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THE SOCIETAL OBSESSION OF NORMALCY: AN EXHILARATING STUDY OF SAYAKA  
MURATA'S *CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

The human society is a composite whole of the individuals with different personality. Each community has its own set of rules, ideologies and presumptions, according to which the individuals of that particular society forms their own ways of thinking and acting. If one's thinking and acting is deemed logical as per the social norms, he is termed as a normal person. But, if an individual has a different way of thinking or acting, people of the society finds it hard to understand or accept that individual. The whole society is so obsessed with the thought of normalcy, that it wants to cure the individuals, who reacts to the situations in their own different ways rather than following the social norms. Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* is a quirky, intoxicating, exhilarating and hilarious novel. Through the comical narration, Murata conveys the predominant message- Thrust thyself and fight for your own happiness. A happy and a healthy society is formed by its happy and healthy individuals. *Convenience Store Woman* is a capturing story of a female protagonist, who has a different way of reacting to situations with removed logic rather than by following social norms or by feeling human empathy. *Convenience Store Woman* has a feministic perspective, where the leading protagonist at last stops compromising her happiness in order to fit in the society. She finally realizes her happiness and lives the life on her terms and conditions. The indifference of the so-called normal people against the differently abled person is narrated in an exhilarating yet heartfelt way, which strikes its reader with its powerful message.

**Keywords:** Quirky, Convenience Store, Exhilarating, Feminism, Empathy, Intuition, Psychiatrist.

Sayaka Murata is a contemporary Japanese writer. She is born in 1979 in Japan. Her first novel, *Jyunyū (Breastfeeding)* won the 2003 'Gunzo Prize for New Writers.' Her tenth novel, *Konbini ningen (Convenience Store Woman)* was first published in 2016 in Japan and later in 2018 Ginny Tapley Takemori translated it into the English language. *Convenience Store Woman* is Murata's first ever book to get translated into English. Murata spent eighteen years working part-time in the convenience stores. Hence, this book is born out of her experiences. It won the prestigious 'Akutagawa Prize' and she was named one of Vogue Japan's Women of the Year. *Convenience Store Woman* has sold more than a million copies in Japan alone and is being translated into twenty-three languages worldwide. It is said that the literature is the mirror of the

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society, and *Convenience Store Woman* is a novel that is hilarious yet hopeless, heavily loaded with sharp criticism towards Japanese society. Murata's writings explore the different consequences of nonconformity in the society for men and women, particularly with regard to gender roles, parenthood, and sex.

In an interview "‘Normal’—What? : In Conversation with Sayaka Murata". Author of *Convenience Store Woman* in Toronto, Murata expressed about her surprise for *Convenience Store Woman* to be read worldwide. It has gathered high appreciations although she thought it was stylistically minimal and very Japanese. Murata expresses her views on Japanese society in the interview:

I feel that it's different. I truly think that Japan is very behind. . . .I visited England and heard that there is an overall understanding towards LGBTQ+ community, but people who don't have partners are severely criticized. In Japan, I don't think we are even at that phase. . . . I think the fact that these problems are coming into light and people are vocal about their anger towards issues is an improvement, thinking that these issues have been hidden and not spoken. However, the situation we have is terrible (Sugawara 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2019).

Murata was asked that there are many people in Japan who don't question the societal norms, and gender roles. To which she replied that she truly wish society to change. She says, "In Japan, movements like #MeToo is called out to be "fake feminism" and gets bashed on with misogynistic words, and the fundamental message is not being spread. ...and there are so many issues that I feel a strong indignation towards..." (Sugawara 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2019).

Through *Convenience Store Woman* Murata projects the shortcomings of the Japanese society by narrating the story of a thirty-six year old unmarried woman, Keiko Furukuru. She is a part-timer worker in a convenience store. A middle age unmarried woman working a part-time job seems strange to the society. Because it has its own untold laws firmly engraved in the minds of the people. Generally, women or men are expected to get married at the right age, which differs from the society to society. In *Convenience Store Woman*, the author mentions one exception to this so-called societal law and that is if a woman is highly qualified and earning a handsome salary, she is subjected to get some concession from the society. The people will make their own typical guesses about the unmarried highly paid woman, and the foremost among them are she might be busy in her career or she is unable to get her perfect match.

Hence, it is clear as to why the people consider Keiko as a foreign object. She is on the verge of crossing the marriageable age as per the societal rules. And she has to take quick action to avoid the disaster befalling her i.e. she should get married. Keiko has attended University, but she is still working as a part-timer in a convenience store for a low wages. She would have been treated less harshly if she would have atleast got a job, which pays her well. Keiko is neither married nor owns a well-paid job so she is criticized two times more by the society.

Keiko is a little different from what we call a normal individual as per the societal rules. From the very young age children develop their ways of acting in the society, which has conformity with the society. After certain age most of the acts carried out by any individual is based on his/her own intelligence, emotions or feelings. Keiko is different because her instinct of acting in the society is different, strange or the best word we can use here is quirky. The people think of Keiko as an abnormal.

Keiko grew up in a loving family in suburban Japan. Her father was a clerk and her mother was a home-maker and she had a younger sister Mami. Keiko recalls her childhood days. The first incident she remembers is when she was in a nursery. Her mother took her to the garden where they found a dead bird. All the children in the garden were upset and crying. Keiko on the other hand insisted that they take the dead bird home and cook dinner out of it. Her mother got shocked and tried to persuade her that it is a sad event that the bird died. All the children buried that dead bird. Keiko was confused as to why they were murdering the flowers to decorate the dead bird's grave it was out of her perception.

The second incident she remembers occurred in the primary school. A fight was broke out between two boys and some children were screaming and shouting for them to stop. Keiko followed her instinct and

thought to stop the boys by hitting one of them on his head with a spade. Keiko's teachers concluded that she comes from a violent family and her violent behavior is the result of the violence she had witnessed at her home. They tried to persuade Keiko to tell them that their conclusion about her family is true, but its exact opposite of it. Keiko came from a loving family.

The third incident she remembers is around the same time the second incident happened. Once at her school one of the teachers got hysterical in the middle of the class room and started shouting at the students. All the students got frightened and pleaded the teacher to stop. Keiko pulled her teacher's skirt down. The teacher immediately became quite and started crying. Later, Keiko mentioned that she had watched something like that on the television and everybody in the class were crying and pleading the teacher to calm down so she tried to help. Her mother was informed about it and she was disheartened. Keiko saw her mother getting upset although she did not know what she did was wrong but she understood her actions are upsetting her mother. Hence, she decided to stop acting according to her thinking or perception. She minimized her act of speech and only talked back in the times of necessity. She stopped following her instincts.

Keiko's parents were asked by her teachers to consult a psychiatrist. Her parents thought that she should get cured or else she would be unfit to survive in the world. A psychiatrist was consulted, but the tests proved her to be normal. Hence, it all came back to the conclusion that maybe she comes from a dysfunctional family. The psychiatrist advised her parents to show her more love and attention and she will be cured eventually.

After Keiko was done with the schooling, she moved to the city to study in the university. She came across the advertisement regarding the requirement of the part-time workers for the new convenience store called 'The Smile Mart' in 1998. She attended the interview, got selected and did extremely well in the training period of her job. She felt, "At that moment, for the first time ever, I felt I'd become a part in the machine of society. I've been reborn, I thought. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society" (Murata 19-20).

She experienced clarity of mind in the controlled environment of the convenience store which she lacked in the actual real world. Because this job came with the manual, which described how to act in all types of circumstance emerged in the convenience store. Her parents were extremely happy by her progress of getting a job. For them it meant her first step in becoming a part of the society and getting cured. But as time passed she was not showing any signs of getting out of her part-time job and getting a serious job. Due to her parent's insistence she tried to apply for new jobs in her 20s and attended interviews. She was rejected because she did not have any experience apart from working at the convenience store. Now at present i.e. in 2016, she has completed full eighteen years of her service in 'The Smile Mart.'

In the eighteen years a lot had changed in the convenience store except Keiko. 'The Smile Mart' is currently managed by the 8<sup>th</sup> Manager, all the workers of the store who joined along with Keiko have left. Keiko is working with Mrs. Izumi, who is a housewife and a year older than Keiko and Sugawara, who is a young singer and some other part-timers.

Keiko's mundane activities and her diet, exercise and habits were in accordance with the working demand of the convenience store. She consumes her breakfast, lunch, dinner and mineral water from 'The Smile Mart's' products. Hence, one can see that Keiko's world revolves around convenience store or her whole world is the convenience store. She says, "... When I think that my body is entirely made up of food from this store, I feel like I'm as much a part of the store as the magazine racks or the coffee machine" (Murata 22).

Keiko copies Manager #8's, Mrs. Izumi's and Ms. Sugawara's behavior, speaking style as well as the dressing style. She tells that she is made up of all these people. She says:

My speech is especially infected by everyone around me and is currently a mix of that of Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara. I think the same goes for most people.... And I probably infect others with the way I speak too. Infecting each other like this is how we maintain ourselves as human is what I think (Murata 25-26).

The entry of a new employee in 'The Smile Mart' causes a lot of distress in it. His name is Shiraha, he is thirty-five years old. His intention to do this job is to seek a potential wife. He is obnoxious, misogynist and lacked respect for the job. Eventually he gets fired because he was caught flirting with the customers. He had a very strong opinion that the modern society is identical to the Stone Age. All the talks of individuality, freedom and progressiveness about the modern world is an illusion. He says:

And so I realized. This society hasn't changed one bit. People who don't fit into the village are expelled: men who don't hunt, women who don't give birth to children. For all we talk about modern society and individualism, anyone who doesn't try to fit in can expect to be meddled with, coerced, and ultimately banished from the village (Murata 89-90).

The societal rules of right and wrong or its prejudices never changed because even though they are invisible they are deeply engrained in the minds of the people. The likes of him are always tortured by the society in the cruelest way possible. In his opinion the people poked their dirty nose in his private affair, just because he is not well-educated, lacks a decent job, homeless and is still single at the age of thirty-five.

Keiko in order to avoid the annoying questions about her job and marriage asked by the people had come up with certain excuses suggested by her sister Mami. Mami had told her to tell the people that she had chronic disease, which made her weak to pursue a normal full-time job. A part-time job will allow her some free time and she can also visit her old parents often to take care of them. If someone asks about her love life and marriage, she was instructed by Mami to say that she had been in love once, but she was a poor judge of men's character.

But, these excuses did not prove to be good enough. Keiko attended a barbeque party of her friend Miho. One of them pointed out that if she is weak then she should not be working in a convenience store at all, because it is difficult to stand throughout the day and shout for the customer's attention. They all suggested Keiko to get married as soon as possible and to upload her profile in the matrimonial websites. They also assumed that Keiko must have been miserable being single and leading a sexless life. But, contrary to their belief Keiko had never experienced such loneliness. She thinks, "I'd never experienced sex, and I'd never even had any particular awareness of my own sexuality. I was indifferent to the whole thing and had never really given it any thought. And here was everyone taking it for granted that I must be miserable when I wasn't" (Murata 37).

A thought crosses Keiko's mind that, "The normal world has no room for exceptions and always eliminates foreign objects. Anyone who is lacking is disposed of" (Murata 80). She began to think that getting married is good idea if she wanted to be considered as normal and keep working in the convenience store.

Keiko comes across Shiraha and gets to know that he is currently homeless. He starts rambling about how the modern society resembles the Stone Age. Keiko offers him a place to stay in her home. She also suggests him the marriage of convenience. She reasons with him that if he thinks that getting married can solve all his problems and stop the people from interfering in his life, then the marriage is the perfect solution. After much initial resistance and making the demonstration that this marriage of convenience will help Keiko more that it will help him, he agrees to it. He has his own conditions to get married. He wants Keiko to hide him from the world. She will not speak about their relationship in front of 'The Smile Mart' workers and she will feed him regularly. Shiraha starts staying in Keiko's house, to be precise in her bathroom. She feeds him regularly with the food she bought from the convenience store. She felt that she is rearing a dog and had to feed him on time to avoid him getting irritated.

Keiko tells her sister that she has a man in her home. Mami jumps to the conclusion that her sister is getting cured. She gets extremely excited and wants to know everything about Keiko's relationship with Shiraha. The same excitement was seen when Keiko mentioned Shiraha in front of her friends. They did not even let Keiko disclose the true nature of her relationship with Shiraha. Mami visited Keiko one fine day and Keiko told her the truth that having Shiraha for her is like having a dog. Mami gets hysterical and starts crying. She says:

Ever since you stated working at the convenience store, you've gotten weirder and weirder. The way you talk, the way you yell out at home as if you were still in the store, and even your facial expressions are weird. I'm begging you. Please try to be normal (Murata 131).

As soon as Keiko's co-workers know about Shiraha's stay in Keiko's apartment, they became the gossip mongers. Keiko was extremely awed by their careless behavior as the convenience store workers. Their negligence irked her. They all turned into social animals that would not treat her professionally. Now only the customers viewed her as an efficient worker.

Meanwhile, Shiraha was visited by his sister-in-law. She comes to Keiko's house and gets acquainted with their relationship. She lectures them about their current tough financial situations. Shiraha convinces Keiko to resign from her job in the convenience store and find the well paid full-time job. According to him if Keiko gets a good job and earns well, the people will blame him less and leave him alone. Keiko thinks about her sister's reaction when she knew about the truth of her relation with Shiraha. She also thinks about the change in attitude of the convenience store workers, which made it hard for her to work in the convenience store. She decides that if leaving her job in the convenience store will make her seem normal and she can have acceptance of the society, then she will do it. She resigns from her job. Keiko after quitting her job from the convenience store becomes a body without the life-spirit in it. She loses the purpose of her life:

I no longer knew what standard to live by. Until now, my body had belonged to the convenience store, even when I wasn't working. Sleeping, keeping in a good physical shape, and eating nutritiously were all part of my job. I had to stay healthy for work (Murata 148-49).

Shiraha finds a job for Keiko. They both leave to attend an interview to this new job. On the way Shiraha walks into a departmental store to take a leak. Keiko follows him in that store. It was a rush hour and the working hands were very few. The commodities were not arranged properly and Keiko starts hearing the store's voice telling her what to do. Keiko begins arranging all the commodities in a neat row in a self. And she also take liberty in instructing the trainee store workers what else to be done in the store, "I couldn't stop hearing the store telling me the way it wanted to be, what it needed. It was all flowing into me. It wasn't me speaking. It was the store. I was just channeling its revelations from on high" (Murata 160).

She refuses to go to the interview. Shiraha calls her grotesque and walks out of her life. Keiko feels that she is a convenience store woman and she will follow her instincts as a convenience store animal and work for the convenience store. She says, "More than a person, I'm a convenience store worker. Even if that means I'm abnormal and can't make a living and drop down dead, I can't escape that fact. My very cells exist for the convenience store" (Murata 161).

Keiko had finally found her life purpose and she acknowledges the fact that she is born to be a convenience store worker, this job gives her fulfillment and the purpose of her life. However low-paid or less important this job might seem to the whole society, if it gives her happiness, satisfaction and purpose in life she will do it. She will think about her happiness before the world's prejudice. She concludes, "The voice of the convenient store won't stop flowing to me. I was born to hear this voice" (Murata 161). We can see the feminist rallying cry in the conclusion in *Convenience Store Women*. Her sense of fulfillment can be seen when she says:

I love this moment. It feels like "morning" itself is being loaded into me. The tinkle of the door chime as a customer comes in sounds like church bells to my ears. When I open the door, the brightly lit box awaits me- a dependable, normal world that keeps turning. I have faith in the world inside the light-filled box (Murata 30).

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