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Coping with Grief:

Mikage's Journey in *Kitchen* and Cultural Perspectives on Grief

In Western culture, grief is often perceived as something to overcome—a temporary state that many believe should eventually lead back to normalcy once ‘closure’ is achieved. In contrast, Japanese perspectives on grief tend to emphasize continuity, remembrance, and the acceptance of impermanence. Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* explores this perspective through the protagonist, Mikage, as she deals with the deaths of her loved ones. Rather than seeking to ‘move on,’ Mikage learns to live with her grief, finding solace in everyday routines and cooking. Through Mikage's journey, *Kitchen* shows grief as a cyclical and transformative process rather than something to be overcome, reflecting a Japanese perspective that contrasts with Western notions of culture.

In Japan, grief is often seen as something that must be lived with, carried through daily life rather than something to “move on from.” This view contrasts with the Western approach, which focuses on finding closure and moving past grief once acceptance is achieved. Many Western readers may not immediately understand Mikage's way of processing grief in *Kitchen*, as she embodies this Japanese perspective by learning to live with her grief rather than seeking to “move on.” In an article on “Death and Dying Throughout Different Cultures,” the grieving and mourning practices in Japan are described as, “the opposite of everything most western cultures promote.” Traditional practices include cremation, dividing ashes, and remembering ancestors

during Obon, when spirits return to the family home. Japanese culture views life as cyclical, not linear, and believes the deceased have power over the living, either blessing or cursing them. However, Western views tend to focus on closure and moving past grief. Furthermore, the article 'Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Mourning and Object Loss,' written by Stuart Picken, discusses the difference between Japanese and Western perspectives on grief, showing how Japanese culture views grief as an ongoing experience, while Western views often emphasize the idea of finality and resolution in mourning. This cultural distinction shapes the main character, Mikage's, perspective on death and her ability to navigate grief throughout Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen*.

Mikage's experience with grief starts long before the events of *Kitchen*, clearly having been orphaned from a young age. Because of the loss of her parents, Mikage moves in with her grandmother, and they develop a formidable bond. By the time Mikage loses her grandmother, she has already experienced multiple losses, which influences how she processes grief. Initially, Mikage copes by withdrawing emotionally, feeling an overwhelming sense of isolation. Three days after the funeral, Mikage describes herself as "Steeped in a sadness so great I could barely cry, shuffling softly in gentle drowsiness, . . . The hum of the refrigerator kept me from thinking of my loneliness" (*Kitchen*, 2). Rather than outwardly expressing her intense emotions, Mikage internalizes her grief, reflecting Japanese cultural tendencies toward emotional restraint and maintaining social harmony. This aligns with the cultural practice in Japan, as described in the article "Death and Dying Throughout Different Cultures," where grief is not typically expressed publicly, but carried silently in daily life. Grieving in this way contrasts with the Western tendency to seek closure and move beyond grief through external expression.

During this time, Mikage is taken in by Eriko and Yuichi, providing her some temporary stability and comfort. Moving in with Eriko and Yuichi gives Mikage a sense of warmth and belonging that she had lost after the death of her grandmother. At first, she struggles with her grief, feeling directionless, but over time, she learns to embrace her connection with her newfound family, especially through cooking. This shift in her perspective is reflected in her thought process after a heartfelt conversation with Eriko one evening: "As I grow older, much older, I will experience many things, and I will hit rock bottom again and again. Again and again I will suffer; again and again I will get back on my feet. I will not be defeated. I won't let my spirit be destroyed" (*Kitchen*, 42). At this point, Mikage has already begun to accept that hardship and sorrow are inevitable in life, but they do not define her.

Yet just as she starts to find stability in this new mindset, another unexpected loss disrupts her world. Unlike the slow grief she experienced with her grandmother, Eriko's loss is abrupt and shocking, which forces Mikage to confront her emotions more directly. Her recently developed perspective is tested in a devastating way, yet rather than completely falling apart, Mikage draws on the resilience she has built for herself. After learning of Eriko's death, Mikage reflects on her time living with Eriko and Yuichi, thinking, "No matter what, I want to continue living with the awareness that I will die. Without that, I am not alive" (*Kitchen*, 59). This shows that Mikage now sees death as not a natural part of life but rather as something that must be permanently overcome. This acceptance reflects a key aspect of Japanese cultural views on death and mourning, which tends to emphasize the cyclical nature of life and death.

In conclusion, Mikage's emotional growth throughout *Kitchen* reflects the cultural distinctions between Japan and the West, particularly in how grief is understood and processed. Mikage's journey, influenced by her time with Eriko and Yuichi, showcases the Japanese belief in

the cyclical nature of life and death—where grief is not something to be "overcome" but something to live with and grow from. As she learns to embrace this perspective, Mikage's view of death transforms, and she comes to understand that sorrow and joy coexist, shaping her emotional intelligence and resilience. Her development exemplifies how Japanese culture deeply intertwines life, death, and memory, viewing them as a continuous and transformative process rather than a linear progression toward closure.

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