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The triumph of the deviant: Social templates, mental reservation, and the ethics of coexistence in Sayaka Murata's convenience store woman

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Abstract: This article explores how the protagonist of Sayaka Murata's Convenience Store Woman, Keiko Furukura, embodies a marginalized identity that critiques the normative social templates imposed by Japanese society. Adopting a qualitative literary analysis approach, the study applies the metaphor of the "mental reservation"—a symbolic space of psychological resistance theorized in relation to Sherman Alexie's Ten Little Indians—to examine how Keiko creates internal distance from societal conformity. Situated in contemporary Tokyo, Keiko's mechanized labor and rejection of romantic and career norms manifest an alternative "ethics of belonging" based on mutual recognition and emotional detachment. The article argues that the novel's postmodern narrative does not seek resolution through normalization but instead imagines an ethical community grounded in deviance, silence, and emotional otherness. These findings reveal how the narrative offers a blueprint for resisting dominant cultural scripts while preserving individual subjectivity. Ultimately, this study concludes that Convenience Store Woman reimagines the ethical architecture of community by celebrating the triumph of the deviant. The implications extend beyond literary criticism, offering new perspectives on cultural resistance, identity reconstruction, and ethical coexistence in contemporary Japanese society.

Keywords: *Convenience store woman, Ethics of belonging, Humanities education, Marginalized identity, Mental reservation, Social conformity.*

1. Introduction

Among contemporary Japanese female writers, Murata [1] stands out as one of the most distinctive voices. Her works consistently interrogate the normative scripts surrounding gender, labor, and social belonging in postmodern urban society. As a writer who worked part-time in a convenience store for several years, Murata transforms her lived experiences into literary material that incisively reveals the subtle yet coercive mechanisms of social expectations. Her novel *Convenience Store Woman* [1] which won the Akutagawa Prize, employs a minimalist and emotionally detached narrative style to depict the "invisible violence" embedded in the societal demand for a "normal life.

This article is based on the original Japanese version of *Convenience Store Woman*, published by Murata [1] and references the 2018 English translation by Ginny Tapley Takemori. The protagonist, Keiko Furukura, is neither mentally ill nor a social deviant. Rather, she is a woman who consciously refuses to follow the so-called normal trajectory of life. She experiences no desire for marriage, sexual relationships, or career advancement, instead finding a sense of order and safety within the highly structured environment of a convenience store.

Although *Convenience Store Woman* may initially appear to be a satirical critique of social homogenization, a deeper reading reveals that the novel raises profound philosophical questions about what it means to be human. This article employs the concept of the "mental reservation." Proposed in Sherman Alexie's post-9/11 short story collection *Ten Little Indians*, it is a metaphor for a psychological defense space that is created by minorities under systemic oppression. In this article, this concept is reframed as a critique of Japan's dominant "social templates." It is argued that Keiko's predicament is

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not merely one of loneliness or unemployment; rather, it reflects an internalized oppression stemming from the disciplinary structures of modern society. Similar to how Alexie's Native American characters are shaped by the legacy of colonial history and racial structure, Murata [1] is shaped by the invisible forces of gender roles, intimacy norms, and semifictional expectations in contemporary Tokyo.

As Connette [2] notes, Alexie [3] recenters Native American identity by shifting it away from geographic ethnicity and toward psychological and cultural consciousness—a critical lens that also applies to Keiko's self-fashioned space of resistance. Precisely because she refuses to participate in socially sanctioned forms of intimacy and productivity, Keiko is perceived as "abnormal." She encounters familial anxiety, societal scrutiny, and workplace suspicion [4]. This reaction exemplifies what Foucault [5] describes as the "disciplinary society," where power is enforced not through direct violence but through norms that shape individual behavior.

Keiko eventually internalizes the logic of the convenience store system and begins to merge with it in terms of language, gestures, and emotional responses. This form of "mimesis" is not portrayed as pathological but as a reverse survival strategy—a mode of self-preservation in a society that is intolerant of difference. In this sense, the convenience store becomes a symbolic "mental reservation": it disciplines Keiko while simultaneously shielding her. Through its programmed language and standardized routines, the store offers a predictable order that protects Keiko from the uncontrollable emotional burdens and moral judgments inherent in interpersonal relationships.

This article also explores how Murata constructs Keiko not as a victim but as an agent of alternative human existence. Her presence challenges contemporary assumptions about marriage, desire, and success, in addition to proposing a model of ethical belonging grounded in silence, difference, and deviance. Ultimately, *Convenience Store Woman* articulates a cosmopolitan vision of ordinary life—one that is defined by emotional autonomy and the principle of noninterference, as opposed to biological roles or economic achievements. This vision echoes Alexie's literary turn toward constructing a human community that is not based on ethnicity or national identity but on the ethical imperative to "recognize difference." This is the deeper meaning underlying what *Convenience Store Woman* portrays as "the triumph of the deviant."

2. "I Live within a Social Template": The Mental Imprisonment of Normative Structure

In *Convenience Store Woman*, the protagonist Keiko does not inhabit a tangible physical space; rather, she occupies a pervasive and invisible structure best described as a "social template"—an all-encompassing network of expectations that defines how one must live in order to be recognized as a "complete person." If the Native American characters in Alexie's works bear the psychological scars of colonial trauma and racial oppression, expressed through the metaphor of the "mental reservation," Keiko's template is composed of long-standing gender norms, behavioral scripts, and social role expectations that are deeply embedded in Japanese society [4]

From an early age, Keiko is labeled as "abnormal" due to her lack of emotional expressiveness and her rejection of conventional behavior. She does not respond to conflict with expected emotions such as sadness or anger, instead favoring practical actions, such as burying a dead bird in public or stopping a fight using a shovel. Although these acts are rational, they provoke moral panic in others. As Butler [6] (P. 52) asserts, the recognition of a person's humanity is contingent on their repeated performance of culturally sanctioned norms. Because Keiko cannot reproduce these social gestures, she becomes unintelligible within dominant discourses.

Peterson [7] notes that contemporary society tends to suppress the cultural trauma of marginalized groups through structural forgetting. Keiko's silence can thus be read as a quiet resistance to such erasure. Rather than being punished overtly, Keiko is subjected to a more gentle and persistent form of normalization. Her family encourages her to become "normal," where "normal" is equated with full-time employment, heterosexual marriage, childbearing, and the display of appropriate emotional desire. Her friends ask her when she will marry, and her sister even writes a script to teach her how to speak and

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respond in social situations. These well-intentioned interventions are premised on the belief that adult life follows a universal standard—deviation from which leads to exclusion from the moral economy [8].

Foucault [5] (P. 85–177) theory of disciplinary power offers a compelling framework. In *Discipline and Punish*, he describes how modern societies no longer rely on sovereign violence to control deviance; instead, they embed surveillance, judgment, and correction into the minutiae of daily life. Keiko internalizes this power through self-monitoring and "performs normalcy" not out of desire but through imitation. She learns to smile, respond "appropriately," and avoid triggering others' suspicions. On the surface, she appears integrated; emotionally, she remains fundamentally detached.

In this sense, the convenience store is more than her workplace—it becomes her sanctuary. It is a space where roles are clearly defined, speech is scripted, and actions are procedurally prescribed. Thus, in the store, Keiko need not create a self, only execute the manual. The store functions as a micro-disciplinary apparatus, and within it, Keiko finds clarity and order. As Kumar [9] argues in the context of post-9/11 Islamophobia, institutionalized fear enables subtle forms of social control. Similarly, the micro-disciplinary logic within Japanese convenience store culture marginalizes nonstandard behaviors while maintaining the appearance of neutrality. This institutionalized order renders emotional and behavioral deviations hyper-visible and easily corrected.

As Agamben [10] (P.126) contends, such spaces are not "outside" the disciplinary system; rather, they are zones where life is reduced to pure function. In these spaces, individuals may lose sovereign identity, but they also escape the moral burdens of normative evaluation. Within this tightly controlled environment, Keiko experiences what might be called a "simulated sense of wholeness"—a form of personality stability untroubled by social noise and existential uncertainty.

Keiko's mental imprisonment differs from the racial trauma portrayed in Alexie's work, in that it is constructed not through overt violence but through a kind of benevolent coercion. She is passively marginalized through others' concern, disappointment, and polite unease, as opposed to being legally excluded. Nevertheless, the result is similar: the individual internalizes a sense of "unworthiness," believing that social acceptance is unattainable unless their true self is hidden. Although this "social template" is not drawn on any map or decreed by colonial administrators, it exists in the gazes of colleagues, the tones of family members, and the expectations of an imaginary lover. Although Keiko outwardly conforms to these norms, she silently resists them. Her mimicry appears to be a compromise, but in actuality, it constitutes a subversive dismantling of systemic logic [11].

This internalization culminates in a moment of critical self-awareness, when Keiko explicitly identifies the logic of exclusion operating in contemporary society: "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" [12] (p. 94). Here, Murata invokes the metaphor of a "village" to critique the coercive normalcy that marginalizes nonconforming individuals and pathologizes divergence. Just as Alexie's characters internalize the idea of the "mental reservation," Keiko's experience exposes a parallel "social template" that enforces gender roles through communal surveillance and exclusion.

From a macro-structural perspective, this silent exclusion of individual differences constitutes a central component of contemporary gender disciplining in Japanese society. As numerous sociological studies have noted, Japan continues to maintain a highly standardized framework for gender role distribution. Although women's educational attainment and labor force participation have been increasing, the traditional ideal of the "good wife and wise mother" remains deeply entrenched, placing significant strain on women as they navigate roles within both family and workplace contexts [13]. Within this framework, women who choose lifestyles that deviate from marriage, childbirth, and normative forms of sexuality and romantic relationships are often categorized not as agents of free choice but as "unclassifiable beings" within the social order.

In this sociocultural backdrop, Keiko embodies a mode of resistance. She refuses to participate in the normative scripts of romance and marriage, in addition to rejecting the meaning imposed by traditional

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gender roles. Instead, she constructs a degendered space of existence through the mechanized labor routines of the convenience store. This decentered mode of living is not a form of self-abandonment; rather, it serves as an ethical counternarrative to the gendered order of modern Japan [14]. Keiko's otherness should not be pathologized, as it is a profound critique and denial of the social logic embedded in mainstream gender trajectories.

Thus, *Convenience Store Woman* exposes a disciplinary paradox: to be socially legible often comes at the cost of ontological alienation. Keiko is not pathologized as mentally ill but is presented as someone who continually bears existential tension. In line with Alexie's notion of the "mental reservation," the "social template" functions as an identity cage by confining her to an "almost-human" status: outwardly a member of society, yet never fully recognized. Through this metaphor, Murata critiques the ideological violence embedded in notions of "social normality" and lays the theoretical groundwork for reimagining the ethical foundations of belonging.

3. "Restricted Range of Action?": Emotional Discipline and the Politics of the Body

In *Convenience Store Woman*, Keiko's bodily comportment and emotional expression are not personal traits but outcomes of social discipline. Her inability—or refusal—to exhibit socially sanctioned emotions, such as romantic desire, maternal instinct, or sexual interest, leads to her continual pathologization by others. She is labeled "strange," "cold," and even "unnatural." These accusations reflect an implicit societal script: to be a "complete person," one must be emotionally legible, physically productive, and aligned with normative values. This labeling mirrors what Herlina and Al Hafizh [15] describe as stereotypical female roles, such as the mother, the dependent, and the sexual object, that are commonly imposed on women who deviate from expected gender norms in Japanese literature. Keiko's rejection of these roles, as well as her retreat into the structured world of the convenience store, thus constitutes a form of resistance to normative gender scripts. This aligns with Orajiuka and Onyeachulam [16] argument that *Convenience Store Woman* deconstructs the "good wife, wise mother" ideal and positions Keiko's occupational withdrawal as a challenge to traditional gender expectations.

Berlant [17] conceptualizes this structure as the "intimate public," which refers to an affective collective in which individuals must perform certain emotional behaviors in order to be included within the moral community [17] (p. 5). Keiko's refusal to participate in this emotional economy not only isolates her socially but also casts her as ontologically deviant.

Keiko often experiences a sense of being "watched" by convenience store customers and society at large. This visual surveillance constitutes a form of everyday disciplinary violence, in which her body is judged and positioned under others' gazes. As Mitchell [18] (P. 24) points out, "race" and "identity" are not merely constructed in discourse; they also become social realities through visual regimes of recognition.

Similar to Ladino [19] critical analysis of the constrained mobility of Native urban migrants, the convenience store becomes a psychological reservation for Keiko—an affective buffer against the labeling imposed by society. Her emotional distance is reflected in her noncompliance with norms regarding the body and sexuality. She does not experience sexual desire and finds physical intimacy aversive. This deviation from "normative sexuality" unsettles those around her, who interpret it as a symptom of trauma or pathology. Butler [6] argues that bodies that cannot be symbolized within the heterosexual matrix are often deemed abject, unrecognizable, or even unlivable. Keiko's body is not dysfunctional in itself; it becomes an object of correction only because it refuses to obey ideological mandates [20].

Moreover, Keiko's disengagement from gender roles manifests not only as emotional detachment but also as a deliberate avoidance of normative bodily expression. The convenience store becomes a degendered zone of existence, constructed through procedural labor. Keiko rejects the affective expressions and desire structures associated with traditional female identity, instead crafting a mode of selfhood that is detached from socially expected gender performance [18]. This enactment is not

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pathological; rather, it signals a conscious resistance to dominant frameworks of gender performativity, embodying a politics of survival.

Jaseel [21] approaching the novel from a labor sociology perspective, argues that convenience stores—sites of "enforced normalization"—enable marginalized individuals, particularly unmarried or asexual women, to deploy stable routines and clearly defined roles as strategies of cultural resistance that transcend standard performance expectations [21].

This disciplinary pressure culminates when Keiko begins cohabiting with Shiraha. Although he is also a marginalized figure, Shiraha clings to traditional narratives of gender, function, and marriage. He does not truly care for Keiko but uses her as a tool to restore his social respectability. Keiko, in turn, uses Shiraha as a "human shield" to deflect questions about her singlehood. Thus, their cohabitation is a double performance of the "normal person script." However, Keiko soon starts to find the performance physically and mentally exhausting. Consequently, she develops insomnia, forgets store procedures, and loses touch with the routine that once anchored her survival.

Keiko's experience is not mere loneliness; rather, it exemplifies what Berlant [22] (P. 95) terms "slow death"—a condition in which one's subjectivity is gradually depleted by the ongoing demands of societal recognition. Society expects her to become a legible subject—married, reproductive, and emotionally expressive—yet offers no real care. In this way, Keiko's "range of action" is limited not only physically but also spiritually. She is not legally restrained, but she is entrapped by sedimented social expectations of "what it means to be human." As Butler [6] (P. 216) writes, such "normative violence" is a symbolic form of oppression, disciplining the body without direct force.

Ultimately, Keiko rejects both Shiraha and the social script he represents, which marks her reclamation of emotional and bodily autonomy. She returns to the convenience store not merely to work there but also to re-engage the rhythmic logic that affirms her existence. This return is not a regression but a renewed commitment to survival beyond the terms of the Other [23]. Similar to how Alexie's Native American characters refuse to perform "authentic Indianness," Keiko's rejection of normative heterosexual womanhood becomes a subtle yet profound act of political existence. Her minor acts—remaining a part-time worker, refusing marriage, and embracing routinized life—form a political language of resistance [20].

Through this lens, Murata challenges the modern narrative that equates productivity with success and intimacy with fulfillment. Although Keiko's body may appear "limited" to the outside world, within the microcosm of the convenience store, she attains full self-governance. The store becomes her counterpublic—a space where her difference is not erased but ritualized in everyday practice. In this manner, *Convenience Store Woman* proposes a new model of belonging—one that is based not on emotional transparency or gender conformity but on the dignity of one's own lived logic [24].

9

4. "Do You Know How Many People Work in Convenience Stores?": Ethical Construction of the Stranger Community

Although *Convenience Store Woman* centers on the protagonist's experience of alienation, it also touches on the possibility of an alternative form of social relation—one grounded in function, repetition, and mutual recognition rather than kinship, romantic attachment, or shared belief. The convenience store, with its sterile lighting and algorithmic routines, may seem like an unlikely site for the formation of "community." However, for Keiko, it is precisely this hyper-artificial environment that enables a reconfiguration of belonging. What she gains there is not warmth or intimacy in the traditional sense but something more fundamental—stability, rhythm, and the affirmation that comes from shared participation in a common task. In this space, coworkers, customers, and even the stocked merchandise become integral parts of the micro-relational network she inhabits [24].

This "micro-community" embodies what Bauman [25] (P. 4) terms "liquid modernity"—an era in which traditional bonds dissolve and individuals must continually reassemble new forms of relation. Keiko's community is not built on emotional investment or historical continuity but on the shared

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practices of routine procedures, such as stocking shelves, greeting customers, and rotating hot food. These repeated actions form a kind of ritualized "co-presence." Thus, the convenience store becomes a symbolic refuge for Keiko—a site where performative identity is suspended and procedural equality is enacted. She recalls, "Once we donned our uniforms, we were all equals regardless of gender, age, or nationality—all simply store workers" [1] (p. 123). This sentiment echoes Alexie's imagined community of strangers, where ethical relations are grounded not in emotion or kinship but in shared function and mutual recognition. Murata thus constructs a microcosmic space where Keiko's deviance is stabilized through ritualized participation instead of being suppressed.

The convenience store offers a depersonalized yet ethical mode of coexistence, which contrasts with the moralism and hypocrisy of the outside world. Unlike the broader society, the store does not demand that Keiko become a "woman," a "wife," or a "daughter"; it simply requires her to be a "store clerk." Ironically, this role grants her a more dignified form of participation than the identities imposed by social expectations.

In this ritualized environment, Keiko encounters not family or friends but "strangers" whose relationships with her are mediated through procedural interaction. These performances are not insincere; rather, they are stable and affirming. Behind this form of nonintimate coexistence lies a largely overlooked "social aesthetic mechanism." As Berlant articulates in his theory of social aesthetics, space is not merely a physical container but also a structure of perception: individuals establish ethical relations through repetitive actions, acoustic environments, and interactive rhythms. In the convenience store, which is an environment that appears to be functional, impersonal, and procedural, there emerges a sense of "ritualistic participation." In this space, one does not need to declare one's identity or establish deep interpersonal bonds; instead, a minimal form of ethical belonging is achieved through coordinated labor and structured order.

This participatory mechanism embedded in sensory space resonates with the characteristics of transient communities described by Bauman [25] in his conception of liquid modernity. Despite lacking any imperative for emotional intimacy, the convenience store sustains an ethics of interaction grounded in coexistence rather than closeness, upheld by repetition and structural stability. Such a "community of strangers" not only safeguards Keiko's difference but also enables her to affirm the legitimacy of her existence through tacit agreements based on nonintervention and nonjudgment.

Agamben [10] (P.126) concept of "bare life," referring to a form of life stripped of political and moral recognition, takes on a new meaning in this context. In the convenience store, Keiko is not cast out but released from the burdens of societal roles. Her life, though "minimal," is nonetheless livable. The store thus becomes a "zone of indistinction," where social roles are temporarily suspended and individual value is no longer assessed on the basis of conformity to dominant norms.

Through Keiko's characterization, Murata challenges the conventional logic of community that is based on "family," "emotion," and "reproduction." She presents an alternative model of stranger-based community that is founded on the shared maintenance of a nonviolent order rather than on similarity. This echoes Butler [6] (P. 134) view that ethical relations do not require "recognition" but an openness to "otherness"—that is, the acceptance of opacity, unknowability, and difference. In the convenience store, Keiko is not asked to change herself or display consistent emotions; her "difference" is accepted precisely because the system never demands disclosure or coherence.

Furthermore, this stranger-based community implicitly critiques mainstream standards of "success." When Keiko's family and friends urge her to leave the store, they advocate for career advancement, romantic relationships, and social recognition. However, they overlook the ethical stability that Keiko has already found in the store. Although the convenience store is artificial, it offers a structure of care—predictable, orderly, and nonjudgmental. In a world that equates ethical life with passion and authenticity, Murata proposes a gentler response, namely that ethics may dwell in habit, repetition, and even daily monotony. Keiko's community is not forged through dramatic sacrifice or love but through the quiet, enduring practice of coexistence [26].

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In this sense, *Convenience Store Woman* presents a profoundly modest vision of human sociality. Rather than celebrating resistance or heroism, it honors those who persist in their own rhythms within oppressive systems. Keiko does not transform society; she outlives it. In Keiko's continued survival, Murata offers a new communal paradigm—one based on coexistence rather than persuasion and on repetition rather than revelation, ultimately framing "being present" rather than "performing" as the ethical foundation of life.

5. Conclusion

In *Convenience Store Woman*, Sayaka Murata issues a profound challenge to the myths of social normalcy, emotional legibility, and constructed human value. Through the character of Keiko Furukura, Murata deconstructs the dominant logic that equates normativity with morality, revealing how the imperative to "become normal" often constitutes a silent form of violence. Keiko's life is not tragic, nor does it conform to a traditional redemptive narrative. In contrast, her existence carries deep ethical significance precisely because she refuses to conform. Her difference is not a defect to be "cured"; rather, it is a reality that must be recognized. In this way, Murata's literary practice resonates with Sherman Alexie's notion of "the triumph of the ordinary"—a literary affirmation of lives that fall outside idealized identities and narratives of success.

The "social template" proposed by Murata finds a transnational echo in Alexie's metaphor of the "mental reservation." Both refer to internalized systems of belief and social expectation that coerce marginalized individuals into fixed roles. However, while Alexie's Native American characters bear the historical burden of colonialism and racial identity, Keiko is subjected to the invisible pressures of gender functionality and heteronormative temporality. Her victory lies not in escaping the system but in redefining her position within it; furthermore, this entails returning to a space that acknowledges and affirms her self-defined identity, as opposed to any kind of upward mobility [26].

The convenience store thus becomes a site for practicing ethical life and reflecting on dominant models of belonging. It is a space where intimacy, emotional expression, and self-disclosure are no longer central and where coexistence is built through repetition, rhythm, and responsibility. The store functions as a ritualized public sphere where strangers coexist through silence, structure, and mutual respect. This imagined community neither romanticizes inclusion nor demands self-transformation; it asks only that each person be allowed to exist.

Ultimately, *Convenience Store Woman* redefines what constitutes a meaningful life. Instead of measuring human worth through social productivity, emotional conformity, or reproductive futurism, Murata roots dignity in persistence and participation. Keiko's continued existence—her stubborn insistence on living life in her own way—embodies an ethics of coexistence: living for the sake of difference in a world that struggles to accommodate it. Through this character, Murata invites us to reimagine the possibilities of community—not as a utopia of sameness but as a fragile yet resilient shelter for the "deviant," where difference is embraced rather than feared.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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