



Understanding the notion of suffering in Yoshimoto Banana's novel 'Asleep'

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Abstract: This research paper aims to understand the notion of suffering in the novel titled *Asleep* by contemporary Japanese author, Yoshimoto Banana. The novel 'Asleep' comprises of three novellas namely *Night and Night's Travelers*, *Love Songs and Asleep*. The paper attempts to examine and analyze how the idea of suffering is exhibited through various characters and how their lives are affected in the three stories. From this study, it is concluded that there are multiple sources or causes of suffering, to each its own, and that it affects human life at psychological and emotional level in many ways, varying from person to person. The work is descriptive in nature and would be carried out through methodical selection of representative excerpts with interpretation and annotation of the selected excerpts from the three stories which reflect the notion of suffering within the context described in the plots.

Key Words: Contemporary Japanese literature, Yoshimoto Banana, Effects of Suffering, trauma, Healing.

1. INTRODUCTION :

This research study aims to understand and illustrate certain aspects of a work of popular Japanese contemporary author Yoshimoto Banana. The work selected for the study is English translation of the novel 'Asleep' published in 2000, translated by Michael Emmerich (original in Japanese published in 1989). Yoshimoto Banana (b. 24 July 1964) is a contemporary Japanese novelist. Her first novella titled "Moonlight Shadow" received the dean's prize. Her debut novel *Kitchen* (1988) gained unprecedented popularity and it became a major success in Japan. She was also awarded with the 39th Best Newcomer Artist Recommended by the Minister of Education in 1989. Some of her popular works are *Tsugumi*, *Amrita*, *N.P.*, *Mizuumi*, *Southpoint*, *Sweet Hereafter*, *Dead end Memories* etc.

This study focuses on one of the prominent aspect or theme of the novel *Asleep* by Yoshimoto Banana. It probes into the portrayal of suffering in the three stories of the novel and attempts to further investigate the causes of suffering and its impact on the main characters. This work will help to gain an understanding of the idea of suffering depicted in the works of Yoshimoto Banana. This study will also serve as a reference work for the researchers working in the field of literature and mainly on works of Yoshimoto Banana.

In this study, the notion of suffering is located by identifying the intended texts that reflect suffering of the characters in any form. Thereafter, a selection is made of the representative excerpts from the selected excerpts that exhibit effects of suffering evidently which are then analyzed through careful reading and extracting the core idea of suffering within that context. An interpretation is provided on how the nuance of suffering is portrayed therein and in what manner it effects the character. The findings are then discussed in the conclusion.

2. About the work :

The novel was originally published as *shirakawa yofune* in Japanese in 1989 and helped young Yoshimoto Banana establish as a distinguished writer in Japan, portraying the lives of millions of Japanese youth with realistic and believable characters, with a hint of supernatural epiphany which turns the ordinary into something magic and



extraordinary (Ball, 2001). The novel was translated into several languages, i.e. in Italian and Spanish in 1994, in English in 2000, in German in 2001, and in Vietnamese in 2008. In 2015, it was also made into a Japanese film by the same name, by director Shingo Wakagi. The novel comprises of three unrelated stories, namely, *Night and Night's Travelers*, *Love Songs*, and *Asleep*. The three stories revolve around central themes such as death, loneliness, dreams, grief, loss, supernatural elements, epiphany, nostalgia, sleep, love triangle, female friendship among others.

In the first story, a young girl, Shibami is grieving the loss of her younger brother Yoshihiro who died in a car accident, leaving behind Sarah, his ex girlfriend and Mari, his present lover. It is a story about three women connected to Yoshihiro and how they deal with the personal loss and gradually try to overcome the suffering. The story is titled *Night and Night's Travelers*, wherein the role of night is considerably accentuated. The night, here, can be seen as a metaphor used throughout the narration for portraying darkness in the lives of the characters and sorrow following the death of a near one, here Yoshihiro. In the same way, the night's travelers here are those left behind i.e. Shibami, Sarah, and Mari, who got affected and were struggling to make their respective ways through the underway darkness in their lives by trying to move on in life.

In the second story *Love Songs*, Fumi's sleep is troubled by voice of Haru, the girl who once fought with her over a man they both loved and is now dead. She tries to look for the reasons and is able to find peace through interaction with Haru, with the help of a midget, introduced to her by her boyfriend. The title *Love Songs* can be understood in its literal sense, i.e. a song that deals with the joys and sorrows of love (Collins, n. d.). In this case, the voice of Haru heard by Fumi every night before falling asleep is an expression of the bitter and sweet memories shared between them when they were in relationship. Another understanding of the love songs can be denoted to the love relationship shared by these three characters (in a love triangle), wherein the two women shared bitterness at a point of time, however, both of them suffered heartbreak in the end. In essence, the journey of experiences and feelings, and the life they lived while in that relationship, can be termed as love songs.

In the last story, a young girl, Terako is living a depressed life partly because of losing her best friend, Shiori to suicide and partly because of her present boyfriend Iwanaga who is struggling with the serious health of his wife. Terako lives each day dull and lazy, remembering Shiori and supporting Iwanaga, until one day Iwanaga's wife come to her dreams and pushes her to work and be active. The title of the third story *Asleep* underlines the excessiveness of sleep post traumatic experiences as the protagonist undergoes a phase of intensified sleep in order to get healing and escape the reality around her. In the larger picture, the title asleep also denotes the inactiveness and numbness, and the lack of purpose at a psychological level in Terako's life.

3. Portrayal and effects of suffering :

Bueno-Gomez (2017) outlines the definition of suffering as an unpleasant or even anguishing experience which severely affects a person at a psychological and an existential level. He mentions further:

"Even when suffering is not caused by biological or observable circumstances, it is an embodied experience which we cannot but feel in the rhythm of our hearts, clenching of our stomachs, the sweat on our hands, our inability to sleep etc (Bueno-Gomez, 2017)"

The source of suffering can be multilateral. In the same way as with the physical pain, social and cultural issues, for example, peer pressure, displacement, penury, social expulsion, and individual factors like grief and stress can also induce the same indications of suffering. Suffering plays an important role in one's life's trajectory as it can alienate one from previous concerns and even displaces one into a state of liminality where one does not feel at home in the world or in one's body as one used to (Bueno-Gomez, 2017). Brooks (2022) believes that suffering serves an important purpose as its roots are deep in our evolutionary heritage. Suffering and its further implications can be broadly manifested in physical, psychological and socio-cultural dimensions. It affects the existential dimension and has an impact on crucial matters regarding one's personal life, hence in order to understand human experience better, it is critical to take suffering into account as well. It will also be noteworthy here that suffering is a very subjective matter as each person's tryst with suffering and the reaction towards it is a different experience.

As it is observed in the works of Yoshimoto Banana, suffering due to personal loss constitutes the central theme of the three stories of *Asleep*. In each story of the novella, the protagonist has suffered some kind of loss in their lives, be it death of a close one or failure in establishing a career.



In *Night and Night's traveller*, The sudden tragic death of Yoshihiro leaves his sister Shibami and his girlfriend Mari to deal with the void. Similarly in the second story *Love Songs* the protagonist Fumi turns into an alcoholic after her failed love relationship. The death of Haru further inflicted her suffering to greater depths. In the last story *Asleep* the protagonist Terako deals with the loss of her dear friend and roommate Shiori and her present complex relationship with Iwanaga.

One can notice the effects of these sufferings of each characters through the following excerpts of the three stories. In *Night and Night's Travellers*, the emotional state of Shibami can be understood through the metaphor of snowy winter night where she found herself stuck and lost interest in joys of life as if the time has stopped for her.

"It really snow a lot that winter. May be that explains why I hardly ever went out at night, but just stayed hold up inside my room. I was in college, but it had been decided that I would study abroad the next semester and that meant I didn't have to take any makeup exams. Which is to say that my situation ought have been very pleasant and carefree, but for no particular reason I'd gone and turned down every invitation I'd received to go skiing or to go travel around spa-hopping. I guess may be I'd gotten to like the feeling of being snowed in - may be that explains it. It was great. You felt like everything had come to a halt, like you were stuck in some sort of snowdrift where what had piled up wasn't snow but time." (p. 14)

Further, Shibami after losing her brother in a tragic accident, moved on but she is not completely able to cope up with the loss and felt gloomy and sad inside missing the presence of her dear brother and the void it will bring in the life ahead. The following excerpt underlines the loneliness felt by Shibami.

"I often got pretty depressed myself back then. It felt like I was standing at the very edge of this world, that's the kind of mood I was in, the kind of emptiness I felt". (p. 27)

On the other hand, Mari who was in relationship with Yoshihiro has changed now after the tragic incident and is no more the same person Shibami (protagonist) once knew. Mari and Shibami were childhood cousins. Mari was a fun-loving and carefree person Shibami had known, however, the whole incident of Yoshihiro's sudden death shook her from inside. In the following excerpts, It is highlighted that Mari's presence changed to a great extent after the accident. She used to visit Shibami's house earlier also, but now it was different from what she used to be, as she stopped responding to the outside world. The following excerpts reflect the transition of Mari's emotional state.

"As a matter of fact it had always been like that with Mari, even when she was living with us. She'd march through the house almost exactly the way a cat does, with that same air of belonging, and if you left her alone she'd just sit there staring off into space, not saying a word, or else go to sleep. You hardly even realized she was there. She seemed to be in the process of fading away that's not the way it used to be. [...] Whereas now she just seemed subdued." (p.16-17)

"Mari had stopped responding to the outside world, she'd pulled the plug on the whole system, she was taking a break – I felt convinced of this. Because, as she saw things right now, life was nothing but pain". (p. 17)

"... and she hardly ever went out, and she hadn't listened to much music – basically all she did was go to sleep and then get up again."(p. 18)

"But she wasn't really living in our house, she wasn't really alive. She just stayed there in the same space with us, a pleasant presence, like a resident ghost. She existed just like a mirage."(p. 26)

"Mari was a living creature during the time she stayed in our house was when she was crying. [...] she'd always be sobbing to herself in the guestroom."(p. 26-27)

In the second story *Love Songs* the protagonist Fumi who was in relationship with a man had to put up with another woman, Haru who was also in love with her boyfriend. Moreover, she suffers a heartbreak when the man suddenly left both the women which also ended Fumi's relationship with her rival too. This was indeed a twofold setback to her as by the time Fumi and Haru parted their ways, not realizing at some point of time in their complicated relationship, Fumi had started to share emotions with Haru about the way she felt then.



“Long ago I’d fallen in love with a strange man and ended up acting out one of the paths in a bizarre triangular relationship. [...] Our two loves finally came to an abrupt end one day when the man, exhausted by the life we had been living, ran off to some faraway place and didn’t come back. My relationship with Haru ended then too.” (p. 71-72)

Fumi resonates with Haru’s feeling of suffering after the man they both loved ran away which must have affected both Haru and Fumi in their own ways. Though at that time, both were competing with each other and considered each other as rivals but this pain of desertion was common to both and must have been difficult to come out from the lasting effect of the memories of a toxic relationship. Fumi could relate to the sadness the abrupt end of relationship brought to both, this time in an empathetic manner.

“I completely understood what Haru had gone through when the man left and why she hadn’t been able to pull herself together and move on again. Because that’s how totally involved our love for him was – both of us had given it everything we could.” (p. 81)

Following excerpt reflects Fumi’s state of depression and unhappiness. Fumi who was overwhelmed with her emotions and sadness, was not able to live a calm life. Even drinks and a night’s sleep could not help her in having a peaceful mind.

“Every thought I had just made me unhappy. And then, like an army in pursuit of an already thoroughly pummeled foe, the phone started to shriek.” (p. 74)

It appears that after the heartbreak, Fumi gradually turned to alcoholism as a means to get over the grief and come to terms with the present life that also included her current boyfriend. She was so exhausted with the struggle of her past relationship that now everything around her seemed hopeless but gradually came to an understanding of the reality of her current situation.

“After I’d started drinking more heavily. Each time I looked out on that scenery with drunken eyes I’d be overwhelmed by the unbelievable purity of those colors, and I’d start feeling as if nothing really matters, like I wouldn’t really care at all even if I were to lose everything I had. This wasn’t resignation or desperation. It was a much more natural form of acceptance.” (p. 69)

Despite their enmity of old times, the shocking news of Haru’s untimely death affected Fumi that much that she drank in excess, also justifying the cause of her excessive drinking that day which indicates her vulnerable and depressive emotional state.

“I went back to my apartment and drank all alone in memory of Haru. For some reason I felt that it was okay for me to drink a lot that night, so I was able to pour in as much as I wanted and still feel good.” (p. 80)

The following excerpt displays the internal perturbations of Fumi esp. the thoughts that comes to her every night on regrets in her life which are affixed in the past and cannot be altered. Fumi regrets to a great extent that while Haru was alive they were always fighting and realized that all the fight and ill-treatment to each other was not worth.

“May be the various lingering regrets that kept drifting upto the surface now that my alcohol-spattered life was getting ready to enter a new stage had simply taken form as an image of Haru. [...] I felt like I wouldn’t mind even if those inescapable regrets that we are all left with, that lie buried deep inside everyone of us, ended up being nothing more than a bit of color added to the night – as long as I could enjoy the incredible beauty of this quietly blurring, infinitely reflected scenery until morning, when everything would return once again to zero.” (p. 87-88)

In the third story *Asleep*, the protagonist Terako suffers from the desolation and emptiness after her close friend Shiori passed away. On one hand, she struggles to deal with the void and on another, she suffers from the helplessness of making her boyfriend Iwanaga understand what she was going through. Her conditions led her to a state of lack of communication where she could not connect with her boyfriend emotionally. The following excerpt confirms this.

“A friend of mine has died. How else was I supposed to express the loneliness I felt? How else could I make him see?” (p. 112)



Terako misses her friend Shiori terribly and recalls the time spent with her sharing stories about all ups and down of life without any hesitation. She remembers how she could freely talk with her on all personal matters and was able to find solace in her company. She was her go-to-person who is now no more which has left Terako with the void she is not able to fill again, not even by her boyfriend. Terako's longing to be with Shiori is clearly evident in the following excerpt.

"I'd feel an inexplicable yearning to bury my head in her giant breast and sob and sob and tell her absolutely everything. The bad things, the lies I have told, things about the future, how tired I have felt, all the things I'd put up with, the darkness of night, my uneasiness – everything. [...] That's the sort of person Shiori was." (p. 120)

One evening, Terako on her way back home after meeting Iwanaga recalled the times when she used to visit Shiori often after meeting Iwanaga and how Shiori always welcomed her happily and listened to her. Terako still takes such night walks to feel the togetherness and intimacy they once shared. However, the hopelessness and the reality of not seeing her again anymore makes her sad.

"Even now I couldn't help feeling that if I just stepped into the elevator in her building and went up to her apartment. I would be certain to find her at home" (p. 135)

"I really did want to see Shiori and so, though there was obviously no way we could meet, I kept plodding aimlessly along, taking a long way home. Somehow this made me feel like I was getting closer to her." (p. 137)

Terako who was already dealing with loss of her friend Shiori found a support in Iwanaga. However, she was not totally content in that relationship given the uncertainty and insecurity that she had to deal with that comes along with the love for Iwanaga. Terako experiences persistent relationship anxiety. She has been enduring the relationship with Iwanaga for so long but now a moment comes after being silent and passive where she now contemplates to end this relationship.

"And if it isn't love, if it's eventually going to an end, I want to go on sleeping like this; I want to stop hearing the phone when he calls. Let me be alone again. I spent the summer feeling like that, exhausted by my anxiety." (p. 109)

Despite putting her best efforts in the relationship and being there for each other Terako still felt lonely, gradually even in his presence and this feeling of loneliness would increase with time reaching to a point she doesn't care anymore about his calls or meeting. Even the relationship that was supposed to bring her out of loneliness made her even more lonely. The relationship which was supposed to alleviate her suffering was only making her more lonelier and aggravate the suffering.

"Why do I feel so lonely, when I am with this guy? I'd think. Maybe it's because things between us are so complex? Or maybe it's because I have no feelings at all about our relationship except that I like it, because I have no clear sense of what I want us to be doing? The only thing I'd understood right from the very beginning was that our love was supported by loneliness." (p. 114)

"Come to think of it, being with him always made me feel incredibly lonely. I don't know why but for some reason I'd always end up having these vaguely melancholy thoughts circling through my head." (p. 136)

From the analysis, it is observed that the characters of each story face their own kind of suffering. Selection of excerpts from the first story are employed to evince the plight of the main characters, here Shibami and Mari, how suffering has affected their lives in various aspects. Use of nature and its extremities, such as melancholy of a snowy winter night was also exerted to display the inner emotional and mental state of Shibami throughout the story in a metaphorical manner. There are many passages throughout the plot which exhibit the emotional turmoil of Mari whose suffering is most expressed. A major focus of the story lies on the massive transition of Mari's life in the aftermath of the death of Yoshihiro. The selection of excerpts from the second story shows how Fumi got a double setback of losing her boyfriend and a close rival with whom she was also emotionally attached in such a manner that the feeling of desertion left a massive void in Fumi's life. Further, it is revealed in the plot that she is unhappy with the colossal feeling of depression which does not let her focus on her work and life. As it is evident, Fumi takes a center stage of the story and all the suffering presented in the story takes place around her. These all tragic developments in her life makes her utterly overwhelmed and lead her towards a vulnerable and depressive state. The passages also depict the issues with excess of alcoholism and extreme feeling of regret over the unworthy fights with Haru which impair her life conditions severely.



In the third story the major themes discussed through the selected excerpts are loss of a close friend and subsequently the feeling of void. It also undertakes the issues of unemployment and how it makes the lives worse by leading a non productive life without a purpose, dependency which also results in abundance of time to overthink. The protagonist Terako is suffering from the loss of her dear friend Shiori and is in a complicated relationship with her boyfriend Iwanaga which makes her life uncertain and insecure. As the text excerpts indicate, Terako is unable to connect emotionally with her boyfriend at a deeper level which drives her further towards loneliness.

4. Conclusion :

This study elucidates essentially the modality of the expressions of suffering depicted in *Asleep* by contemporary Japanese author Yoshimoto Banana. It is eventually here to understand that the degree and form of suffering endured by the characters in *Asleep* are disparate and individual. This tendency is evident in almost all major works of Yoshimoto Banana. The key ideas mentioned in the analytical part of this article help us comprehend clearly the root causes of suffering in the three stories which can broadly be categorized into three major points. These are: a. lack of stability in life due to various reasons such as unemployment or unstable relationships, e. g. due to loss of a close relationship and sometimes due to an abrupt end to a relationship due to factors like death, desertion or disappearance of loved ones, or due to an existing complicated or confused relationship; be lack of hope in order to overcome suffering due to depressing environment, or due to a precarious situation where all options are exhausted, or due to lack of timely emotional support and a helping hand in the dire need of a direction; and c. lack of acceptance of reality due to constant living in the past or experiencing too much nostalgia or inability to share and communicate one's feelings because of a state of emotional isolation or lack of trust in people or lack of right people around.

The selected excerpts from the three stories demonstrate that the suffering can exhibit various attributes which affect the characters in many ways. As is evident, the effect or response to the trauma differs from person to person, depending on the nature of suffering. For example, it talks about the deterioration of general health, which may be psychological, emotional or even physical, which as a consequence might also lead to vulnerability towards fatal addictions. Further, the intensity of suffering is the most where it is least visible or hard to express, such as the feelings of emptiness, gloominess, loneliness due to pain and depression (sometimes extreme due to excessive nostalgia) as compared to the external expressions such as crying or sobbing. This could also lead to social withdrawal in forms of isolation, numbness, indifference, cold behavior, feeling of being lost etc. Excessive sleep or inability to sleep may also be seen as a common effect. The effects of suffering to some extent also bear loss of faith and hopelessness eventually making it difficult for the person to move on.

Suffering normally is related to pain, sadness and carries a negative connotation, however, on the flip side one may notice that the process also has some positive effects as the by product of the long endurance. Some positive outcomes as seen in the stories are spiritual and mental renewal, moral growth, redemption, motivator for progress etc. that helps the person become much more stronger for the journey of survival ahead. Works depicting themes such as suffering, struggle, recovery touches an indispensable aspect of human life and the real complexities faced in daily life. Such works not only reflect on these aspects but also sometimes provides a way of dealing with those complexities.

The novel *Asleep* can be considered as one of the finest representative work of Yoshimoto Banana depicting suffering as its core theme, in a very subtle yet powerful way, the underlying causes and its effects on the lives of the characters and the changes or transformation it brings along.

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