

Gendered Perspectives and Performativity in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*: An Evaluation on Keiko's Cognitive Responses and Societal Challenges

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Abstract

This study examines Sayaka Murata's novel, 'Convenience Store Woman' from a gendered perspective. It delves into Keiko's cognitive responses to social interactions, utilising research to demonstrate how her unique worldview offers a corrective approach to life. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity, the article argues that Keiko rejects societal gender norms. This analysis explores Keiko's cognitive processes and performative behaviours that challenge the gender constructs and expectations which are imposed by society. The study also explores the convenience store setting as a sanctuary for Keiko, a realm that serves as a distinct separation from the external world

Keywords: Gender, Performativity, Convenience Store.

In the contemporary landscape characterised by rapid technological advancements and demanding lifestyles, convenience has emerged as a fundamental necessity. Individuals grapple with the complexities of modern living, necessitating solutions that streamline their daily routines and alleviate time constraints. The convenience store stands out as a pivotal innovation, offering quick

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access to essential commodities and services while catering to the demands of individuals navigating their fast-paced schedules. Connecting individuals with the pulse of contemporary society, *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata serves as a powerful mode of representation towards the modernist way of life. This novel delves into the complexities of societal expectations and individual identity within the context of a convenience store setting.

Convenience Store Woman follows the story of Keiko Furukura, a woman who has worked at a convenience store for eighteen years. Throughout the novel, Keiko grapples with societal pressures and expectations, feeling like an outsider due to her perceived 'abnormal' behaviour. As she navigates her way through life, Keiko finds solace and purpose within the structured environment of the convenience store, ultimately questioning the norms and expectations imposed upon her by society. The novel explores themes of identity, conformity, and the search for belonging in a thought-provoking and poignant manner.

This paper posits Keiko as an individual who has different cognitive responses to social interactions that are unaccepted within patriarchal society, and explores the construct of gender imposed upon her as her identity. Furthermore, it examines Keiko's utilisation of the convenience store as a sanctuary, shielding her from societal expectations and criticisms.

In a world characterised by disparity, Keiko is perceived as a woman exhibiting deviant behaviour in contrast to society's accepted norms. Barbara Thornbury comments, "Murata creates in Keiko a woman who, from early childhood, is a person whose views of the world startle those around her, humorously yet disturbingly" (69). The novel underscores three pivotal incidents that contributed to her distinct identity. In one such instance, when a teacher exhibited agitated behaviour, disregarding her students' exhaustion, Keiko took matters into her own hands by pulling down the teacher's skirt in front of the class. She later attributed this action to something she had seen on television. This incident portrays her as a child whose thought process is different from that of her peers. In the second incident, the author creates a scenario in which two local boys engage in a physical altercation. Despite the temptation to stop the boys, the public falls short on ways to break the fight between the boys. Keiko, who lacks such inhibition, tries to dissuade the fight by hitting one of the boys's heads with a spade, prompting questions about her cognitive reasoning.

It is evident to readers that Keiko is not overtly expressive of her emotions and struggles to form deep emotional bonds with others. However, subtle indications of familial affection between Keiko and her sister are present in the narrative. Even though the novel primarily presents the idea that Keiko is adored by her sister, it does not show Keiko vocalising her love for her sister. An incident in the novel underscores Keiko's perplexity regarding her emotions, particularly her inability to comprehend why she should prioritise certain individuals over others. Her statement, "Maybe this particular baby should be more important to me than the others,"

reflects her innate tendency to lack emotional attachment to those in her surroundings and her questioning of societal norms regarding familial prioritisation (55). In this context, Keiko emerges as an independent figure who challenges society's implicit expectation of prioritising family over other individuals.

Keiko's departure from conventional behaviour distinguishes her from mainstream societal norms, resulting in her ostracization. However, Thornbury, in her research article on Keiko, argues that there are compelling reasons to appreciate her distinct perspective and contributions. She says that Keiko may not earn much from her job, but she embodies independence and self-reliance. She offers warmth and comfort to customers, particularly the elderly, with her cheerful greetings and friendly interactions. One of her most admirable traits is her quiet defiance against those who belittle her for her job. Keiko finds it intriguing when people look down on her for working in a convenience store, and she boldly confronts their judgmental attitudes. She challenges societal biases and offers a different perspective on what it means to be human. In essence, "Keiko offers a corrective in her own "deviating" way" (Thornbury 71). This underscores that Keiko, when viewed through a narrow lens, may seem unconventional or 'abnormal,' but in narratives like *Convenience Store Woman*, individuals such as Keiko are portrayed as more ordinary than others.

This study aligns with Thornbury's perspective, presenting Keiko's worldview as divergent from the norm while also serving as a revolutionary voice challenging accepted societal conventions. It is recognised that her particular perspective and unconventional cognitive processes have resulted in her marginalisation, yet the societal expectations placed upon her as a woman ultimately lead her to extensive subordination. From a feminist perspective, the novel portrays the struggles of a woman to fit herself into the already-existing normative society that alienates people who do not conform. Both men and women are ensnared by patriarchal expectations, which curtail their autonomy and reinforce gender disparities. However, women bear the brunt of this oppression, as double standards serve to further subjugate them compared to men.

Gender performativity, a key notion in Judith Butler's seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, suggests that gender is not an inherent or unchanging trait but rather a series of repeated actions and behaviours that conform to societal norms and expectations. According to Butler, individuals engage in the ongoing 'doing' of gender through their everyday actions and expressions, rather than embodying an essential, fixed masculinity or femininity. She says:

The question, however, of what qualifies as "gender" is itself already a question that attests to a pervasively normative operation of power, a fugitive operation of "what will be the case" under the rubric of "what is the case." Thus, the very description of the field of gender is no sense prior to, or separable from, the question of its normative operation. (Butler 21)

Utilising Butler's theory of gender performativity, it becomes apparent that Keiko exemplifies the concept of gender performance within the narrative by adopting behaviours and speech patterns from her fellow store workers. As she articulates:

My present self is formed almost completely of the people around me. I am currently made up of 30 percent Mrs. Izumi, 30 percent Sugawara, 20 percent the manager, and the rest absorbed from past colleagues such as Sasaki, who left six months ago, and Okasaki, who was our supervisor until a year ago. My speech is especially infected by everyone around me and is currently a mix of that of Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara. (Murata 21)

Keiko is depicted as someone acutely aware of societal expectations regarding behavioural norms. Consequently, she intentionally mimics the conduct and speech patterns of others to align herself with society's standards of humanity. As depicted in the novel, Keiko operates within a workplace environment where conformity is ingrained, contributing to her already cultivated behaviours. This environment serves as a facade, further facilitating Keiko's adherence to societal norms in her pursuit of a perceived "normal" life. Butler's statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end" (43) aptly applies to Keiko, who lacks typical feminine behavioural traits and does not perceive herself as a woman. This is evident when she admits in the novel, "I'd never experienced sex, and I'd never even had any particular awareness of my own sexuality" (46). Keiko adopts the dressing patterns of her colleagues in the store as a means to conform to societal expectations of womanhood. In the novel, Keiko is shown as struggling with issues related to her marriage and sexuality, forcing her to accept an identity she doesn't believe she was born with but reluctantly does so in order to fit in.

As a woman, her physical form takes on a pivotal role in shaping her identity, often leading to her being defined and recognised by her body. However, Butler challenges this binary notion of gender, which associates individuals strictly with their physical anatomy. She says, "The body is not a natural given, but a historically constructed medium" (105). Butler posits that societal norms, discourses, and power dynamics, which differ across different historical and cultural contexts, shape our understanding of the body. The societal context of Japan, as well as many other cultures, expects women to conform to specific roles throughout their lives. However, individuals like Keiko are deemed unfit by societal standards, as articulated by Shiraha in the novel. He expresses disdain, saying, "You're still in a dead-end job at your age, and nobody's going to marry an old maid like you now. You're like second-hand goods. Even if you are a virgin, you're grubby. You're like a Stone Age woman past childbearing age who can't get married and is left to just hang around the village, of no use to anyone, just a burden" (Murata 59). Shiraha's disdainful remarks towards Keiko exemplify this societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. He disparages Keiko for her age, employment status, and

perceived lack of desirability, highlighting the strict expectations placed upon women in Japanese society. Keiko defies societal constructs regarding her body and sexuality, yet she adopts the behaviours of others in society to evade scrutiny and maintain a peaceful existence. Through the lens of Butler's theory, it is apparent that Keiko's way of life and behaviour diverge from established societal norms and expectations.

The environment of a convenience store is crucial to Keiko's life. Known as "Konbini" in Japan, these stores are ubiquitous, found on practically every street corner in both urban and rural areas. Convenience stores provide ample job opportunities for various individuals in Japan, ranging from part-time workers, and students, to retirees. However, those employed in such establishments are commonly associated with lower social status or economic standing. Working in a convenience store is a highly structured job where every action of a store worker follows strict rules. From the customary greeting of "Irasshaimasé!" to packing food with a smile, each task is performed repeatedly every day, like a routine cycle. The novel illustrates the rigorous routine of working in a convenience store, depicting Keiko's recitation of daily phrases such as 'Irasshaimasé' and 'Yes, madam. Right away, madam,' and 'Thank you very much!'

Keiko regards the convenience store as her sanctuary, a place where she finds solace and security. Throughout the novel, her unwavering dedication to the store becomes her driving force, providing her with a sense of purpose and direction in life. As Keiko expresses in the narrative, "When morning comes, once again I'm a convenience store worker, a cog in society. This is the only way I can be a normal person" (21). This elucidates that for Keiko, the societal norms and the structured environment of the convenience store are analogous, as she adheres to the perceived set of rules in both settings. Yet Keiko forms a strong bond with the convenience store, to the extent that working there has become an integral part of her existence. She finds comfort in the fact that she is not obligated to deviate from the prescribed norms, feeling reassured that her presence within the convenience store conforms to societal expectations, given that all store workers equally mimic their designated roles. This sense of comfort leads her to develop an intense fixation with the environment, as depicted in the narrative:

Sometimes I even end myself operating the checkout till in my dreams. I wake up with a start, thinking: Oh! This new line of crisps is missing a price tag, or, We've sold a lot of hot tea, so I'd better restock the display cabinet. I've also been woken up in the middle of the night by the sound of my own voice calling out: "Irasshaimasé!" When I can't sleep, I think about the transparent glass box that is still stirring with life even in the darkness of night. That pristine aquarium is still operating like clockwork. As I visualize the scene, the sounds of the store reverberate in my eardrums and lull me to sleep. (Murata 18)

This illustrates that her body begins to react to the sounds of the convenience store, providing her with a sense of comfort. Keiko finds that the real meaning of her life is to work in the convenience store as the novel ends, as she says, “I caught sight of myself reflected in the window of the convenience store I’d just come out of. My hands, my feet—they existed only for the store! For the first time, I could think of the me in the window as a being with meaning” (108). Keiko comes to the profound realisation that the true purpose of her existence lies in working at the convenience store. By opting to work in the store, Keiko disrupts the stimuli associated with the job and the norms that have constrained her for years, proposing it as her sanctuary.

Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman* provides a nuanced examination of gendered perspectives and performativity through Keiko Furukura’s character. Keiko’s cognitive responses and societal challenges underscore the tension between personal authenticity and societal expectations. Her story reveals how gender roles and societal norms impact individual identity and the ways in which one might navigate and negotiate these pressures. The novel reflects on the performative nature of societal roles and the complexities of maintaining personal agency within restrictive frameworks.

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