

Girl Power!

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Mikage, a Japanese woman in the contemporary novella *Kitchen*, by Banana Yoshimoto, says, "We're constantly making choices... we decide as though by instinct" (Yoshimoto 97). Certainly, she and Akiko, a character in the Korean story, *Comfort Woman*, by Nora Okja Keller, which takes place during and after the Second World War, have both made the conscious choice to begin their lives again, practically from scratch. That is the lesson to be gained from these two novels: we should not give up, for the best in life may be just around the corner.

Ironically, Akiko describes the beginning of her days in the comfort camps as a homecoming. Having lost her mother, she is relieved to discover so many women in the Japanese camps. She is even more relieved to discover that she is useful to them because she can help care for them, bring them ointment for all their sores, and send them hidden messages through her songs. As she says herself, "How could I imagine anything else?" (Keller 19).

How could anyone imagine what happens to Akiko? Even reading the words on the page does not make her experience real; anyone would crack if forced to live the life that the Comfort Women lived. Their days are spent closing their mouths and opening their legs, submitting to the soldiers' will and doing whatever it takes to keep their humanity, all the while trying not to get caught. The only woman who dares defy the soldiers is Induk. After being used by so many men, Induk takes matters into her own hands and spends an entire night, screaming, "I am Korea, I am a woman, I am alive..." (20). The other women think that she has lost her sanity once and for all, but Akiko alone knows that Induk has actually gone sane; with the mutilation and horrific death she receives, Induk's soul is finally free, leaving Akiko to fill the void.

Akiko is much too young when she is sold to the soldiers to serve as a full Comfort Woman. The only thing that keeps her alive is the memory of Induk, and the posthumous guidance that she receives from her spirit. Years later, when Akiko is out of the camps, out of Korea, and past her trauma, she looks back on her life as a Comfort Woman and describes those days almost as if she had amnesia. The days, years, men, women, words, colors, experiences of that life all bleed together, making it nearly impossible to separate one from another. The most lasting affliction of the Comfort Women is the inability to stay put in this world, as illustrated by Akiko throughout the rest of her life. She spends all of her time flitting between her daughter's very tangible body, and the intangible spirits of so many of the women she has known. To everyone around her, she looks crazy, but this erratic behavior is actually what keeps Akiko sane; to lose touch with her mother and with Induk, the women who kept her alive through the hardest times of her life, would be to plummet into insanity.

Akiko's story shows that it is amazing what she can endure: being orphaned and sold into slavery at a very young age, spending all of her formative years in forced prostitution, marrying a man that she barely knows and does not love, being widowed with a young child who does not understand her, remaining poor and having to struggle for the roach-infested apartment she can barely afford, and being considered crazy by everyone who sees her; it is a miracle she survives at all. Yet she does survive, and in addition, she manages to raise a healthy, intelligent, self-sufficient daughter.

Akiko is able to do all of this for the simple reason that she does not give up. Even after her spirit is murdered at the age of twelve, she does not allow her body to follow, and eventually, she finds her spirit coming back to her, in the form of a baby girl. Every hardship that she has been made to endure, every pain that she has had to overcome, is made up for with the birth of her daughter, Beccah. The love that Akiko feels for her daughter is incredible. The fierceness with which she protects Beccah, also, is astounding.

Some may argue that Akiko is not a good mother because she rarely provides full meals for Beccah or because she breaks into rants about spirits who are trying to consume Beccah. However, it is clear from the very beginning that Akiko simply does not concern herself with things like the food pyramid or field trip request forms or new coats at Christmastime. When she looks at Beccah, she sees someone who is totally self-reliant, who will get what she needs with or without her mother's help. What Beccah needs, then, is advice and lessons in how to deal with the spirit world, something that her American teachers and friends cannot understand or provide. Akiko may not be June Cleaver, but she spends her entire adult life, running herself ragged to be the safest passage between the two worlds that Beccah could ask for. By the end of her life, this strict concentration has turned her into the best mother – the only mother – that Beccah could ever need or want.

With Beccah's birth, Akiko has finally found her purpose, even after being killed so many times by so many men. That purpose is to love, to protect, to inform Beccah, to be a stronger source of inspiration and encouragement than any other in her life, and to make sure that she is never alone. Even through all of Akiko's strange outbursts, she has only love and appreciation for Beccah. Without her, Akiko would have been left a wandering corpse, doomed to a life spent solely in awful memories. It is because of Beccah that Akiko remains as sane or coherent as she does; Beccah is her miracle. Akiko endures the lot she is given; she never folds to the pressure of outside forces, because she understands, even before she gives birth, that someday there will be something better. That something is motherhood, and even from her grave, she remains by Beccah's side, so that "...she will hear my name and know that when she cries, she will never be alone" (183).

Mikage, in the novella *Kitchen*, lives through a much more contemporary, and much less exotic, heartbreak, but a heartbreak nonetheless. Her grandmother, the only family she has in the world, has died, and Mikage is left an absolute orphan, completely alone in the world. She takes to drifting through her empty apartment, desolate and dazed. If not for the help of Yuichi Tanabe, she may have remained that way forever.

While living with Yuichi and his mother, Eriko, Mikage begins to recover from her loss. It is a happy family she has found herself with, and she is starting to feel better, in spite of everything. The feelings between Mikage and Yuichi, while they are not perfectly understandable or able to be explained, are growing stronger. She is regaining strength and finding activities to keep her busy. Life is going as well as can be expected.

Months later, after Mikage has moved out, Eriko suddenly dies and Yuichi finds himself an orphan, just like Mikage, and much less equipped to deal with it. The only way he can cope is by drinking: "I wondered if eating would put out the light, but it seemed like too much trouble, so I just drank" (64). Because he and Mikage know each other so well and can understand each other so intuitively, especially now, she slowly finds herself being dragged down with him. She begins to stay in his house again; she cooks for him; she inadvertently gets herself mixed up with his love life; in short, she does all of the things that a friend is not supposed to do to help someone cope, but, like most people, she is unable to help herself. Seeing him in such despair brings back to life all of the feelings she herself had after her grandmother's death. If the two of them can just remain together, "looking over the cauldron of hell," then they will never be forced to shake themselves off and get over it (66). Their mutual sadness will allow them each to remain that way indefinitely, and that would be so much easier than facing life head on.

Nevertheless, Mikage knows, even while she is entertaining that option, that nothing would be worse for the two of them. If she and Yuichi are to remain together, it will only be in a healthy way, a way that will force them to find some happiness with each other. Mikage senses that this

feeling of hopelessness they are both dealing with is not all that is in store for her. "I couldn't exist like that. Reality is wonderful," she says, proving that underneath her sadness, there is a force of optimism and hope that, above all, is driving her in life (5). She leaves Yuichi.

Mikage leaves for Izu for a relaxing business trip with her group from work. Yuichi, and what he is going through without her, does not leave her mind for a moment, even while she is thanking her stars that she managed to get away. She finally realizes that the relationship between the two of them had been growing more and more complicated for months, hidden only by Eriko's presence. Once Eriko is gone, there is nothing to hide behind and nothing to cover Mikage's own ever-present sadness. This business trip, then, serves two purposes: it allows her to spend some time away from Yuichi, and it forces her to continue to come to terms with all of the losses she has endured throughout her life. "Over and over, we begin again" (103).

It turns out, though, that she is unable to begin again without Yuichi's presence. All her vows to spend a week without him and figure things out on her own are forgotten once she hears his voice on the telephone. She buys an extra serving of *katsudon*, takes a very long and very expensive taxi ride all the way to Isehara to see Yuichi, and climbs up the outside wall of his hotel in the freezing cold nighttime, all for what she finally understands is "a matter of love" (93). Mikage has found her purpose, her reason for having survived when so many people around her have not. She and Yuichi were meant to find one another and meant to have the connection that they have, regardless of what their relationship turns into. Neither of them would have been able to live fully again without the other. Mikage does not give up, and she is rewarded tenfold. Lying outside Yuichi's hotel window, injured and freezing, she thinks to herself, "Some of us will inevitably find ourselves rolling around in a puddle on some roof... as if it were the most natural thing in the world" (97-8). As far as Yuichi and Mikage are concerned, she is right; nothing could be more natural.

Good, meaningful writing teaches what any good, meaningful life will teach: bad things, nightmarish things will happen, and hope is necessary to be able to live again. Both of these books encompasses that lesson. Akiko and Mikage were lucky in some ways; they both found another human being to latch onto in their times of need. Even without Beccah, though, Akiko would have survived, due solely to her strength, and likewise, Mikage would have made it without Yuichi, because of her indefatigable spirit.

Works Cited

Keller, Nora Okja. *Comfort Woman*. New York: Time Warner, 2001.

Yoshimoto, Banana. *Kitchen*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993.