

# Could Women Ever “Shine”?

## Happiness and its Shadow in Right-Wing Discourse Since 2011 and Banana Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen*<sup>1</sup>

*Nozomi Uematsu*

Those women lived their lives happily. They had been taught, probably by caring parents, not to exceed the boundaries of their happiness.

(Yoshimoto 59)

Feminism is cast into the shadows, where at best it can expect to have some afterlife, where it might be regarded ambivalently by those young women who must, in more public venues, stake a distance from it, for the sake of social and sexual recognition.

(McRobbie 11)

In recent years in Japan, *Jyosei Katsuyaku* (Promoting Women’s Active Participation) has become a watchword in public, both at the governmental and corporate level, to work towards gender inequality. Expanding the work opportunities and life choices for women are at stake in this argument, and some might note the inauguration of “the first female governor” of Tokyo in 2016, the right-wing politician Yuriko Koike, as an emblematic event of feminist accomplishment “breaking Japan’s glass ceiling” (Rich). One of Koike’s pledges is to make Tokyo a place where “both men and women can shine” (Forster), and this sparkling moment of presumably feminist achievement in current Japanese politics and in the public domain, one could argue, is symptomatic of the postfeminist condition. Shintaro Kono explains

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postfeminism as the “current condition of feminism now, and that in which women in general are situated” (“Hajimeni” i). Has feminism achieved its goal and broken the glass ceiling, what does it mean for women to “shine,” and who is left in their shadow in the current situation in Japan? Firstly, I will lay out the definition of postfeminism and its roots, and how it relates to neoliberalism. I will then analyse the language and rhetoric in recent governmental campaigns and movements, and end by discussing the literary text Banana Yoshimoto’s *Kitchen* (1987). By looking at these discourses and the text, this article aims to clarify the social disparity amongst women in relation to their life choices, and discuss the way in which the discourses around women and life choices still reinforce the normalising regime of happiness and create a rupture between housewives and career-women.

### **What is Postfeminism?**

The definition of “postfeminism” or similarly of third-wave feminism is hugely contested, and scholars have not reached agreement on it.<sup>2</sup> The discussion of defining the term itself could be summarised in finding its meaning in either “the end of second-wave feminism,” or looking at the continuities and discontinuities between the second-wave feminism and postfeminism. Shelley Budgeon explains this tension and the hostile relations between the second wave and postfeminism, with some of the characteristics as follows:

Postfeminism ... relies upon a fundamental contradiction—feminism is both incorporated but simultaneously reviled. By asserting that equality has been achieved postfeminist discourse focuses on female achievement, encouraging women to embark on projects of individualized self-definition and privatized self-expression exemplified in the celebration of lifestyle and consumption choices. (281)

Angela McRobbie echoes with Budgeon on how postfeminism is “a process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined” (11). She suggests that, “by means of the tropes of freedom and choice which are now inextricably connected with the category of young women, feminism is decisively aged and made to seem redundant,” and therefore “[f]eminism is cast into the shadows” (11).

Despising second-wave feminism as outdated, postfeminism values “individual’s (or more accurately women’s) choice towards lifestyle and consumption over individualised career and employment” (Kono “postfeminizumu”; my trans.; 214). In this respect, postfeminism is clearly connected with neoliberalism, whose interest is in flexible labour, in market freedom and individual choices. Reiichi Miura explains this culture of postfeminism in Japan through the development of a particular law:

The characteristics of postfeminism, in the case of Japan, is in its culture since the Equal Opportunity Law for Men and Women in 1986. This culture claims that the goal of “self-fulfilment as a woman (I, who is a woman)” could be achieved by participating individually in commercialised culture as an individual, by throwing away the framework of political activism through social solidarity, and by criticising and despising second-wave feminism as collective socio-political activism. Such a birth of postfeminism is clearly continuous with the transformation and reformation of contemporary liberalism. This [the birth of postfeminism] is, as both Budgeon and Gill point out, the birth of neoliberalism and its prevailing culture. (my trans.; 64)

Kono offers a modification on Miura’s (as well as that of Budgeon and McRobbie) understanding on postfeminism’s refusal of and

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disconnection with second-wave feminism as outdated. Although there is discontinuity between the two movements, there is also “the solidarity [continuity] with the neoliberal postfeminist and individualistic drive with which second-wave feminism partly was pregnant.” (Kono “postfeminizumu”; my trans.; 214-15)

Second-wave feminism, though it was a collective movement since it was political activism, connotes paradoxically the drive to run away from collectivism.... A part of the politics of second-wave feminism was to criticise the welfare state and it aimed to emancipate women from family into the labour market, yet, part of this politics [in the second wave] shared its aim with neoliberalism to demolish the welfare state and dependents’ benefits, and to require flexible and fluid labour power. (my trans.; 215)

Kono’s claim to see the continuity between the second wave, postfeminism, and neoliberalism, in sharing their aims to criticise the welfare state and its ties to Fordism, take distance from collective social change, and their focus on personal choice, is helpful to understand the way in which the current Japanese right-wing government utilises the tone and rhetoric of their “feminism.”

When the right wing promotes feminism, and especially in regard to reproduction, its emphasis is on women’s “personal choice” to be a mother. In this sense, for right-wing discourse, the issue of reproduction and child nurturing is not seen as an issue of welfare, but about personal and individual choices in the life that women should (naturally) take. Ironically, it was the second wave’s slogan to claim that “the personal is political”; indeed, we will see here that second-wave activism in fighting for women’s reproductive rights for individual choice, such as for abortion, is not reflected at all in Japan’s current right-wing

discourse and yet, separated from this, the individualism (or, more accurately drive to individualism) inherited from second-wave feminism is applied. In this respect, the type of women's choice that is implied in the right wing's feminism is conditional on its benefit towards neoliberal aims.<sup>3</sup> I will come back to this point when I discuss the significance of the year 1985. In the next section, I will look at campaigns that the current Japanese government has deployed since 2011, and analyse the rhetoric and language used to justify their feminism.

### **The Earthquake, Nationalism and the Rhetoric of “Restoration” in Japan**

The earthquake and following tsunami in the North East region of Japan in 2011, has turned Japan towards right-wing politics and the spread of its discourse. There is no need to go into the details of the event, but it was indeed a national emergency, and in particular people lost trust in the Democratic Party (*Minshu-to*: the dominant party at that time) due to their conduct surrounding the devastated Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Plant, and in 2012 the Cabinet office was restored to the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan (*Jiyu-Minshu-to*: LDP), who had dominated the National Diet for nearly 40 years, with the so-called “1955 system.”<sup>4</sup> This Japanese national crisis fuelled its nationalism: slogans such as “*gambaro, Nippon!*” (Hang in there, Japan!) and “*kizuna*” (bonds) were repeatedly broadcast on news and television programs to encourage the nation to break through the crisis, which the LDP cabinet incorporated into their task forces. Such emphasis on the “strength” of the nation in the time of crisis could be clearly seen in the Prime Minister's speeches.

Shinzo Abe was elected Prime Minister of Japan from the LDP soon after the earthquake, and in his Policy Speech to the 183rd Session of the Diet on the 28th of February 2013, he emphasised the necessity

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of (re)establishing “A Strong Japan,” finding “[n]ational independence through personal independence,” an idea that echoes Thatcher’s famous speech, in which she asserts that “[t]here is no such thing as society,” a speech that calls for individualism and moves away from the safety networks of the welfare state (Thatcher). Abe also articulated the increase of defence-related expenditures, keeping Senkaku Island’s dispute with China and Taiwan in mind, and Abe directly quoted Thatcher’s speech:

Japan’s national interest lies eternally in keeping the seas, which are the foundation of Japan’s very existence, unequivocally open, free, and peaceful.

“We tried to defend a principle of basic importance for the entire world, namely the principle that above all, international law should prevail over the use of force.” These are the words of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as she looked back on the Falklands War.

“The rule of law at sea.” I would like to appeal to the international community that in modern times, changes to the status quo through the use of coercion or intimidation will not legitimise anything. (Abe “Policy Speech”)

His speech clearly shows his hawkish diplomatic attitude towards the neighbouring countries around Japan, just as Thatcherism pursued against the Falkland Islands. LDP’s campaign pledge, “Restoring Japan,” not only articulates the nation’s desire to revive and rebuild the nation to just as it was “before the earthquake,” but it also echoes its desire, as I will argue, to return to the right-wing politics and the peak of the Japanese economy in the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher’s death in 2013 might be emblematic to lead to this nostalgic retrospect of the “good glorious 80s,” remaining strong and

constitutes a discourse around keeping and sustaining conventional family and moral values in contemporary Japan in neoliberalism. Thus, investigating the social discourse as well as women's writing in the 1980s helps to understand the issues that Japan is currently facing, especially the restoration of "maternity" that the Japanese government emphasises as needed for reinvigorating the growth of the economy. In other words, while Japanese policies and campaigns in the 2010s rhetorically stress liberty and freedom of choice (of individuals as well as women), at the same time, they privilege certain choices, such as maternity and family construction, that they believe will benefit society. In this sense, Japan espouses a complicated relationship between neoliberalism and maternity. After all, the promotion of feminism by the government reinforces the idea of women's happiness in child-birth and rearing, based upon choice, and as we will see below, it appears impossible to imagine life-fulfilment outside of family construction.

### **The Restoration of Maternity? Creating "A Country in Which Women Shine"**

It is interesting to see that, when the government talks about and aims to nurture the "strength" of the nation, the strength is in other words the need for reinvigorating the growth of the economy, and this nation's need is closely narrated along with, to some extent, the "restoration of maternity." In leading his Cabinet as Prime Minister in 2012, Abe emphasised the significance of economic reformation, later named "Abenomics," composed of "'three arrows': a massive fiscal stimulus, more aggressive monetary easing from the Bank of Japan, and structural reforms to boost Japan's competitiveness" (*Financial Times*). Above all, he clarified that a vital constituent of Abenomics is "Womenomics," unleashing the potential of which is "an absolute must if Japan's growth is to continue" (Abe "Unleashing"). The term

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“Womenomics” first appeared in 1999, coined by Kathy Matsui and others in Goldman Sachs, claiming that the Japanese economy “could increase its gross domestic product by as much as 15% simply by tapping further its most underutilized resource—Japanese women” (Matsui). Abe claims that expanding women’s employment would ultimately increase the birth rate, and that Womenomics is the key to developing Japan: “a country that hires and promotes more women grows economically, and no less important, demographically as well” (Abe “Unleashing”). In the same policy speech to the 183rd National Diet that I quoted above, Abe proposes his intention to “create a Japan in which women shine” and acknowledges the difficulties for families to balance work and child-nurturing:

It is a fact that mothers and fathers working hard to raise their children are pressed to choose between either raising their children or having a job.... In addition, there are also people who raise children or render nursing care while dedicating themselves exclusively to the household. Their hard efforts are invaluable and unable to be measured by economic indicators alone. I believe that the activities of these people in society will give rise to *a new vitality in Japan*....

We will advance our efforts to create a country in which both women playing active roles in the workforce and women dedicating themselves exclusively to household affairs, and indeed all women, can shine, with confidence and pride in the lives they are leading. My fellow honourable members of the Diet, let us together create a Japan in which women shine. (Abe “Policy Speech”; emphasis added)

Abe’s speech, to some extent, sheds light on the significance of domestic labour such as nurturing children and nursing the elderly,

considering those works as fundamental to the “vitality” of the nation. The part of the speech titled “A Country in Which Women Shine” raises issues such as the need for increasing the number of nurseries and care services for children and the elderly. Valuing such domestic work associated with women’s issues and aiming to set up governmental support is indeed a significant social improvement. However, we cannot dismiss the close connection that his rhetoric creates between domestic labour and the right-wing notion of “a Strong Japan.” Domestic work such as nurturing and care are associated with and presumed to be women’s work, in relation to maternity, and so Abe seems to be aiming to revive the Japanese economy through maximising on women’s labour, in both the domestic and public spheres. In other words, the assumption in the rhetoric of his policies is that in order to create a “Strong Japan,” maternity, including good care for babies and the elderly, is a necessary source for a “new vitality,” and holds the key to reviving the Japanese economy.

As one of the examples for the new governmental support to help with balancing nurturing and paid work, Abe developed a plan for “[t]hree year maternity leave.” However, this policy was much criticised, as it was likely to discourage companies from hiring women, since three years of maternity leave will cost companies an enormous amount, and so the aim of “having a balance between work and nurturing” cannot be achieved. This policy, as a result, pushes women to stay at home solely for nurturing, not having a balance between work and nurturing. Rather than letting women have a balance, we can interpret such policies as suggesting that the government thinks that women focusing on maternity itself is the key to revive the Japanese economy.

Furthermore, Abe emphasised working to fight the decline in birth rate in Japan in the speech, and later set up a task force to improve the situation. Masako Mori, Minister of State for the Declining Birth Rate

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in 2012 (she was also the Minister in charge of Support for Women’s Empowerment and Child-Rearing, and Minister of State for Gender Equality) organised a committee to improve the situation of the decreased birth rate.<sup>5</sup> The task force described their purpose as follows:

We [the Japanese government] are holding a Task Force to break through the crisis of the declining birth rate in order to encourage younger generations to form a family, and to realize and experience *pleasure* with child raising. Simultaneously, we aim to solve issues about marriage, pregnancy, reproduction and child-rearing to achieve a better society for children as well. In addition, placing family at the centre of the community, we are carrying out investigations to promote efforts to support child-rearing by the whole local community. (Cabinet Office, Ministry of Japan; my trans.; emphasis added)

The ambiguous term “pleasure” in this outline puts forward the premise that child-nurturing is supposed not to be a burden, and should be associated more with optimism: it affirms child-raising as a kind of happiness (“pleasure”). It also suggests family as a centre of community, and child-raising through family/community is promised through reproduction, child rearing, namely, *through* maternity.<sup>6</sup> The happiness that the task force proposes is exclusively a maternal happiness, despite the fact that child-rearing is not only about women.

On the 7th of May 2013, *Nihon Keizai Shimbun* (*The Nikkei*) reported that the meeting of the taskforce led by Masako Mori discussed plans to publish *A Notebook for Life and Women* (its tentative title; it was later called “Women’s Diary” (*jyosei-techo*) by the media) for teenage women to educate them on the workings of the (female) body and enlighten them regarding future (family) planning. The aim of this notebook was to stop late marriage and late pregnancy through claiming

that, from a medical perspective, there is a desirable time to be pregnant and engage in reproduction, ideally by one's early 30s, since egg cells start to "deteriorate" and this makes assisted reproduction less likely to succeed (in fact, according to the minutes, in the first meeting of the taskforce, the committee talked about the relation between infertility and the "aging" of egg-cells (Cabinet Office)). However, the plan to publish this notebook was discontinued after significant criticism by the media.<sup>7</sup>

In Japan, usually the *Maternal and Child Health Handbook* (*boshi-techo*) is provided once women are pregnant. However, Minister Mori at that time claimed that, prior to the *Maternal and Child Health Handbook*, women (later she asserted that it was for both women and men) should be well-informed about life-planning in regard to marriage, their bodies and the dangers of late pregnancy, and clarified that providing *A Notebook for Life and Women* (*jyosei-techo*) was only one of the ideas raised in the task-force meeting. This government's plan for educating teenage girls gave rise to much argument in the media, on the internet and in the Diet itself.<sup>8</sup> Through such plans as the handbook, Womenomics, and the encouragement of a "pleasant" maternal experience, the Cabinet foregrounded the idea that maternal experience is a very prominent aspect in women's lives, relegating to the side lines non-heteronormative relations and other life choices, such as not having children, or choosing not to marry.

Possibly this promotion of earlier marriage and earlier pregnancy, by planning reproduction in advance, might suggest the nation's anxiety towards giving birth to disabled children, due to late pregnancy. Part of the aims of *A Notebook for Life and Women* was to encourage and educate young women to realise the "risks of late pregnancy," and mostly this risk means infertility, but this "risk" could also connote the higher percentage in the birth of children with disabilities, such as Down syndrome, as well as a higher risk of pre-eclampsia during

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pregnancy.<sup>9</sup> According to the minutes of this taskforce on the 27th of March 2013, Mori states in the first meeting that she wanted to make “Babynomics” a key part of Abenomics, in order to overcome the declining birth rate (Cabinet Office) through this taskforce.<sup>10</sup> Economic growth and maternity are closely associated here, and they are considered as the nation’s “task” to tackle for future generation. When these two elements are intertwined, what the promotion of early planning of marriage and pregnancy suggests is a mindset that considers producing the next generation as a matter of human resources, providing greater productivity for economic growth. Even though the decline of the birth rate lies in structural issues that Japan is facing, the responsibility of the decreased rate of reproduction is still hugely and simply reduced by such political efforts to the “choices” of individual women, considering their pleasure for life to engage in child-rearing. In order for women to “shine,” women are encouraged to plan marriage and pregnancy earlier. Women are doubly to have labour (giving birth and work) and their “contentment” for life is supposedly a key element for making such a “strong” nation.

### **1985: Equal Opportunity, Women’s Labour and Their Happiness**

1985 is the key time to consider women’s fulfilment, the moment of “shine,” as it is considered as the time that women tentatively gained equal opportunities through the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act for Men and Women in the National Diet in Japan (enforced in 1986). As mentioned earlier in this article, Reiichi Miura points out that the culture of postfeminism and neoliberalism on women’s individual life choices is rooted in this event in Japan. Through the administration of this policy in 1986, it became possible for Japanese women to participate in the job market, and at first glance, this policy seems to reach towards the feminist goal for equality.

However, this emancipation did not mean that all women became free from domestic labour, from the kitchens, from giving birth or from being a housewife, and this caused a huge tension in the postfeminist and neoliberal condition of women's lives.

This division between postfeminists (women who are entering the free market with equal opportunities) and housewives (inheriting the division of labour in gender) is heightened further with revision of the National Pension system (NP) in 1985. Through this revision, women's pension rights were established. Until 1985, a woman's pension membership was on an optional and voluntary basis, but with the revision of NP in 1985, the membership categories of NP were redeveloped, and the new category of "No. 3 Insured" was established. This no. 3 insured membership category was considered mainly for housewives whose husband works as an employee for a corporate company (no. 2 insured member). The maximum annual income for housewives to be eligible for no. 3 member insurance was regulated in 1987, and from here the housewives' labour is restricted to part time. Kikuka Kobatake points out the establishment of women's pension scheme with category no. 3 strengthened "the gendered perception of women as economic dependents. Indeed, rather than challenging the embedded gender assumptions in the system, the reformed system as a whole actually strengthened the male breadwinner/female homemaker model more than before" (167).

Two contradicting law changes in 1985, the Equal Opportunity Law and the Establishment of the Women's Pension System, are indicative of the coming of a new social disparity among women in the time of neoliberalism and postfeminism. Women, who are capable of developing their careers with equal opportunities, could also possibly gain the opportunity to pay membership for the National Pension system, or alternatively follow the path of being a housewife, categorised as a no. 3 insured member, gaining a pension through their

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husband’s employment. Such a disparity is perhaps what Nancy Fraser calls the ambivalence of “the feminist critique of Embedded Liberalism” (238).

Normalizing women’s dependency, the resulting system of social protection compromised women’s chances to participate fully, on a par with men, in social life. Institutionalizing androcentric understandings of family and work, it naturalized gender hierarchy and removed it from political contestation. Equally important, by valorizing waged work, Embedded Liberalism’s mode of protection obscured the social importance of unwaged carework.

...

Politically and intellectually powerful, this [feminist] critique was nonetheless ambivalent, capable of leading in either of two directions. Taken one way, the feminist critique of the family wage would aim to secure women’s full access to employment and to employment-linked entitlements on a par with men. In that case, it would tend to valorize wage labor and the androcentric ideal of individual independence, effectively devaluing unwaged carework, interdependence, and solidarity. Targeting the traditional gender ethos that was still serving to embed markets, a feminism of this sort could end up furthering their disembedding. (Fraser 238-239)

Fraser thus diagnoses the struggle that having these two distinct paths creates, in undervaluing unpaid carework as a kind of “dependence,” and yet still normalising it for women over the male-dominated business sphere. Moreover, I contend that many women may struggle to take either path: what about a woman, then, who does not marry, has no children, and whose career is not does not involve a high-income, executive or management level job? The culture of neoliberalism along

with women's life choices since 1985 created a huge divide in women's situations, and we could read this divided social class among women on marriage and family construction—namely in what is supposedly called women's happiness—in Banana Yoshimoto's *Kitchen* (1987). Not being able to follow either of the two paths (reinforcing the family model as a housewife, or having freedom to pursue a career), the main protagonist Mikage is trapped in-between the two paths – being in their shadows. She does engage in the world of work, but we see her strong desire to imitate and be proximate to the domestic sphere, where comfort and happiness can still be seen to lie. The novel reinforces the idea of happiness as something preserved in the nuclear household.

### **The Boundaries of Happiness in the Kitchen: Who is Excluded and Who Included**

Written in 1987, two years after the administration of the equal opportunity act, *Kitchen* suggestively probes the relationship between women's happiness and their career choices, and specifically about their associations with domesticity. The protagonist Mikage is an orphan and finds comfort being in and near the kitchen, and as a career choice she decides to be a professional cooking teacher. Mitsuko Egusa finds value in that Yoshimoto transfers the place of the kitchen from its association with femininity and domesticity into professional life for women (114). Contrary to her reading, I would argue that it is highly ironic that Mikage enters the professional sphere in as domestic a manner as possible, and Mikage and her career choice demonstrate that becoming a housewife and possibly becoming a mother still work as a desire to follow the norm of happiness, and this leads to the disparity of class issues, a sign of women's happiness in the time of postfeminism. Mikage, as her name suggests, is always in the shadow of this happiness, never able to gain it, but she desires to be “proximate” to this happiness through her work.

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Sara Ahmed discusses how emotions can work as social norms, especially in regards to concepts of “happiness.” For her, being approximate to an object causes happiness, and “[i]f happiness creates its objects, then such objects are passed around, accumulating positive affective values as social goods.” For example, she states that family could be “a happy object, as being what good feelings are directed towards, as well as providing a shared horizon of experience” (21). This understanding of the relationship between happiness and approximation towards an object is helpful to see the way in which happiness works as a border-making device, and in this sense, happiness work as a norm. For Mikage, family is also an object that causes her to be happy. However, she cannot share the “horizon of experience” with her family members (Ahmed 21). She is outside of the horizon of family experience.

Being an orphan, and through being “adopted” by the Tanabes, Mikage finds her fulfilment in cooking. She dedicates her entire summer to learning how to cook in the Tanabes’ kitchen, “learning the foundations, theory and practice” (Yoshimoto 57). She spends all the earnings from her part-time job on it and practices cooking until she gets it right. Her enthusiasm—“angry, fretful, or cheery”—and this self-learning lead her to become a professional, as an assistant to a “rather famous” cooking teacher in a cookery school. In her monologue, she describes her passion for cooking:

[T]hat one summer of bliss. In that kitchen.

I was not afraid of burns or scars. I didn’t suffer from sleepless nights. Every day I was thrilled with pleasure at the challenges tomorrow would bring. Memorizing the recipe, I would make carrot cakes that included a bit of my soul. At the supermarket I would stare at a bright red tomato, loving it for dear life. Having known such joy, there was no going back.

No matter what, I want to continue living with the awareness that I will die. Without that, I am not alive. That is what makes the life I have now possible.

Inching one's way along a steep cliff in the dark: on reaching the highway, one breathes a sign of relief. Just when one can't take any more, one sees the moonlight. Beauty that seems to infuse itself into the heart: I know about that. (Yoshimoto 59-60)

Here, she accepts being on the dark side of normative happiness, or as she puts it, the "steep cliff in the dark" (60). This cliff contrasts with the bright lights and ordered lanes of the highway, which could be read as the normative path, designed to speed people to their destination or goals quickly and safely. For Mikage, her bliss is not running to the destination as others do, but in the sensory pleasure of cooking professionally. For her, pleasure is in looking at the redness of a tomato, and feeling the vibrancy of its life. For her, the burns and scars of professional cooking are a trivial price to pay for this pleasure.

Mikage feels "incredible" (58) getting the job, as the application process was highly competitive. Mikage wonders why she got it, but soon after she starts working at the cooking school, she understands the reason why she was chosen. Her attitude was different from that of other female students in the school:

Those women lived their lives happily. *They had been taught, probably by caring parents, not to exceed the boundaries of their happiness* regardless of what they were doing. But therefore they could never know real joy. [One cannot choose w]hich is better.... Everyone lives the way she knows best. What I mean by "their happiness" is living a life untouched as much as possible by the knowledge that we are really, all of us, alone.

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That’s not a bad thing. Dressed in their aprons, their smiling faces like flowers, learning to cook, absorbed in their little troubles, and perplexities, they fall in love and marry. I think that’s great. I wouldn’t mind that kind of life. Me, when I’m utterly exhausted by it all, when my skin breaks out, on those lonely evenings when I call my friends again and again and nobody’s home, then I despise my own life—my birth, my upbringing, everything. I feel only regret for the whole thing. (Yoshimoto 59; emphasis added)

This scene is significant, as Mikage gains insight into two issues: firstly, that happiness is something that includes/excludes girls, and secondly, the disparity between herself and female students in the school is caused by their education from “caring” (heterosexual) parents about happiness (59). Mikage too had a caring parent in Eriko, but as they are not blood related, Mikage sees their circumstances as fundamentally different. To those girls who come to the cooking school, cooking is a process of preparation to be certified as a bride, marry and perhaps become a mother.

Mikage is nevertheless envious of other girls’ lives, even though they do not know the experience that Mikage calls being “thrilled with pleasure” (59), which for her is being engaged in professional cooking, and the self-fulfilment she finds there. In the English translation, “I wouldn’t mind that kind of life” misses the subtle nuances of the original Japanese. Rather than not “mind”ing their choices, Mikage’s statement has more of a subtle favour/jealousy towards the other girls’ choices for their happiness. A closer translation would be “I also wish I had that kind of life” or “I think it’s kind of nice” (*Kicchin* 93).<sup>11</sup> Mikage wishes that she could be happy in “that” way, but she does not have the choice. This subtle wish of Mikage’s is significant, as even though Mikage is successful in her job, she wishes she had the choice not to

work. In this sense, these “boundaries of happiness” (59) imply the class division between women in neoliberalism, between those who are “within” normative happiness as housewives, and on the other hand, Mikage who is outside of the norm, yet stands as close as possible to the happiness of other women. Cooking is her passion, and her love towards the kitchen, despite her inability to gain or be included in their conventional “happiness,” seems to be her subtle desire to be proximate to that normative happiness. Not having any blood relatives, she could not receive the pedagogy of happiness from heterosexual parenting. However, working in the kitchen, not as a chef, but as an assistant to the teacher, being close to the girls who never exceed normative happiness, she is constantly in the shadow of happiness, but as close as she can be. Her occupation is, in a way, engaging in the reproduction of normative happiness for other girls, and in this way, she compensates for her lack of a conventional pedagogy of happiness, lacking blood-related parents.

This subtle wish of Mikage the orphan towards being included within the “boundaries” (59) of happiness implies the difficulty of imagining a happy life without a bloodline. Because this happiness is possible only by pedagogy from (caring and happy) heterosexual parenting, even though she desires it, she is always in its shadow, trying to be as close to it as she can.

### **Happiness Lies in Family and Status Quo**

Critics investigate how radical and new *Kitchen* is in writing the transgender mother, and how the family depicted here challenges the modern normative family, upon which a great moral value is considered to lie.<sup>12</sup> However, rather than embracing the queerness of the novel, more careful investigation shows the limitation of this happy queer family: when we read *Kitchen* and *Full Moon: Kitchen 2*, as a series, we have to ask why Eriko has to be killed, and, out of the story, if she

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is the key to hold together the happy family portrait. After Eriko's death, Mikage and Yuichi struggle to define their relationship. They “really were orphans” (Yoshimoto 54), and Yuichi is reluctant to tell Mikage the fact that Eriko has been killed, because he would have to behave as the oldest son and deal with the funeral and murder. When Mikage is told that Eriko was murdered, she visits her house, where she used to spend time as a part of the family. Yuichi offers to replace the sofa she slept on with “a double bed,” so that Mikage can live there with him (65). Mikage asks him if it would be as his lover or as his friend and he answers: “Right now I can't think. What do you [Mikage] mean in my life? How am I myself changing? How will my life be different from before? I don't have a clue about any of that” (65).

This ambiguous relationship between Mikage and Yuichi after Eriko's death, not yet romantic but much closer than friendship, is discussed by a number of critics and how to interpret their relationship varies. Yoshimoto herself articulates that she is not interested in the romance genre at all, and also considers that this lack of interest is one of the characteristics of her writing. In fact, all the characters in *Kitchen* are not in the state of being involved in romance: they are mentally unstable, and close to being unable to keep living: “They don't have any energy, neither for shopping, nor sex: the only thing they can do is to eat a little bit and share time together” (qtd. in Yoshida 133). Famously, Chizuko Ueno argues that the bed-scene is replaced by the scene of food: “how to deal with sexuality is the eternal issue of ‘family,’ but it seems that Banana Yoshimoto avoids [talking about] it” (Ueno; my trans.; 32). Indeed, there is no sex scene between the two, and this sexlessness or, more accurately, asexuality is the reason why critics say the relationship is “something different” from a “normal” heterosexual relationship. However, I contend that it is nonetheless problematic to innocently associate eating, the family and the kitchen:

Truly happy memories always live on, shining. Over time, one by one, they come back to life. The meals we ate together, numberless afternoons and evenings.

When was it that Yuichi said to me, “Why is it that everything I eat when I’m with you is so delicious?” I laughed. “Could it be that you’re satisfying hunger and lust at the same time?” “No way, no way, no way!” he said, laughing, “It must be because we’re family.” (Yoshimoto 100)

Domesticity is closely related to Mikage, both from her occupation and in her relationship with Yuichi, and still domesticity is considered as the source of happiness, a well of comfort, the place where “[t]ruly happy memories live on, shining.” Family is a space that creates a “shine” for Mikage, and in which she shines. She chooses her profession in the kitchen, working closely and making effort to create family, for its happy and shining memories. Thus, it may be that this series of novels challenges the normative form of modern family; however, it does not shake up the system of sexual divisions itself, and does nothing to change the gendered division of labour in Japanese culture.

## **Conclusion**

Tracing the feminist narrative of right-wing discourse since 2011 leads us to see the pivotal moment of 1985, where two contradictory stories of women’s choices have begun: the postfeminist narrative on individual female choices (the Equal Opportunity Law) and the Establishment of Women’s Pension rights. These two different ways of narrating women’s lives based upon their choices are complicatedly interwoven and entangled, but from this mesh, there is some loose thread, which cannot be tightened or woven into the main fabric, and is trying not to be separated from the dominant shape.

Currently Article 24 of the Constitution is under revision,

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reinforcing its encouragement of conventional and hetero-normative family values and units. As we have seen, starting from Abe’s speech in 2012, the Japanese government has been encouraging Japanese women to participate in the public sphere to boost its economics, yet when we closely look at the rhetoric to justify this encouragement, their emphasis and belief on “freedom of choice” for women is conditional, dismissing the idea of reproduction as an issue of welfare. In order to build a country in which women shine, firstly women needs reproductive rights, with their own decisions over their bodies, and this starts from abolishing the laws that criminalise abortion.

Mikage is trapped in-between models of women’s happiness, neither able to be a career woman nor a housewife. A place where women shine always comes with its shadow—it creates a disparity among women, some of whom are closer to normative happiness, and reinforces the idea that one’s life’s fulfilment is to form family. Mikage’s life choices in *Kitchen* are suggestive of the choices that contemporary women are believed to face: to “choose” between a profession, reproduction, nurturing or “having it all” in Japan. However, Mikage does not even fit into such paths: not having access to high-income secure jobs, not able to access familial support, unable to learn how to be inside the “boundaries of happiness” (Yoshimoto 59), she tries to be as close as she can to normative happiness. Closely working with girls who are going to marry and form a nuclear family, she stays in the shadow of shining women.

## **Notes**

1. Since this is an article in English, I will mostly quote from the English version of *Kitchen*, translated by Megan Backas, published in 1994. When I discuss the translation from the Japanese original text, I will cite it as *Kicchin*. In addition, in this

article, both *Kitchen* and *Full Moon (Kitchen 2)* are considered as one serial work and referred to as *Kitchen*.

2. For various understandings of postfeminism, see Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of Sensibility.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol.10, no.2, 2007, pp.147-166 and Kazuko Takemura, *Posuto-feminizumu*, Sakuhin-sha, 2003.
3. It is worth noting that there are, and still have been various kinds of social activism going on for women’s reproductive rights, especially since 1983, the time of the revision of the Eugenic Protection Law. *Soshiren* and others still actively engage against it, with the aim to abolish the laws that criminalise abortion and they published a statement on the 19th of May 2013 to oppose the taskforce and its attempt to distribute the so-called *jyosei techo* that I discussed above. See [soshiren.org/data/kougibun0519.pdf](http://soshiren.org/data/kougibun0519.pdf). Accessed 10 Jan. 2017.
4. There have been long discussions and even activism regarding the risk and safety of atomic power stations in Japan since the Cold War. Tetsuo Arima explains that America’s political pressure was there to build the plants in Fukushima in *Genpatsu, Shoriki, CIA —Kimitsubunsho de Yomu Showa Urajijyo* [Nuclear Power, Shoriki and the CIA: The Underground History of the Showa Period Revealed by Classified Documents], Shinsho-sha, 2008. Despite the activism against the construction of the plant, this earthquake revealed that its assurances of safety were indeed a “myth.” It is worth noting that the nuclear plant was constructed under governance by the LDP.
5. Abe’s cabinet I am referring to ended in September 2014, and he reshuffled ministers and reformed the cabinet from October. It is worth noting that MP Haruko Arimura, who took over the ministerial work from Mori, is anti-abortion.
6. For optimism in neoliberal discourse, see Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel*

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*Optimism*, Duke UP, 2011. Although the taskforce committee, led by Mori discussed that their role should not be to promote “Beget and Multiply,” as was the slogan during WWII in Japan, it is questionable if the rhetoric on pleasure in child-birth and child-rearing could avoid echoing this slogan from the past. In the Prime Minister’s speech, as well as in the taskforce, women’s happiness is promised through maternity, to create the nation’s vitality.

7. Later Mori claimed, in an interview with NPO *paburikku puresu*, that the idea of the Women’s Diary was misunderstood by the media. In this interview, Mori repeated that reproduction is a matter of women’s personal choice, and that the government was not forcing individual choices. See Masako Mori’s interview by NPO Public Press. “Jyosei-techo no Shini wa Jyosei no Jiritsu Shien: Mori Masako Shoshika Taisaku Tantou Daijin Intabyu.” *Public Press*, 2 July 2013. [www.publicpress.jp/2013/07/02/](http://www.publicpress.jp/2013/07/02/).
8. MP Murata Renho (Democrat Party of Japan) interrogated if the taskforce meeting was planning to publish the notebook on 7th of May 2013 in the Cabinet Committee of the House of Councillors. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMIzCrOuu8s](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMIzCrOuu8s).
9. It is worth noting that new pre-natal screening started in Japan from April 2013 and, by examining maternal blood, chromosomal “defects” can be found more accurately than in previous tests. Showa women’s hospital in Tokyo started this screening, due to their concern with “late pregnancy.” With a higher percentage of late pregnancies and also in a nation in which radiation is leaking at a high rate, anxiety towards “late pregnancy” and its possibility of giving birth to a child with a genetic disorder are at stake, especially since the earthquake.
10. See [www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/shoushika/meeting/taskforce/k\\_1/pdf/gijigaiyou.pdf](http://www8.cao.go.jp/shoushi/shoushika/meeting/taskforce/k_1/pdf/gijigaiyou.pdf).
11. In the original text, “*Watashi mo souiu no iina to omou*” (Kicchin

- 93).
12. For example, see Hideto Tsuboi, *Sei ga Kataru* [*Sexuality Speaks*], Nagoya UP, 2012, and Chizuko Ueno, “Shokuen-Kazoku.” *Midnight Call*, Asahi Shinbunsha, 1990.

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