar, Department Of English Literature, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Faisalabad, Pakistan.
Prof. Sanniya Sara Batool moellim@riphah.edu.com	Lecturer, Department Of English Literature, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Faisalabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

This research aims to examine the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in the major symbols present within the novel *Kitchen* written by Banana Yoshimoto through the theoretical lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The research explores how everyday objects, particularly food, kitchens, household spaces, and domestic tasks, play their role as semiotic signs in order to communicate emotional, psychological, and interpersonal experiences in the novel. This research employs a qualitative approach with textual analysis method to interpret the selected textual examples from the novel. Findings of the study reveal that food in the novel Kitchen serves as a powerful semiotic device that facilitates healing from grief and loneliness, built the emotional bonds and triggers memory. Connotatively, food symbolize the intimacy, comfort, care, emotional recovery, and human connection: however, at the denotative level food represents basic nourishment and kitchen spaces serve as domestic settings for cooking. The application of Barthes' five codes on this novel further reveal that the domestic spaces and food related actions carry a layered meanings that has a significant contribution to the narrative progression and character development. The research also identifies that kitchen spaces operate as the emotional shelters where psychological healing and identity reconstruction occur. This study highlights that the food in the kitchen is a cultural and symbolic symbol that connects human connections and emotions rather than just a physical object .Through the lens of Barthesian semiotics, this research provides a deeper insight of how everyday objects in the literature convey complex cultural and emotional meanings.

Keywords*:* *Barthesian Semiotic Theory, Connotation, Denotation, Five Modes, Kitchen, Signs.*

Corresponding Author: Sabrina Abid (MPhil Scholar, Department of English Literature, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Faisalabad, Pakistan).
Email: Sabrinaabid1021@gmail.com

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Literature often expresses meanings beyond its literal narrative through the use of symbols, signs, and cultural symbolism. According to Viranda (2020), literature is the outcome of human expression manifested in written or oral form, based on thoughts, opinions, experiences, or even feelings, and demonstrated imaginatively as a reflection of reality. Through rich and heterogeneous depictions, literature is also capable of providing transformative experiences for its audience, allowing them to feel emotions, understand different perspectives, and discover complex themes. One of the elements frequently used as a theme in literature is food which enables readers to interpret deeper emotional, psychological, and ideological layers within a literary text. According to Utami (2018), food serves not only to satisfy physical needs but also as a substantial element in life experiences.

Halligan states that food has a strong association to memories, the past, and the happiness linked with the past (Artika, 2017). Hence, food is considered capable of generating memories of the past and provoking feelings of longing. This is in line with Christina's view (2023) that food and emotions are closely interconnected and mutually influence each other. As it is known that food can be associated with specific events or occasions thus it recollects happy or sad memories. The food consumed then becomes a symbolization of the characters' past experiences or memories that evoke their longing for particular experiences. The main idea in literary gastronomy is the intimate connection between culinary elements and literature (Suyasa & Darmutika, 2023). This covers the role of food as a livelihood tool, conversation starter, identity marker, memory trigger from the past, strengthening relationships between characters, fostering togetherness, expressing emotions, and providing nutrition for fictional characters (Anggraini, 2018). This shows that food not only serves as an object in the narrative but also has a substantial impact on the literary elements, showing the profound relationship between culinary elements and literature in the domain of literary gastronomy.

Semiotics, the study of signs and meanings, offers a useful framework for examining how such symbols function in literature. The current study focuses on Roland Barthes, who is a French philosopher, linguist, essayist, semiotician, and critic. Barthes was a pioneer of structuralism in the 1950s and 1960s. Structuralism studies the underlying structure using analytical concepts from diverse fields, such as linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and others in order to comprehend the cultural products. In the 1960s and1970s, Barthes transitioned to post-structuralism which viewed that history and the different cultures have impact on the interpretation (Jurjensen, 2014). He played

the main role in developing the field of semiotics after developing it from linguistics to visual representations.

Among various semiotic theories, Roland Barthes' theory is particularly substantial as it explains how denotation, connotation, and myth operate in constructing meaning within texts. Barthes (1957) found semiology as it is the science studying ideas-in-form because the main focus of the study is on significations away from the content. Yet, it is crucial to consider the unity of the interplay between form, and ideology "historical" exposition. According to Barthes, semiology is the interrelation between the signifier, and the signified to form the sign, all in one process. Etymologically, the term 'Semiotics' can be traced back to the Greek word semeiotikos which means "the study of signs" and develops the theory of semiotics. Hartmann and Stork (1972) defined Semiotics as the systematic study of linguistic and non-linguistic signs. Eco (1976) defined sign as a term, a word, a notion, a voice, and also a visible image that achieves the mission of a sign. It represents objects, in reality; hence, subtitling something into another object is the major purpose of a sign (Chandler, 2007). In semiotics, the idea of meaning is formed through diversity between signifiers and signified. The signifier is a picture that represents something or a graphic exemplification of words, letters, and something outside of the discourse environment. On the other hand, the signified is the rational feature of the idea and something that can either be real or imaginary. So, the signified does not essentially be treated as concrete. Barthes (1957) observed semiology as it is the science studying ideas-in-form because the main center of the study is on significations away from the content. Yet, it is significant to consider the unity of the interplay between form, and ideology "historical" explanation. According to Barthes, semiology is the interdependence between the signifier, and the signified to form the sign, all in one process.

As Barthes effectively highlighted in his fundamental essay, Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption (1961, p. 21–5), food represents a "sign" thoroughly, since it is highly structured and includes substances, practices, habits, and methods of preparation and consumption in a system of differences in meaning. . Far from simply involving material needs or physiological processes, in fact, food concerns all the activities, discourses, and images that encompass and are associated with it (Pezzini 2006; Volli 2021).

The novel *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto is a modern Japanese literary work that investigates themes of grief, loneliness, identity, and emotional healing. The novel frequently employs ordinary objects such as food, kitchens, and domestic spaces in order to express intricate emotional and psychological experiences. These ordinary elements extend beyond their literal function and become powerful signs that show the inner states of the characters.

Contemporary writer Yoshimoto Banana was born in 1964 and caught Japan's attention very early. She wrote her first work at the age of 24, while still in college. Her debut work, Kitchen, was well received by the analysts and secured the author the literary prize Izumi Kyoka. Translated into more than twenty five languages, the novel is not only a top selling book but has led to Yoshimoto Banana's techniques being appreciated and studied by scholars. With much room for discussion and investigation, studies on this author's works prove to be applicable to the modern literature field (Leader-Hastorun, 2006; Ogawa, 2019). Yoshimoto's characters are always related to nostalgic feelings. Saito (2006) establishes that nostalgia is the reason Yoshimoto became popular across the world. Some consider those characters search for relief from their traumatic experiences by using their past as a cane to encourage themselves, while others argue that nostalgia is there as a way to assist them to see through said hardships and eventually heal. In any case, it is often viewed that, in one way or another, nostalgia is what moves her characters. This research article applies Barthesian semiotic theory to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings present in the major symbols of *Kitchen*. It also explores how Banana Yoshimoto uses food and domestic spaces as semiotic signs to communicate emotional depth and human experiences. In this way, the study intends to provide a deeper understanding of how meanings are constructed through everyday symbols in the novel.

1.2. Problem Statement

The novel kitchen by the author, Banana Yoshimoto, demonstrates the theme of loneliness, identity crisis, healing, and emotional transformation through food, everyday objects and household spaces. While the previous literature on the novel have primarily centered on cultural, feminist and thematic analyses, however, inadequate attention has been given to exploring denotative and connotative meanings rooted in its symbols from the perspective of Barthesian semiotics. Everyday elements such as food, kitchen and family environment operates beyond their actual meanings and appear to express deeper sentimental and cultural importance. However, there persists a lack of detailed and broad analysis regarding how these common entities and food function as semiotic signs in order to explore the denotative and connotative meanings integrated in the substantial symbols of Kitchen. This research also observes how Banana employs food, ordinary objects and familial spaces as semiotic signs which are used to develop meanings related to grief, emotional healing and human connection through the approach of Barthesian semiotics.

1.3. Research Questions

- What are the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in the major symbols of the novel *Kitchen*?

- How does Banana Yoshimoto employ everyday objects as the semiotic signs to communicate psychological and emotional and experiences?

1.4. Research Objectives

- To identify the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in the major symbols of the novel *Kitchen.*
- To examine how does Banana Yoshimoto employ everyday objects as the semiotic signs to communicate psychological and emotional and experiences.

1.5. Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in the contribution to scientific and literary studies by providing a deep understanding of symbolic meanings that are embedded in the Banana Yoshimoto's novel ‘’Kitchen’’ through the lens of Barthesian semiotics. This research examines how the kitchen, domestic spaces and the food serve not only as the common elements of everyday life but also as the semiotic signs that carry the connotative and denotative meanings pertaining to the identity, grief, loneliness, human relationships and emotional healing. This study provides a new interpretive perspective of the novel “Kitchen” that goes beyond the psychological and thematic analysis by applying Roland Barthes' theory. This research is also significant for the scholars and students of semiotics, cultural studies and literature as it enhances the comprehension of how symbols and signs are function within a literary text to construct the deeper meaning. Through the application of Barthesian semiotics to the novel “Kitchen”, this research offers insight on the symbolic role of everyday objects, domestic spaces and food in the representation of psychological and emotional experience. Furthermore, this study may also serve as the valuable reference for the future researchers in Japanese literature, symbolism, semiotic analysis, and the relationship between emotional expression and everyday events in the literary works.

1.6. Delimitation

This research is delimited to the implementation of Barthesian semiotic theory on the novel *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto. It concentrates only on the examination of major symbols such as food, the kitchen, and domestic environment, along with their denotative and connotative meanings. The research does not extend to other theoretical approach or comparative analysis with other literary works. It is further limited to the analysis of selected textual elements relevant to emotional and psychological experiences in Banana’s novel.

2. Literature Review

Banana Yoshimoto's first novel, Kitchen (1988) has captivated sustained scholarly attention across various disciplines, from translation studies and cultural

criticism to grief theory and food symbolism. The previous studies analyzed here collectively illuminate the novel's multidimensional richness, investigating how it mediates loss, nostalgia, cultural identity, and cross-cultural representation. Together, they form a growing critical discourse that positions, Kitchen, not merely as a coming-of-age narrative but as a discursive space where deeply human concerns, mourning, memory, healing, and belonging converge.

.Sivashankari and Deepa (2025) in their research undertake a thanatological analysis of Banana's Kitchen, arguing that the domestic space of the kitchen functions as a place of consolation for Mikage's grief following the successive losses she endures. Based on grief theory, the writers show that Yoshimoto develops culinary engagement as a conventional response to lamentation, a means through which the protagonist deals with the psychological and existential disorientation of loss. The kitchen, in their reading, surpasses its utilitarian purpose to become a transitional entity, securing identity when societal and familial structures have collapsed. This thanatological framework provides a convincing lens that deepens comprehension of the novel's emotional architecture.

Supporting this focus on loss is Souza's (2024) study of, natsukashisa, a uniquely Japanese form of bittersweet nostalgia, as a shaping emotional register in the novel. Souza claims that Yoshimoto's novel is replete with yearning not merely for the past but for a quality of warmth and familiarity that is inextricable associated with people and places that have passed away. This cultural-affective idea enriches the novel's thematic complexity, implying that grief in Kitchen is not only a response to death but also to the passing of lived experience. Souza's criticism is particularly insightful in placing the novel within a Japanese cultural and philosophical framework, resisting Western universalizing readings of mourning.

The theme of food as a vehicle for healing and transformation is addressed directly by Judith Pearlyn III (2025), who examines the metaphorical role of cooking and eating throughout the narrative. Food, in this reading, is not simply sustenance but a language through which characters express care, connection, and the will to survive. The act of preparing and sharing food depicts a form of agency for Mikage, a way of reconstructing selfhood in the aftermath of grief. Judith Pearlyn's study aligns with broader food-studies scholarship while grounding its assertions firmly in Yoshimoto's text, offering a nuanced explanation of how the domestic and the curative intersect.

Khoirunnisaa and Febrianty (2024) investigated the connection between food and memory in their study which is titled as Food as a Memory Trigger: A Study of Literary Gastronomy. It has been argued that food offers a potent mnemonic representation in literary narration. Such depiction of food enables the characters to reconnect with individual histories, emotional and compassionate experiences, and

cultural heritage. Analysis reveals the representation of culinary practices in literature. Moreover, the findings showed that sensory encounters with food specifically taste and smell trigger recollections and these memories play a significant role in shaping both individual and collective identities. Hence, literary gastronomy has given a perspective of how food can become a source of preserving memories that assures provision of continuity of emotions even in displaced zones.

Stano (2023) in his research expanded the diverse discussion in Food, ideology and Critical Semiotics, by examining ideological structures in which food is embedded and drives a culturally coded system of signs in them. It has been argued that food communicates meanings beyond nutritional function explained in semiotic theory particularly in the work of Roland Barthes. Culinary choices, rituals, and representations offer a clear visual of values related to class, nationalism, gender, and power. Through a critical semiotic lens, the research demonstrated the multiple dimensions through which food practices to naturalize dominant ideologies which indirectly contribute to the construction of social realities. This study is particularly significant in foregrounding the borderline on which cultural norms and power relations are negotiated and reproduced with respect to food.

George (2023) in his research examined that the food becoming a site is substantiated where it revived Barthes' fundamental perspective of food semiotics. In the light of Barthes' discussions about wine and steak, the process daily food items transforming into mythic signs has been illustrated. These signs are particularly related with crucial notions of national identity, masculinity, and social ideology. Additionally, Wine for Barthes is symbol that conveys the nationality of France which is described in Frenchness and cultural refinement. On the other hand, steak can be interpreted as sign of strength and vitality. This study however analyzed and emphasized that gustatory signs operate within expandable cultural narratives. And these broad narratives transform simple consumption into a symbolic performance of identity and ideology.

Pratiwi and Marfathonah (2023) focused on food as depiction of love and affection in their research. It drew its analysis on the claim that food is the Asian way of showing affection. This phrase widely investigated as signifier of culture that shows the importance of food in Asian interpersonal relationships of societies. Their semiotic exploration revealed the role of food and its preparation a symbol that advocates care, emotional labor, and familial obligation. The study highlighted the affective and relational aspects of food by illustrating how culinary functions act as a non-verbal communicative source conveying love and belonging. This perspective interprets and defines food something that is mediator of emotional intimacy and cultural identity.

Matoszko (2022) investigates the use of metaphor in selected short stories by Yoshimoto as they appear in English and Polish translation. While not exclusively

focused on Kitchen, Matoszko's study raises significant questions about how Yoshimoto's figurative language, much of which is tied to home imagery and emotional experiences, is rendered across linguistic and cultural boundaries. The study adds to broader discussions in literary translation studies and reveals both the creativity and the limitations of translators when confronting culturally embedded metaphors.

Jadou and Al Ghabra (2021) carry out a general exploration on the science of signs, and it employs Barthes' semiotic theory for the interpretation of signs in particular. The main objective is achieved through reviewing the famous writings of Barthes. It focused on developing the understanding of his semiotic theory. Various previous researches that applied Barthes 'semiotic theory were displayed. Current study intended to answer several questions that includes: In what ways Barthes semiotic theory can be used to understand signs?. The major works of Barthes critically reviewed under this study were exclusively Mythologies, Elements of semiology, The five codes, The rhetoric of the image, The death of the author, and From work to text. The results of this research successfully answered the inquiries mentioned in its introduction. It was presented in three levels, denotative described literal meanings, mental concepts were associated with connotative whereas history and culture views were studied under mythology.

Furukawa's (2012) in his research finds a visual counterpart in analysis of cover designs for international editions of Kitchen. Furukawa argues that cover illustrations frequently misrepresent the novel's cultural and thematic content, projecting Orientalist or generic consumer-aesthetic expectations onto a text whose subtlety and cultural specificity they fail to capture. This study is a valuable reminder that the reception of literary works is shaped not only by translation but by the entire apparatus of publication and marketing.

2.1. Research Gap

The insights from previous literature have established food as a multifaceted semiotic and literary phenomenon. Food triggers memories, act as a carrier of meanings of different ideologies, it serves language of love, and a signifier of cultural and traditional identity. The recent body of scholarship provides a beneficial theoretical framework that introduced unique approaches for analysis of literary texts. These techniques gave an extensive description of how food functions not simply as a descriptive element but also it occupies a central status of symbolic structure that conveys themes of memory, belonging, emotion, and socio-cultural power.

3. Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework offers the conceptual foundation of a study by explaining the theory through which the research problem is examined and interpreted.

The present research applies Barthesian semiotics to interpret how Banana Yoshimoto uses food, kitchens, and domestic spaces as symbolic signs in the novel. Since *Kitchen* deals with the themes of grief, loneliness, identity, emotional healing, and family relationships, the study explores how ordinary objects operate apart from their literal meanings to express psychological and emotional states.

Since the current study aims to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings integrated in symbols and everyday objects in the novel, Kitchen, the study is grounded in the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes. Barthesian semiotics is applied to analyze how food, kitchens, and domestic spaces operate as signs that communicate emotional and psychological experiences in *Kitchen*.

Through the lens of Barthesian semiotics, this research intends to uncover both the denotative and connotative meanings found in major symbols and analyze how these symbols contribute to the narrative's emotional depth. Thus, Barthes' framework provides a suitable theoretical foundation for comprehending the hidden meanings and emotional significance of everyday experiences represented in the Kitchen.

3.1.1. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

This research is grounded in the semiotic theory of Roland Barthes, whose theoretical structure provides an effective approach to understanding how meanings are constructed through signs and symbols in literary works. Semiotics is the study of signs and the ways meanings are constructed and interpreted within cultural and literary settings. Barthes extended traditional semiotics by focusing on that texts carry multiple layers of meaning beyond their literal interpretation. According to Barthes, objects, actions, and images in literary texts often function as signs that express deeper emotional, social, and cultural meanings.

Barthes' theory is notably suitable for literary analysis because it enables researchers to analyze how ordinary objects and experiences are transformed into meaningful symbols present within narratives. In literature, signs may appear in the form of settings, objects, actions, food, colors, or recurring motifs that play the significant role in the construction of themes and emotions.

3.1.2. Concept of Sign in Barthesian Semiotics

In Barthes' semiotic, text is a widely used term. However, text is not always present in the written form. According to Torop (2019), text is a ternary composed of signs, particularly used and constructed in a certain cultural-historical background, including the author's worldview, life experience, etc. Therefore, pictures, films, paintings, and other literary works are also classified as texts. Meanwhile, the connotation is the second level meaning that exposes a deeper meaning of the text by taking into account the environment, psychology, history, and other surrounding aspects. These layered signs consequently lead to a new definition of meta-language or

meta-text. Barthes describes that a sign consists of two components: the signifier and the signified. The signifier denotes to the physical form of a sign, such as a word, image, or object, while the signified refers to the concept or the meanings linked with it. In the works of literature, everyday elements can function as signs that depict meanings transcend their literal existence.

In the novel *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto, elements such as food, kitchens, and home environments are not just physical objects but are signs that carry emotional and symbolic meanings. For instance, the kitchen may signify comfort, belonging, healing, or emotional security rather than simply being a place for cooking.

3.1.3. Denotation and Connotation

The primary concepts employed in this study are denotation and connotation, which are central to Barthes' semiotic theory.

Denotation denotes to the direct, literal, or dictionary meaning of a sign. It illustrates what an object or image literally represents. For example, food in the novel literally refers to meals and eating practices, while the kitchen signifies a physical domestic space used for cooking.

Connotation, on the other hand, applies to the implied, emotional, or cultural meanings linked with a sign. Connotative meanings go beyond literal interpretations and demonstrate emotional experiences, ideologies, or social values. In *Kitchen*, food may connote emotional relief, healing, care, and human connection, while domestic areas may symbolize loneliness, intimacy, memory, or emotional recovery.

This difference between denotation and connotation forms the basis of the interpretation in this research, enabling a deeper understanding of how meanings are embedded in everyday objects and experiences.

3.1.4. Barthes Narrative Theory

In his book S/Z, Barthes developed a textual analysis theory in which he classified signifiers into five types of codes believing that any text may have several meanings, and all the events can be given codes and names. The five codes are as follows: the proairetic code indicates to all the actions as they are understood through reading leading the reader to develop the plot, and they are typically related to earlier and/ or later actions; the hermeneutic code indicates to any mysterious or unexplained elements in the literary text as they are seen in detective, and open-ended stories (Booryazadeh & Faghfori, 2014); the semantic code indicates the connotation of the implied elements as they appear through reading; the symbolic code points to the connotation of organized sets of meaning in a way that can be understood differently; lastly, the cultural code concentrates on indisputable texts like science, religion, or profession (Jureczek, 2017).

3.2. Research Methodology

3.2.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design as it seeks to explore and interpret meanings embedded in literary symbols rather than relying on numerical data. Qualitative research is appropriate for literary analysis because it allows for an in-depth understanding of texts, themes, and symbolic representations. The study is interpretive and descriptive in nature, focusing on how meanings are created through signs and symbols in the selected literary work.

3.2.2. Research Method

The research follows a textual analysis method, which entails the close reading and examination of literary texts. Textual analysis method enables to examine language, symbols, recurring motifs, and narrative elements to reveal hidden meanings and ideological messages. Since this research focuses on semiotic meanings in the novel, textual analysis is considered as the most acceptable method for understanding how signs function within the narrative.

3.2.3. Data Collection Procedure

The primary source of data in the current research is the novel *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto. Textual excerpts containing major symbols, recurring motifs, and significant references to food, kitchens, memory, human connections and domestic spaces are selected for analysis.

3.2.4. Data Analysis Procedure

The collected data are interpreted using Barthesian semiotic theory. The data has been anaylsed through careful reading of the text to identify the significant symbols appearing in the text, particularly food, kitchens, memory and domestic spaces. These symbols are then examined at the denotative level to comprehend their literal meanings. Afterward, the connotative meanings are evaluated to interpret the emotional, cultural, and psychological importance attached to these symbols.

The findings are evaluated in relation to the themes of grief, loneliness, identity, emotional healing, and human relationships in the novel. This systematic process assists reveal how Banana Yoshimoto employs ordinary objects as semiotic signs to express deeper meanings and emotional experiences.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Analysis based on Barthes 'theory of signification:

4.1.1. Food represented as a Sign of Emotional Healing and Human Connection

In *Kitchen*, food serves as more than nourishment; it operates as a sign carrying emotional and relational connotations. From a Barthesian point of view, food acts as a signifier**,** while emotional comfort, love, healing, and intimacy become the signified meanings attached to it. For instance, after Mikage loses her grandmother, the Tanabe family invites her into their home and asks her to cook for them:

"But instead of rent, just make us soupy rice once in a while. Yours is so much better than Yuichi's." (Page 21)

At the level of denotation, "soupy rice" simply signifies to a meal. However, at the level of connotation, the food symbolizes care, acceptance, and emotional connection. Through Barthesian semiotics, food becomes a symbol of belonging because Mikage's cooking fosters an emotional closeness between her and the Tanabes. The meal transforms into a symbolic language of love and mutual support, especially during grief.

Similarly, when Yuichi and Mikage cook late-night ramen after sharing an emotionally intense dream experience, food again becomes a medium of intimacy:

"In this little room suspended in the black of night, under the kitchen light, I opened the refrigerator. I chopped vegetables." (Page 40)

Denotatively, this scene depicts ordinary food preparation. Connotatively, on the other hand, the act of cooking symbolizes emotional companionship and healing. According to Barthes, ordinary objects become culturally meaningful signs, and here ramen becomes symbol of emotional warmth in moments of loneliness.

4.1.2. Kitchen as a Symbolic Space of Memory and Emotional Security

The kitchen in Yoshimoto's novel is not just a domestic setting but also a symbolic space deeply connected with memory, comfort, and emotional survival. According to Barthes, spaces can appear as signs that express meanings beyond their physical existence.

Mikage often expresses emotional attachment to kitchens:

"It was a kitchen. I was puzzled, smiling about how I had just gone from the darkest despair to feeling wonderful." (Page 35)

At denotation level, the kitchen is simply a place where food is cooked. Yet, its connotative meaning represents emotional refuge and psychological recovery. During a period of grief and emotional collapse after remembering her grandmother, the sound of cooking from a kitchen recollects Mikage's emotional stability. Through Barthesian analysis, the kitchen becomes a signifier of optimism, continuity, and emotional renewal. The symbolic importance of the kitchen is reinforced near the conclusion:

"Dream kitchens. I will have countless ones, in my heart or in reality." (Page 43)

Here, the kitchen surpasses physical reality and becomes a metaphorical space incorporated in memory and identity. Connotatively, it represents emotional resilience and the continuity of human experiences despite loss.

4.1.3. Food and Memory: Reconstructing the Past through Everyday Objects

According to Barthes, ordinary objects can produce emotional and cultural interpretations. In *Kitchen*, food-related experiences evoke memories and emotional

recollections, particularly of Mikage's grandmother. Mikage recalls moments spent with her grandmother:

"We would spend a little time together before bed, sometimes drinking coffee, sometimes green tea, eating cake and watching TV." (Page 20)

Denotatively, coffee, tea, and cake are the examples of consumable items used every day. However, connotatively, these foods represent familial love, emotional intimacy, and nostalgia. The food items serve as signs connecting Mikage to memories of domestic warmth and emotional closeness. Barthes' theory illustrates how these everyday objects gain symbolic value through emotional experience. Likewise, Mikage recalls sensory details connected to home:

"The kitchen window. The smiling faces of friends… my grandmother's voice on the phone… the sound of my grandmother's slippers in the hallway." (Page 32)

These domestic details work as signs of memory. Instead of being a neutral area, the kitchen becomes emotionally charged and connected with the grandmother's presence. From a Barthesian perspective, memory is created through symbolic associations embedded in ordinary surroundings.

4.1.4. Human Connections through Shared Domestic Experiences

Another major theme uncovered through Barthesian theory is the formation of human connections through domestic routines and food practices. Shared meals and kitchen activities become symbolic behaviours that establish emotional connection among characters. For instance, Eriko gifts Mikage a glass with a banana-theme on it:

"Be sure to drink lots of juice, okay?" (Page 31)

Denotatively, the glass used as a household item. Connotatively, it represents emotional acceptance and familial affection. The gift demonstrates Mikage's emotional integration into the Tanabe family, reflecting how material objects become signs of love and belonging. In the same manner, when Mikage and Yuichi prepare food together after dreaming the same dream, their shared kitchen activity symbolizes emotional understanding:

"While I scrubbed the sink and Yuichi mopped, we sang together. It was so much fun, hearing our voices in the silent kitchen in the middle of the night." (Page 38)

From a Barthesian perspective, the kitchen scene signifies togetherness and emotional synchronization. Cooking together functions not merely as action but as symbolic communication emotionally wounded humans.

4.1.5. Food as Emotional Comfort during Grief

One of the significant functions of food in *Kitchen* is emotional recovery after loss. After the death of Mikage's grandmother, food frequently appears in moments of sadness, acting as psychological comfort. For instance:

"I'm starving. I was thinking, hmm, maybe I'll make some ramen noodles…" (Page 39)

At the level of **denotation**, ramen simply denotes to a late-night meal. However, **connotatively**, the meal represents emotional support and companionship. The scene appears after emotional distress, demonstrating how food becomes a means of coping with loneliness. According to Barthes, ordinary objects become culturally meaningful symbols; therefore, ramen serves as a symbolic sign of emotional recovery. Food here does not merely provide sustenance but also reduces emotional emptiness.

4.1.6. The Kitchen as a Symbol of Psychological Healing

The kitchen is shown as a healing space where emotional pain becomes manageable. Throughout the novel, Mikage connects kitchens with comfort and peace. An important example appears when Mikage cries after leaving her old apartment:

"From inside came the sound of happy voices at work, soup boiling, knives and pots and pans clanging. It was a kitchen." (Page 35)

Denotatively, this explains cooking sounds and noise in a kitchen. Connotatively, however, the kitchen becomes a signifier of coziness, safety, and emotional stability. At a moment of despair, hearing kitchen sounds brings back Mikage's hope. Through Barthesian semiotics, the kitchen switches into a symbolic refuge where grief is softened.

4.1.7. The Kitchen as a Space of Memory

The kitchen frequently becomes tied to memories of the past. Mikage recalls:

"The kitchen window… my grandmother's voice on the phone… the sound of my grandmother's slippers in the hallway." (Page 32)

At the denotative level, these are illustrations of home. At the connotative level, they represent grief, nostalgia, and emotional attachment. The kitchen works as a memory archive where personal experiences remain emotionally alive.

4.2. Analysis based on Barthes' Narrative theory:

4.2.1. Hermeneutic Code (Enigma / Mystery Code)

The hermeneutic code deals with mysteries and unanswered questions that organize the narrative and maintain the reader's interest. In *Kitchen*, several emotional and existential mysteries drive the narrative:

One key question is why Mikage develops such a strong emotional attachment to kitchens and cooking after the death of her grandmother. Another mystery concerns the true emotional condition of Yuichi and his complex relationship with Eriko, which remains emotionally layered and difficult to fully interpret. The novel also raises the question of how food and domestic spaces gradually replace broken family ties and

become a substitute for emotional support. Food itself becomes part of this existential mystery as cooking is not only a daily activity but also an emotional riddle within the story. Mikage's deep connection with the kitchen creates an ongoing interpretive question: Is the kitchen a space of survival or emotional recovery?

Even though the when answers are partially given within the narrative (through Mikage's thoughts and actions), Barthes' hermeneutic code remains active because emotional loss and healing are never completely addressed.

4.2.2. Proairetic Code (Action Code)

This code denotes to the actions and sequences that build narrative movement. In *Kitchen*, several important actions shape the story's development such as Mikage cooking meals alone in her apartment after the death of her grandmother marks the beginning of her emotional journey. Yuichi later invited Mikage to live with him and Eriko in their apartment which introduces a new domestic arrangement and emotional environment. Their shared cooking and eating routines in the shared home gradually creates the feelings of togetherness. The sudden death of Eriko becomes a turning point in the narrative and leads to Yuichi's psychological transformation. Eventually, Mikage leaves and later reunites with Yuichi, completing a cycle of separation and return. Throughout the story food-related actions formulate structure organize the emotional rhythm of the story. Cooking functions as a coping mechanism, eating together becomes a form of emotional bonding, and preparing meals helps the characters rebuild stability after trauma. Each of the cooking practice pushes the narrative forward, demonstrating that food is not static symbolism but a driving force of plot movement and emotional development and change.

4.2.3. Semantic Code (Connotative Meanings)

This code primarily focuses on deeper meanings attached to objects, characters, and settings. In *Kitchen*, food and kitchen spaces beyond their literal function conveys multiple layers of meanings

Kitchen as a symbol:

The kitchen symbolizes safety and emotional refuge, offering a space where characters feel protected from emotional distress. It also represents memory preservation, as it connects Mikage to her grandmother and her past experiences. Additionally, the kitchen functions as a substitute for family structure, replacing traditional bonds with newly formed emotional connections.

Food as meaning

Food itself carries connotations of comfort and healing, especially through warm meals and home-cooked dishes that represent love and care. It also becomes a medium of emotional interaction, where food expresses feelings that cannot be communicated

through words. Shared meals further symbolize continuity of relationships, as eating together reflects shared lives and emotional closeness.

4.2.4. Specific example (thematic):

A key example is Mikage linking cooking with her grandmother shows that food becomes a carrier of memory or unforgettable precious moments of the past, where taste and smell preserve emotional presence.

4.2.5. Symbolic Code (Binary Oppositions)

The symbolic code discloses deeper structural oppositions in the text. In *Kitchen*, key binaries include:

1. **Life verses Death**

One major binary is between life and death. Cooking and eating symbolize life, continuity, and emotional survival, while the deaths of Mikage's grandmother and Eriko represent emotional rupture and psychological loss.

2. Loneliness versus Connection

Another opposition exists between loneliness and connection. Mikage's solitary life in her apartment reflects isolation, whereas shared meals with Yuichi and Eriko represent belonging and emotional attachment.

3. Home versus Displacement

The text also contrasts home and displacement. The kitchen functions as a symbol of home and stability, while the outside world represents emotional instability and uncertainty.

4. Food versus Absence

Another significant opposition is between food and absence. Food signifies the presence of affectionate relationships and emotional warmth, while the absence of food reflects emotional emptiness and numbness.

These oppositions reflect that food is not neutral as it exists in tension between loss and healing, isolation and intimacy.

4.2.6. Cultural Code (Knowledge / Social Meaning)

This code indicates to cultural knowledge, social norms, and shared beliefs. In *Kitchen*, Japanese cultural associations strongly formulate the meaning of food:

Cultural meanings of food

Food plays a central role in constructing meaning. Home-cooked meals are culturally associated with care, emotional responsibility, and family bonding. Sharing food is also seen as a sign of trust and intimacy, strengthening social and emotional relationships. In this context, the kitchen is traditionally linked to domestic stability and often connected with feminine caregiving roles. Additionally, mourning practices are indirectly reflected through food-related routines, as grief is often expressed through actions rather than verbal communication. Japanese cultural norms that emphasize

emotional restraint are also evident, as characters tend to express grief indirectly through cooking and caregiving instead of openly discussing their emotions. Mikage's behavior reflects this cultural idea, where emotional expression is achieved through action, particularly through preparing food, rather than through direct verbal articulation of grief or loss.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the complex relationship between food, human relations, and memory in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. The research was grounded in a theoretical framework that offers the conceptual foundation for comprehending and interpreting the research problem. A theoretical framework illustrates the theory through which a study is done and guides the researcher in determining relationships between key concepts, enabling a systematic analysis of data. In the current study, since the focus was on analyzing the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in symbols and everyday objects within the novel. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory was utilized as the central framework. Barthesian semiotics was particularly used to interpret how food, kitchens, and domestic spaces operate as signs that express emotional and psychological experiences in *Kitchen*.

Within Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the key concepts of denotation and connotation were the point of focus to the analysis. In *Kitchen*, food connotes emotional comfort, recovery, care, and human connection, while domestic spaces such as the kitchen denote loneliness, intimacy, memory, and emotional recovery. The application of Barthes' five narrative codes further consolidated the analysis. In relation to the research questions and objectives of the current study, it is confirmed that food in *Kitchen* serves as more than a physical necessity; it is a semiotic resource that creates and mediates human relationships and memory. It helps people express their emotions, strengthens interpersonal bonds, and functions as a coping mechanism for grief and isolation. The kitchen appears as an emotional shelter where identity reconstruction and psychological healing take place.

The research gap noticed in this study lies in the limited scholarly attention given to a systematic semiotic reading of food in *Kitchen by Banana Yoshimoto* using Barthes' framework. Although earlier research has addressed themes such as loneliness, grief, and identity, they have not thoroughly explored how food serves as a structured sign system that associates memory and human relations. This research addresses that gap by providing a detailed Barthesian interpretation of food as a layered signifying practice.

In conclusion, this research reflects that Barthesian semiotic theory provides a powerful lens for interpreting *Kitchen*, disclosing that food, kitchens, and domestic spaces serve as complex signs embedded with both denotative and connotative meanings. These signs transcend beyond their literal presence to depict emotional states,

cultural values, and lived human experiences. In the end, food in *Kitchen* becomes a narrative bridge between memory and relationships, shaping the characters' emotional journeys toward recovery, connection, and self-understanding.

References

Davis, S. E. (2016). *Food and pleasure in modern American literature.* Temple University.

file:///C:/Users/abid_/Downloads/BarthesSemioticTheory.pdf

George, K. (2023). *Of Wine and Steak: Reading Gustatory Signs/Signifiers in Roland Barthes' Essays.* Saudi J. Humanities Soc Sci, 8(8), 224-226.

https://repositorio.pucrs.br/dspace/bitstream/10923/27180/1/2024_2_MARINA_DE_CARVALHO_RIOS_PINHEIRO_DE_SOUZA_TCC.pdf

Khoirunnisaa, N., & Febrianty, F. (2024, June). *Food as a memory trigger: a study of literary gastronomy*. In Proceeding of International Conference on Business, Economics, Social Sciences, and Humanities (Vol. 7, pp. 295-303).

Mintz, S. W., & Du Bois, C. M. (2002). *The anthropology of food and eating.* Annual review of anthropology, 31(1), 99-119.

Pratiwi, R. D., & Marfathonah, U. (2023). *Food is the Asian way of showing love: A semiotic Analysis.* JSSH (Jurnal Sains Sosial dan Humaniora), 33-39.

Samson, I. (2018). *THE SEMIOTICS OF FOOD: AN INVESTIGATION OF FOOD FROM A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE.*ACADEMIA

Stano, S. (2023). *Food, ideology and critical semiotics*. LEXIA, 41, 307-322.

Stano, S. (2023). *Food, ideology and critical semiotics*. LEXIA, 41, 307-322.

Yoshimoto, B. (1993). *Kitchen*. Grove Press.