

Trauma in Layers: Representation of Complex Trauma in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*

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Abstract

Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* is a deeply resonant novel that explores the world of grief through the loss and trauma experienced by the characters. The novel follows the protagonist and narrator, Mikage Sakurai who tries to rebuild her life after experiencing profound losses. The paper is a literary reading of the novel that tries to examine the representation of complex trauma in it through its main characters, Mikage, Yuichi and Eriko. The paper does not intend to treat the examination in a clinical manner or, diagnose or pathologise the characters in any way, shape, or form. The paper presents analyses on the representation of complex trauma in *Kitchen* specific to each of the main characters with arguments that support the analyses. The paper employs trauma studies as its foundational theoretical framework and draws upon the ideas, notions and concepts of seminal figures in trauma studies such as Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra to present the arguments for the analyses. It also utilises the ideas of radio journalist and memoirist, Stephanie Foo to further enrich some of the analyses presented. The paper establishes that complex trauma in *Kitchen* is a form of trauma resulted from multiple losses and prolonged suffering. It presents complex trauma as a layered and cumulative condition that eventually becomes a way of survival and living for the characters, shaping their identity, sense of self and personality as a whole while altering their perception of self, life and the world. In *Kitchen*, Yoshimoto showcases through its characters that healing from profound losses and intense trauma is a slow and gradual journey. The paper also thus contends that although healing from complex trauma is a difficult and non-linear process that takes a long period of time, it is not always or entirely impossible.

Keywords: Complex Trauma, Representation, Layered Trauma, Cumulative Condition, Prolonged Suffering, Self-Altering, Identity-Shaping

I. Introduction

Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* is a powerful novel that explores loss, grief and the fragile process of healing through an understated but deeply emotional narrative. Although the text appears simple in style and minimal in dramatic action, it reveals a complex emotional world of grief

where the characters try to navigate through life after experiencing profound losses. The novel follows Mikage Sakurai, a young woman who is left alone after the death of her grandmother and traces her journey from solitude and disorientation towards renewed connection with others.

The paper reads the novel through a literary concept of complex trauma. The close reading of the text reveals that it represents complex trauma through its emphasis on repeated losses, emotional instability and the cumulative effects of bereavement on identity. Rather than presenting trauma as a single wound with a clear beginning and end, Yoshimoto shows it as layered, enduring and inseparable from the rhythms of everyday existence.

The novel is especially significant because it refuses the conventional spectacle of trauma and instead locates pain in ordinary domestic settings, quiet gestures and intimate conversations. The kitchen which functions as the most important symbolic space in the text becomes a site of nourishment, refuge and emotional survival. It is in this domestic space that Mikage begins to recover her sense of belonging, not through dramatic transformation but through the slow reconstitution of trust, routine and empathetic connection.

Through the ideas, notions and concepts of seminal trauma studies figures, Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra along with supporting ideas from radio journalist and memoirist, Stephanie Foo, the paper establishes that *Kitchen* represents complex trauma as a form of trauma that is cumulative, layered and formative, resulting from repeated losses and prolonged suffering. It further asserts that complex trauma also alters the identity of the characters while shaping their sense of self and how they perceive their self, life and the world. While positing that complex trauma is an ongoing condition that gradually and eventually becomes a way of survival and living, the paper also contends that although healing from complex trauma is difficult and complicated, it is not absolutely impossible, providing a hopeful optimism, one that makes the affected individual look forward to the possibilities of life that could unfold in the aftermath of their profound losses.

II. Conceptual & Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Framework

The paper uses the literary definitions and interpretations of trauma in general and complex trauma in particular presented below as guiding concepts to present the analyses on the representation of complex trauma in *Kitchen*.

Trauma, in a literary sense, may be understood as a rupture or breach in the lived experience of an individual that disrupts and unsettles the continuity of the self, resisting complete and proper assimilation into language, memory and narrative. It is not confined to the originating event of loss or shock but persists as an aftereffect – reappearing in the form of dreams, nightmares, fragmented memories, other repetitive, intrusive phenomena and certain altered ways of perceiving the world. Trauma inhabits the spaces between what is felt and what can be articulated, often revealing itself obliquely and obscurely rather than directly and clearly.

In narrative, trauma is both disruptive and generative: it fractures linearity and destabilises identity, yet also produces new modes of relationality, care and meaning-making. It is experienced not only individually but also intersubjectively, circulating through bonds of intimacy, memory and shared vulnerability. Thus, trauma is less a singular event than an ongoing condition of being, a lingering entity that shapes how characters inhabit absence, negotiate grief and move towards forms of healing.

In *Kitchen*, Yoshimoto represents trauma not as a spectacular event but as a quiet, persistent disturbance that enters the most ordinary spaces of life. The novel shows that trauma can reside in memory, loneliness and the fragile effort to continue living after experiencing loss. Rather than presenting trauma through dramatic revelation, Yoshimoto embeds it in domestic routines, everyday gestures and private realisations. In this way, *Kitchen* suggests that trauma is not simply what breaks the self apart, it is also what alters the way the self experiences time, space and human connection. The novel's restrained tone and minimalist style make this representation especially powerful because emotional pain is felt more through atmosphere than through declaration.

Complex trauma may be understood as a layered and cumulative condition of wounding that resists singular origin or closure. Rather than emerging from one identifiable event, it accrues over time through repeated losses or destabilising experiences. In narrative, it manifests as fragmentation – of linear storytelling, of memory, of selfhood – and often produces characters who exist in a state of ongoing negotiation with their traumatic past. With complex trauma, it is not only about what has happened, but also about how the self is continually shaped and reshaped by patterns of vulnerability, endurance and adaptation. It is thus diffuse, recursive and deeply entangled with the rhythms of daily existence.

Complex trauma in *Kitchen* is illustrated through the characters' accumulation of repeated losses and the long aftermath of grief. Each character's life is marked by a chain of deaths and separations, and the novel shows how such repeated ruptures shape identity over time. Rather than making trauma remain tied to a single event, Yoshimoto presents it as cumulative, layered and formative. The self that emerges from such experience is one that has adapted to instability yet remains quietly marked by it. This makes complex trauma in *Kitchen* less about visible breakdown than about the enduring consequences of living through repeated emotional devastation. The novel's sensitivity to memory, routine and survival allows trauma to appear as a condition that shapes the entire state of existence.

This study is grounded in the understanding that trauma in *Kitchen* is not presented as a singular psychological wound alone but as a layered experienced shaped by grief, care, intimacy and everyday life. The paper presents complex trauma as an embodied, cumulative emotional injury where the self is shaped by multiple losses and prolonged vulnerability rather than by a single event. This form or category of trauma is not used in a clinical sense but as a literary tool for reading the complex structure of the novel and the emotional experiences embodied by the characters in the novel in a deeply humanistic manner.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this paper draws primarily on trauma studies, especially its literary understanding of trauma as a disruption that resists direct, articulate and proper narration, returning through repetitive, intrusive phenomena and unstable emotional experiences. The study approaches the experience of trauma as an ongoing, affective condition and a way of survival and living rather than a medical diagnosis. This allows *Kitchen* to be read as a text in which grief is not merely reported but also structurally embedded in tone and imagery.

The paper is informed by a trauma-centred framework that reads *Kitchen* not simply as a narrative of grief but as a literary exploration of how trauma is experienced and witnessed. This paper approaches complex trauma as a layered condition and cumulative phenomenon. In this context, complex trauma is understood not only as the effect of traumatic events but also as an ongoing condition and a way of survival and living shaped by affect, care and the search for emotional survival. Such an approach is suitable for *Kitchen* because it represents pain in a restrained and intimate manner where the domestic sphere becomes the site in which loss is felt, mediated and transformed.

The paper primarily draws upon Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, which helps in establishing a definition and concept of complex trauma, hence providing an insightful understanding of it. Herman's ideas help in explaining the nature of complex trauma and its effects on the individual. Herman's ideas thus help in framing complex trauma as a form of trauma resulted from repeated losses and prolonged suffering which gradually and eventually alters and reshapes the identity and selfhood of the individual.

The paper also draws upon Bessel van der Kolk's influential text on clinical trauma studies, *The Body Keeps the Score*, to help the paper discuss trauma as an entity that is not only remembered but also embodied, carried in affect, bodily response and lived presence. Van der Kolk's ideas help in positing that trauma affects the individual as a whole, hence altering the way they perceive the self, life and the world.

The paper also uses Cathy Caruth's seminal text on literary trauma studies, *Unclaimed Experience*, which conceptualises trauma as an experience that is not fully grasped when the traumatic event occurs and returns belatedly in fragmented and indirect ways. Caruth's understanding of trauma helps in examining the delayed, quiet and sometimes elusive presence of grief in *Kitchen*. This framework helps explain how Yoshimoto renders grief as something that goes beyond immediate understanding, reappearing in memory, mood and domestic detail.

The paper also draws on Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, which helps in considering how trauma operates in *Kitchen* through his understanding of how traumatic memory works and his notions of "acting out" and "working through." LaCapra's notions help in explaining the difference between being trapped in loss and gradually moving towards a more reflective relationship with it.

The paper is further supported by Stephanie Foo's memoir of healing from complex trauma, *What My Bones Know*, which acts as a supportive contemporary text to assert ideas on the lived experience of trauma. Foo's memoir helps the paper in refining the understanding of the representation of complex trauma in *Kitchen* by contending that the novel depicts complex trauma as cumulative, lived and ongoing. It further helps the paper in arguing that healing from complex trauma can take place through performing one's favourite rituals and activities.

Taken together, these texts help the paper in providing an understanding on how complex trauma is represented in *Kitchen*. The ideas, notions and concepts presented in these texts allow the paper to contend that *Kitchen* represents complex trauma as a cumulative, layered and ongoing condition that is resulted from repeated losses and prolonged suffering. They help in asserting that it is a formative force that alters one's identity and shapes one's sense of self, reforming how one perceives the self, life and the world. Through this examination of the representation of complex trauma in the novel, *Kitchen* emerges as a subtle meditation on how loss alters the self but is repaired gradually through connection, care and ordinary, everyday activities.

III. Complex Trauma in *Kitchen*

The discussion on complex trauma will move beyond single-event trauma to the narrative accumulation of trauma relevant to characters who endure prolonged hardship arising from multiple losses, namely, Eriko, Mikage and Yuichi. The discussion will establish complex trauma as layered and cumulative in nature, resulted from repeated losses and prolonged suffering. It will also highlight its impact on identity and the role that social marginalisation and gendered vulnerability play in the accumulation of trauma in an individual leading to complex trauma.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes, "People who have endured horrible events suffer predictable psychological harm. There is a spectrum of traumatic disorders, ranging from the effects of a single overwhelming event to the more complicated effects of prolonged and repeated abuse." (p. 3) This statement posits the claim that complex trauma is not a result of a single traumatic event but of multiple losses and prolonged suffering. In the book, she further writes, "Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living." (p. 52) These statements illuminate the state and condition the characters on *Kitchen* are in in the aftermath of their losses. Herman also writes, "People subjected to prolonged, repeated trauma develop an insidious, progressive form of post-traumatic stress disorder that invades and erodes the personality." (p. 86) This statement supports the claim that complex trauma alters and shapes the identity of the person subjected to repeated losses and long-term suffering. In *Kitchen*, all the three main characters' sense of self, their perception of life, the world and reality are all altered by their intense grief and trauma, hence leading to the alteration of their personality and identity as a whole.

In the second part of *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman writes that "traumatic memory ... is wordless and static" and that "the survivor's initial account of the event may be repetitious, stereotyped, and emotionless" highlighting the nature of narrative stagnation in traumatic memory. (p. 175) This claim illuminates how the characters in *Kitchen* are configured by the text in their representations when they try to narrate their stories to the listener. Trauma disarticulates the self and the characters find themselves not being able to narrate their stories properly in an articulate manner. Further in the text, Herman also writes, "Trauma inevitably brings loss. Even

those who are lucky enough to escape physically unscathed still lose the internal psychological structures of a self securely attached to others... And those who lose important people in their lives face a new void in their relationships with friends, family, or community.” (p. 188) In *Kitchen*, Mikage experiences multiple losses before she moves into the Tanabe household. While all her immediate family members – her parents, her grandfather and finally her grandmother – have lost their lives, Mikage still has to keep on living despite the dire circumstances that life has put her in. In the period of her grieving process where she is still deeply affected by her recent, immediate loss, her relationships with other people are strained due to her sense of self being intensely affected by the grief. Yuichi is also not his usual self in the aftermath of the death of Eriko, even months after the loss. Eriko is also shown struggling to cope with life while her wife was battling cancer and after her eventual painful death.

In *Kitchen*, all the three main characters are presented as subjects of complex trauma. Each character is marked by their own losses, trauma and grief. How each character is depicted as a subject of complex trauma in the novel is discussed in the following analyses. The analyses are presented under the name of each character using lines and scenes relevant to the character as certain arguments specific to the character need to be made for a detailed and coherent discussion to take place. The paper does not intend to portray the following analyses as character analyses in any way, shape, or form. It adopts this format of presentation for an effective and structured reading of the representation of complex trauma in the novel with regard to the unique circumstances and details specific to each character.

1. Eriko Tanabe

Although all the three main characters of *Kitchen* are depicted as subjects of complex trauma, Eriko, with her personal loss, gender identity and the marginalisation that she faces from society make her the perfect candidate amongst the main characters for the discussion on complex trauma. In the paper, “she” and “her” will be used as the pronouns for Eriko, who transitioned from a man to a woman after her wife passed away, even while recalling the past moments in the novel before her wife passed away, as a way of respecting her gender identity as well as to maintain consistency regarding her pronouns.

Eriko is represented as a subject of complex trauma in the sense that the novel’s narrative does not present her as being marked by only a singular traumatic event or instance or a single tragic moment or memory, but by many. Her personal loss – the death of her wife, her gender identity – the transition from male to female and the effects and complications that arise from it, and the marginalisation from society that she is forced to deal with due to her newly found gender identity – all come into play and perform as factors that result to her being rendered a subject of complex trauma.

In the first chapter of *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman writes that “when the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality.” (p. 8) This statement supports the claim that society devalues specific victims. Eriko, a victim of a toxic, conservative and heteronormative society and the cruel and harsh system resulted from such a society, is pushed towards a violent death in the novel. In her lengthy will, which eventually tragically becomes her farewell letter to

Yuichi, Eriko writes, “I have cheerfully chosen to make my body my fortune... If people I don’t care for are attracted to me, I accept it as the wages of beauty. So, if I should be killed, it will be an accident.” (Yoshimoto 52) In this letter, which tragically becomes a foreshadowing of her own brutal murder, it is evident that Eriko is painfully aware of the marginalisation and cruelty that she faces from society. She therefore makes an optimistic yet ominous remark about the possibility of her being killed. These realisations regarding her gender identity and her own fate are not resulted from a singular tragic event that she faced in the past or just one trauma that she has. They are a consequence of several traumas accumulated during her whole life. Hence, the major reasons for her making these statements in the letter are the decision that she made to transition to be a woman and the consequences that she faced after making that decision.

But Eriko being portrayed as a subject of complex trauma in *Kitchen* is not just because of her gender identity and how she has tried to grapple with the consequences of possessing such an identity in a conservative and heteronormative society. Her personal loss, the death of Yuichi’s mother is another major reason. She choosing to decide to become a woman was actually caused when she realised that Yuichi’s mother was nearing death. “Because I was crying my eyes out, I couldn’t take a taxi. It was colder than hell, too. That may have been the first time it occurred to me I didn’t like being a man.” (Yoshimoto 81) Eriko then had no choice regarding her wife’s illness. She had no power over the tragic and inevitable circumstance of her wife’s slowly fading away life. This sorrowful event is the trigger that leads Eriko to become a woman. She cannot control the harsh reality of life and the cruel ways of the world, and is eventually led to change what she can which is herself. Eriko during this tragic circumstance probably feels that changing her identity and perspective on life is the last and only resort that she can turn to in order to grapple with life, thinking that putting up a front and altering herself in the way that she can might change certain things in her life.

In the third chapter of *Trauma and Recovery*, in the discussion on the damaged self, Herman writes, “Traumatized people suffer damage to the basic structures of the self... The identity they have formed prior to the trauma is irrevocably destroyed.” (p. 56) These statements reflect how violence and loss alter one’s identity. Eriko’s radical transformation of herself, her transition from a man to a woman following the death of her wife, can be explained by these statements. During a conversation with Mikage, Eriko tells her, “I realized that the world did not exist for my benefit. It followed that the ratio of pleasant and unpleasant things around me would not change. It wasn’t up to me. It was clear that the best thing to do was to adopt a sort of muddled cheerfulness. So I became a woman, and here I am.” (Yoshimoto 81) These statements from herself sum up Eriko’s life as a transgender woman who has faced marginalisation and cruelty from a conservative, heteronormative society, and also as an individual who has suffered from certain personal losses. The sickness and the eventual death of her wife lead her to make probably the most important and major decision of her life. In the first part of the novel, she also recalls to Mikage another event of personal loss which is the death of their pet dog, Woofie, which Yuichi really adored. Back then, she probably suffered as an individual who was affected by the death of her beloved pet. She also suffered vicariously from witnessing the sorrowful state that Yuichi was in where she couldn’t get Yuichi to eat even a bite, not a single grain of rice. All these traumatic events have shaped and altered Eriko significantly as an individual and been made to be who she is in the present moment.

The opening line of the second part of the novel reveals that Eriko has died late in the autumn. During their one o'clock telephonic conversation in the morning, Yuichi tells Mikage without preamble, "She died fighting." (Yoshimoto 45) It is revealed through Mikage's narration that a crazy man had become obsessed with Eriko and killed her after shockingly discovering that the beautiful woman who he had liked was a man and not what he thought her to be. The man came to the gay club that Eriko was working at one night and lunged at her with a knife while screaming that he had been made a fool of. Eriko, wounded, grabbed a barbell off the bar with both hands and beat him to death before dying. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman writes that "the subordinate condition of women is maintained and enforced by the hidden violence of men." (p. 32) The patriarchal society has been systemically and structurally subjugating women for centuries, rendering them inferior to men. Eriko being a transgender woman is put in a much worse circumstance. The tragic and violent death of Eriko reveals the toxic reality of a conservative, heteronormative society where certain individuals who do not conform to its conventional ideals and norms are forced to pay heavy prices in life. Eriko is a victim of this toxic society and cruel system that pushed her to a tragic, violent end. Eriko's death is not just the death of a transgender woman, it is a revelation of a cruel and unjust society, guided and led by toxic morals and harmful standards.

While Eriko was driven by her personal losses and circumstances to make certain decisions in her life, the vulnerability of her gender identity in a toxic conservative, heteronormative society with a cruel system further pushed her to several more agonies and sorrows of life that eventually led her to a tragic, violent end.

2. Mikage Sakurai

In *Kitchen*, Mikage is depicted as a subject of complex trauma represented by her multiple profound losses – the deaths of her parents, the death of her grandfather and the death of her grandmother. All these losses accumulate over a period of time subjecting her to prolonged suffering. She also experiences the loss of Eriko which adds another layer to her already mounting trauma. In addition, she suffers vicariously due to her close proximity and intimate connection with Yuichi.

At the very beginning of the novel, Mikage notes, "My family had steadily decreased one by one as the years went by, but when it suddenly dawned on me that I was all alone, everything before my eyes seemed false." (Yoshimoto 4) This statement points out the obvious losses encountered by Mikage, the deaths of her parents, grandfather and finally her grandmother. She realises in this moment that she is left alone in this world, with no immediate family member by her side. She also starts to question life and her existence. She feels that everything in the world is false and is having a hard time facing the immediate reality resulted from her consequent losses. She is trying to grapple with her tragic life while trying to come to terms with things and make sense of everything.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk writes: "Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think." (p. 24) These statements posit the claim that trauma has the power to alter and shape how an individual

perceives the self, life and the world. Being deeply affected by trauma can significantly change how one thinks and feels about certain things. This assertion is reflected and proven in *Kitchen* through Mikage. After cleaning out her old apartment, while Mikage has a chat with the landlord, she has this sorrowful thought, “For me everything had been agony.” (Yoshimoto 32) This thought illuminates the several cumulative losses that Mikage has had over her life. She visiting her old apartment reminds her of certain memories that bring out this thought. All the tragic events and instances, painful memories and emotions surface, making her have this agonising feeling. This is very common in and obvious for complex trauma. To feel that everything had been despair. To feel that everything had been sorrowful. To not be able to see reality clearly. To not be able to find clarity or meaning in things. To not be able to make sense of anything.

In the first chapter of *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth posits a definition of trauma. She writes: “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” (p. 11) In *Kitchen*, Mikage finds herself crying or pondering over her various losses on several occasions. After getting off a bus in which she sees an old lady with her granddaughter having a lovely, meaningful time, Mikage finds herself sobbing. “As the hot tears poured out, I remembered that I had never had a proper cry over my grandmother’s death. I had a feeling that I wasn’t crying over any one sad thing, but rather for many.” (Yoshimoto 35) Although the most recent and immediate loss that Mikage has experienced is the death of her grandmother, and the interaction between the old lady and her granddaughter may have been the trigger for her sudden flow of tears, it is evident that – the event, that is the death of her grandmother and the instance, that is the witnessing of the old lady with her granddaughter having an enjoyable moment together – are not the only reasons for her sobbing. Mikage is crying for various other reasons – other events, instances, situations, circumstances and memories. She is crying because of the death of her grandmother, the death of her grandfather and also the deaths of her parents. She may also have been crying due to other painful incidents that she has experienced over her life. She may also have been overcome and overwhelmed by certain other memories and emotions that gradually and eventually surfaced up, formed after a long accumulation of the wounds and scars resulted from the several traumatic events and circumstances that she had to experience.

One evening, after Yuichi goes away to buy groceries, Mikage flops down on her back on the apartment’s floor and gets lost in thought while looking up at the apartment’s familiar ceiling. “To the extent that I had come to understand that despair does not necessarily result in annihilation, that one can go on as usual in spite of it, I had become hardened.” (Yoshimoto 56) Mikage is having thoughts like this due to the numerous losses that she has had over her life. All the grief, sorrow, sadness, devastation and brokenness have accumulated and made her numb. Although all the accrued trauma does not destroy her completely, she is not able to function normally and properly while having positive emotions. She is instead filled with negative and undesirable thoughts and emotions, making her question life and existence. In this scene, Mikage asks if living with ugly ambiguities – elements and aspects that do not shape and nurture her life positively – is what it means to be an adult. She does not like this philosophy or way of living life while still agreeing with the view that having this perspective makes it easier to move forward in life. Mikage goes through an existential crisis resulted from her accumulated trauma

all the while seeking to find clarity and trying to come to terms with certain things during her current confusing state and circumstance.

While she is at a barley-tea shop across town with Yuichi one day, Mikage makes this observation, “In the uncertain ebb and flow of time and emotions, much of one’s life history is etched in the senses. And things of no particular importance, or irreplaceable things, can suddenly resurface in a café one winter night.” (Yoshimoto 75) This observation represents how trauma in general and complex trauma in particular function. It depicts how trauma works in Mikage as a subject of complex trauma. In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel van der Kolk states that “trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body.” (p. 24) The effects of all the traumatic things that happened to Mikage – events, incidents, instances, situations and circumstances – is absorbed by her body and marked in her senses. Further, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra claims that traumatic memory “may not be subject to controlled, conscious recall,” but instead “returns in nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and other forms of intrusively repetitive behavior.” (p. 89) Certain memories or aspects linked to any of the elements that Mikage mentions above can resurface when some kind of trigger or stimulus disrupts the individual’s psyche. In the very beginning of her memoir, *What My Bones Know*, Stephanie Foo writes, “I’ve always known that I carry my past with me, but it exists in moods and flashes.” (p. 3) This statement from Foo represents the embodied and lived experience of trauma, how something or an aspect of the thing related to the traumatic event from the past can trigger the affected individual and bring up memories letting them surface up in the mind. Certain memories of Mikage resurfacing in the café after being reminded of certain things from her past reflects the statement presented by Foo in her memoir.

After Mikage recalls a memory of Eriko where she shared with her, her story of how she transitioned to a woman, she notes, “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.” (Yoshimoto 82) With this statement, Mikage questions life, existence and the human condition. She resents how we humans have so little agency in life and how we have to suffer so much as a consequence of such a fact. She is also pondering over the morbidity of human lives – how death is inevitable for each and every one of us. She dwells upon how in spite of all the pain, hardships, sorrows, despair, hurt, sadness, brokenness and devastation, we have to move forward in life and continue living, believing in the thought that to keep on living and not give up on life is non-negotiable.

Mikage further notes, “Tonight, again, I felt the darkness hindering my breathing. In my heavy, depressed sleep, I battled each demon in turn.” (Yoshimoto 82) That night, after she reminisces about Eriko’s story, Mikage is overcome by the darkness and despair of life. An accumulation of every traumatic thing that she has experienced comes to haunt her and hits her deep. Her peace of mind and the normal, proper functioning of her body are disrupted by this terrifying despair. She is ridden with anxiety while questioning life and existence. That night, her disturbed self battles all the demons of her traumas one after another, so as not to succumb to the demonic force powered towards her and to emerge victorious in order to continue her well-deserved and well-earned life.

While she is at Izu, Mikage has a telephonic conversation with Yuichi, with the help of the number of the inn where Yuichi is staying, given to her by Chika. After the conversation, Mikage is suddenly hit by a wave of exhaustion. And she thinks, “People aren’t overcome by situations or outside forces; defeat invades from within.” (Yoshimoto 92) This thought reveals so much about how trauma functions and translates itself into several other things. An individual suffering from trauma is not defeated in life by other external factors. They are annihilated by what has been established from the accumulation of everything that they have faced and survived. When this monstrous entity hits and overcomes the individual one day, they are consumed and swallowed by it. The individual has no strength left to defend themselves and survive. Hope and energy are snatched away, leaving the individual with nothing to fight it. Helplessness coupled with hopelessness overtakes the individual, making them give out from within eventually and naturally.

Towards the end of the novel, Mikage travels to Isehara in the middle of the night to meet Yuichi. While struggling to get to Yuichi’s room at one of the inns at the shrine, Mikage makes a philosophical observation. “We all believe we can choose our own path from among the many alternatives. But perhaps it’s more accurate to say that we make the choice unconsciously.” (Yoshimoto 97) This perspective is resulted from Mikage having the realisation of the fact that so many of us have had to follow certain paths, often unfavourable and undesirable, inevitably. Mikage has learned that circumstances force us to make certain choices and decisions in life. Even though we are made to believe that we have choices, the often limited choices and sometimes the only choice that we have lead us to respond and react to the process of decision-making undesirably. Sometimes, we do not even have a choice. It is inevitable to go through with what is the only choice. We are not even given the privilege to make a choice consciously. And these decisions that we make under unfavourable conditions further shape our future circumstances, leading us to more undesirable situations of pain, sorrow and misery, hence inevitably forcing us to make certain choices and decisions by default, through some kind of survival instinct.

3. Yuichi Tanabe

While *Kitchen* configures Yuichi as a subject of complex trauma owing to him being marked by multiple losses and several of his trauma resulted from the unfavourable circumstances that he faces accruing over time, the analyses under Yuichi will not include specific lines and scenes from the novel as the lines or dialogues presented by him are more suitable for inclusion in the discussion on direct trauma and vicarious trauma. Hence, the analyses with regard to Yuichi’s complex trauma will be briefly presented descriptively while recounting the various losses and trauma experienced by him in the novel.

The most significant loss depicted in the novel with regard to Yuichi is the violent death of Eriko which affects him deeply. The novel shows Yuichi struggling and grappling with the death of Eriko even months after the loss. Eriko’s death does not end only as a direct, immediate blow to Yuichi; it follows him throughout the novel and the effects of this loss get intertwined with the trauma of the other losses that he experiences in the novel.

Aside from the loss of Eriko, he also experiences other personal losses. Near the beginning of the novel, Yuichi reveals that his biological mother died when he was little. Thus, with the death of his biological mother, Yuichi had to grow up as the child of a single parent. Eriko, with her transition, becomes the mother figure to Yuichi in the novel. But due to the lack of another parental figure who could have served as a great addition to his life, it can be deduced that Yuichi lacked certain things that his other parent could have given him while growing up. He must have had to deal with certain things that other kids with both parents did not have to. He also must have lacked certain perspectives about life and the world that his biological mother could have provided him. Although it is evident in the novel that Eriko tried her best to give Yuichi the best of everything and not make him feel the absence of another parental figure in his life, it is a fact that Yuichi did not have another parental figure who could have provided him what Eriko could not and other things which would have been useful to him as an individual. This is only the assumed interpretation of the trauma that is implied in the novel caused by the death of his biological mother. Thus, it can be said that Yuichi could have struggled with other things that are not explicitly shown in the novel.

Further in the novel, it is revealed through Mikage that Yuichi is also deeply affected by the death of Mikage's grandmother whom he was acquainted with through the flower shop he worked part-time at. The shop was the grandmother's favourite flower shop and Yuichi used to help her with her errands. Mikage recounts how her grandmother complimented Yuichi on multiple occasions because of his good nature and helpfulness. Yuichi also experiences another personal loss which is the death of Woofie, the Tanabes' pet dog whom Yuichi adored. Yuichi was so affected by this loss that Eriko couldn't get him to eat a bite, not even a grain of rice.

Another important element that needs to be taken into account in this discussion is Yuichi's intimate relationship with Mikage that leads him to experience vicariously the pain and hardship that Mikage goes through. Both Yuichi and Mikage absorb each other's sorrow and despair while being each other's emotional support. The intimate bond and connection that they have established while sharing their hurt and trauma for survival also become the very reason that makes them suffer vicariously. The testing circumstances that they experience in life make them pay a price for the care and affection that they have for each other. This interpretation highlights the intimate relationship that Yuichi and Mikage have with each other and also the very nature of vicarious trauma.

Thus, besides the most significant loss experienced by Yuichi which is the death of Eriko, all these other losses along with the vicarious trauma he experiences with regard to Mikage further add layers to Yuichi's complex trauma in *Kitchen*.

IV. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it can be established that complex trauma in *Kitchen* is represented as a form of trauma that is not resulted from a single traumatic event, circumstance, moment or memory but from multiple traumatic events, circumstances, moments or memories. *Kitchen*'s narrative presents complex trauma as layered and cumulative. The characters' repeated losses and prolonged suffering configure them as subjects of complex trauma. The novel shows that it

is marked and integrated in the senses of the individual and hence embodied by them. Complex trauma being an ongoing condition gets embodied by the characters and integrated in their life and lifestyle. As it eventually becomes a way of survival and living, it also shapes and alters the identity of the characters. While *Kitchen*'s narrative presents healing from complex trauma as a difficult and complicated process requiring a long period of time, the characters rebuilding their life and navigating their way back to life through ordinary, everyday activities and the new bonds and connections that they establish in the aftermath of their losses show that healing from one's trauma is not totally impossible.

In *Kitchen*, the kitchen as an affective space plays a major role in the process of recovery from their losses for the characters, especially for Mikage in the novel. Mikage comes back to the Tanabes' apartment after the death of Eriko and is finally in their kitchen after a long time. She finds that the kitchen had not been used in quite a while. She starts cleaning it as it was somewhat dirty and dark. She does some kitchen chores and while watching the dish towels that she has washed and bleached go round and round in the dryer, she realises that she has become calmer. She notes, "As I stood there, I seemed to be making a new start; something was coming back." (Yoshimoto 56) This statement made by Mikage while she realises her love for kitchens and their importance in her life signals healing from her losses and trauma. Although healing from multiple losses and intense grief takes a long period of time and is only gradual, Mikage feeling the possibility of it starting to take place finally shows that healing from trauma in general and complex trauma in particular is not always or entirely impossible.

While Mikage's initial behaviours in the novel – sleeping on the kitchen floor, withdrawal from social life and chaotic disorientation – represent what LaCapra calls 'acting out,' where the traumatic past of the individual haunts the present, Mikage processing her losses through routine, cooking and connection in her grieving process represents "working through." Mikage's shift towards cooking – for herself and for the Tanabes, and her focus on the sensory routines of the kitchen thus represent "working through." In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra states that "working through is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma (as well as transference relations in general), one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future." (p. 22) One day, Mikage remembers the summer she had taught herself to cook. She is reminded of how Yuichi and Eriko talked about her passion for cooking. While she remembers the crazed enthusiasm she had for cooking that summer, she notes, "Angry, fretful, or cheery, I cooked through it all." (Yoshimoto 57) Mikage working through with the help of cooking allows her to articulate her grief and distinguish her current life from her past losses. In *What My Bones Know*, Foo writes, "This was how I discovered the power of journalism – not just as a force to right wrongs and change the world, but as a force that turned my anguished brain into a functioning machine... I could take feelings and injustices and even tragedies and figure out a way to shape them all into something purposeful. Something controlled." (pp. 40-41) In the way Foo works through her trauma and processes her grief with the help of journalism, Mikage also uses cooking to take charge of her life once again in the aftermath of her profound losses. She navigates her way back to life in a fulfilling manner with the help of cooking, processing her grief and rebuilding her life in a healthy and purposeful way.

Towards the end of the *Kitchen*, Mikage remarks, “I got dressed to begin another day. Over and over, we begin again.” (Yoshimoto 103) The reinvestment in life shown by Mikage can be explained by what LaCapra writes in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, where he states that the process of mourning which is a form of working through “brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again.” (p. 66) Working through thus involves a “homeopathic socialization or ritualization of the repetition compulsion,” such as Mikage’s repetitive cooking routines depicted throughout the novel, that counteracts the death drive through “re-petitioning in ways that allow for a measure of critical distance, change, resumption of social life, ethical responsibility, and renewal.” (p. 66) Mikage slowly and gradually heals from her losses and trauma with the help of cooking and the new connections that she forms with other people in the aftermath of her losses. She finds herself assimilating and integrating back into society, looking forward to what life has in store for her.

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