# "Forcibly Normalized Environments": Precarious Japanese Female Worker in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*

Jaseel P
IIT Roorkee
(India)

**Abstract:**

This paper contends that Sayaka Murata's novel *Convenience Store Women* offers a perceptive and critical examination of the impact of the economic recession of the 1990s on the social character of labour and everyday life in contemporary society. Through the lens of the novel's protagonist, Keiko, a freeter who has spent eighteen years in a part-time job at a *konbini*, the novel illustrates the precarious living conditions and lack of job security experienced by young, unmarried individuals in post-recession Japan. Murata employs a deft use of an alien metaphor and dark humour to illustrate the dehumanizing effects of Keiko's machinic enslavement to the demands of recognizability under capitalism. Through her persistent attempts at mimetic conformity in search of a sense of belonging, the author exposes the dismal disillusionment of precarity in late capitalist society. The novel also draws attention to the toxic and affective attachments to gender-oppressive norms that exacerbate the exploitative effects and uneven distribution of precarity. Murata contrasts Keiko's experience with that of an unemployed male character, illuminating the ways in which misogyny and patriarchal ideals contribute to the normalization and disregard of female precarity. The novel offers a surrealistic affectsphere for its readers to foreground the oppressive nature of capitalist patriarchy and the prevalent, problematic yearning for the restoration of traditional family-corporate systems in Japan. The textuality of her workspace highlights the intersectionality of precarity and gender, as women are doubly marginalized due to the expectation of being housewives and child bearers, combined with a significant wage gap. The novel's portrayal of Keiko's alienation and disillusionment, in the context of neoliberal precarity, serves as a metaphor for the larger human experience under the yoke of late capitalism, where individuals are reduced to mere cogs

in the machine of a profit-driven system. Using contemporary research on precarity and vulnerability, this study examines the narrative strategies used by Murata to foreground Keiko's failure to understand her cruelly optimistic attachments that deny relationality and interdependence, which ultimately trap her in oppressive gender norms and the negative consequences of neoliberal precarity.

**Keywords:** Vulnerability, Neoliberal Precarity, Relationality, Entrepreneurial Subjectivity, Invulnerability.

## The Curious Case of Keiko Furukura

Keiko is a "freeter," or a young adult who works part-time at a convenience store (Reiko, 2006), and is immediately established as an outsider struggling to understand and conform to the unwritten rules of her society. As an employee of a convenience store, Keiko exemplifies the average precarious worker in Japan, who is commonly found in the everyday workforce. According to Whitelaw (2018), the convenience store, or *konbini*, plays a significant role in the daily lives of Japanese citizens and is a prevalent aspect of contemporary Japanese society. Keiko's odd and eccentric character is a reflection of her inability to fit into the mould of "a normal cog in society" (p. 17). Her employment at the store serves as a means of reinvention of her identity, where she sacrifices all aspects of her personal life for the sake of efficiency and conformity. One of the key elements of the novel is the subtle alien machine metaphor associated with Keiko. The novel introduces her as unmarried, unambitious, and asexual, who prefers a machine-like existence, as a mere component in the societal engine. The original Japanese title of the novel, *Konbini Ningen*, translates to "Convenience Store Human" rather than "Convenience Store Woman" as found in the English translation (Saladin, 2022). This distinction is significant as it highlights the publisher's decision to market the novel to a specific audience, rather than accurately conveying the themes of the novel. The original title better describes Keiko's precarious

position, as she sacrifices any semblance of a unique personality to become a genderless, feelingless being, solely existing for the purpose of work.

The post-war capitalist phase in Japan is characterized by the corporatization of its social economy. Despite the country's failures in militarism during World War II, Japan experienced a period of high-paced economic growth. Over the decades, the country perfected both Fordist and Post-Fordist methods of production, and by the 1970s (Kenney & Florida, 1989), it had gained global acclaim as a leading world economic power. The state organized its enterprise society around the three pillars of family, corporation, and school (Itoh, 1992). The ideal family was a heteronormative nuclear family, with traditional gender roles defined as the man providing for the family through a lifelong job and commitment to the company, while the woman focused on raising children and running the home, and the child's role was to study hard. The division of labour was gendered, with values of duty, loyalty and lifelong commitment at the core. There was a famous slogan from that period which states, "one did not work for Toyota, one belonged to Toyota." A company man is expected to devote extra-long hours to work without any extra pay, even spending weekends and vacations with fellow workers of the company. Consequently, the father was often an absent figure in the family space, due to the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life. The 1990s economic bubble burst led to a shift in corporate hiring practices, with a greater emphasis on temporary and part-time recruitments, effectively diminishing the notion of long-term employment opportunities. Eventually, this lack of stability in the workspace also resulted in issues of social connectedness, falling infertility rates, an ageing population, and an everyday life skewed with “de-sociality” and loneliness (Allison, 2013, p. 85). The protagonist of Murata’s novel grew up during this time, and it provides an opportunity to study the affective impact on interpersonal relationships owing to the prevalent feelings of insecurity and anxiety resulting from the shift towards a neoliberal capitalist society.

The narrative told from the point of view of Keiko, a person characterized by astuteness and emotional detachment, demonstrates how capitalism can erode an individual's capability to exercise autonomy and self-determination in their life choices. This vulnerability is not just confined to the professional realm but also permeates into the personal sphere as capitalism continues to encroach upon the private aspects of one's life. Keiko attempts to become a cog in Japan’s *muen shakai* or “relationless society” by a decision

that she would no longer do anything of her own accord (Allison, 2015, p. 37). Instead, she "would either mimic what everyone else was doing, or simply follow instruction" (p. 10). This was the only way she could cope with the societal pressure to be normal and to have a sense of belongingness. So, she was constantly on her toes – in a perpetually precarious position trying her best to fit in – even if that means sacrificing absolutely everything unique about her. As a teenager, Keiko found solace in imitating others in order to fit in and be accepted by her peers. This strategy of imitation becomes her gospel for survival when she finds a part-time job at a convenience store at the age of eighteen. The store, as described by Keiko, is a "forcibly normalized environment" where homogeneity and sameness are valued above all else (p. 60). The store serves as an extended metaphor for the capitalist world, where there is a clear hierarchy, a set of rules and regulations, and a training program that teaches employees how to "transform into the homogenous being known as a convenience store worker" (p. 16). As Keiko states, "At that moment, for the first time ever, I felt I'd become a part in the machine of society. I've been reborn. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society" (Murata, 2018, p. 13).

For the next eighteen years, Keiko remains at the store, fully embracing her role as a "convenience store machine" (p. 19). She finds comfort in the predictability of the store and the security it provides, as the outside world is perceived as unpredictable and scary. As a result, Keiko never ventures out and never develops any close relationships or connections. Her perception of humans around her remains unchanged, further emphasizing the theme of the suppression of individuality in the capitalist society. Keiko's experiences at the convenience store serve as a metaphor for the capitalist world, where individuality is sacrificed for the sake of fitting in and being accepted by the masses. This also greatly affects gender relations and can impede progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women, as we shall see with the analysis Keiko's encounter with the male foil character Shiraha.

## Normalization of Female Precarity in Japan

Keiko's portrayal as an alien-like figure allows the author to situate her outside of the existing social customs and offer the readers a foreign yet advantageous perspective. In this way, Murata employs Keiko as a means to challenge and question societal norms and expectations, particularly in

relation to gender performance. As Judith Butler posits in her seminal work *Gender Trouble*, "gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 25). Keiko, like many individuals, learns what clothes to buy and shoes to wear by looking at other women of her age, and as such, her gender performance is rooted in imitation and it is a desperate attempt to be “pulled off being a person" (p. 29). However, Keiko's emulation of societal norms is not depicted as typical, but rather as an exaggeration that approaches an almost inhuman level of intensity. Her gender performance, although seemingly efficient for the store, is met with laughter behind her back, and she is oblivious to this. She is playing a person rather than being a real one, putting up a performance without being vulnerable to change, experience, or the people around her. She risks being thrown out of this normalized space if she fails to “conform to the norms that confer recognizability on subjects” (Butler, 2009, p. 3), as it does not tolerate any foreignness and she can easily be disposed of like a commodity in the store.

The introduction of the character Shiraha serves as a foil to Keiko and further emphasizes the societal expectations and pressures placed upon individuals. Shiraha, a young man, is supposed to be married and rich as per masculine expectations in his society (Woźny, 2022). But is homeless and impoverished. He is also presented as a sexist and a misogynist in the novel. He came to the store for the express purpose of "marriage hunting" and tells Keiko that she is too old to get married and is now beyond saving. This serves as a satirical commentary on the prevalent notion in Japan that the solution to one's problems lies in a return to the traditional family-corporate system. Kano (year) elucidates that such a concept of family, which is founded upon “biological essentialism”, should be met with censure (p. 98). The eventual firing of Shiraha for stalking a customer does not negate the societal pressures and expectations placed upon him, as evidenced by his suggestion that he and Keiko enter into a pretend marriage to prevent her from getting expelled from the store. This ultimately leads to Shiraha's descent into becoming a *hikikomori*, or socially withdrawn individual (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2012), detached from human contact and with no hope for the future.

Shiraha, now homeless and unemployed, turns to Keiko for help. He proposes a solution to prevent Keiko from experiencing the same fate: a

pretend marriage in which the two of them simply live together in Keiko's small apartment, without any romantic involvement. Remarkably, this strategy proves successful, as Keiko's co-workers at the store begin to treat her differently once they believe her to be married. Keiko's realization that her gender performance is more effective than her hard work and dedication to the store is a poignant commentary on the societal devaluation of women's labour and the limited opportunities available to them. The narrative follows this with the resignation of Keiko from her first job which lasted nearly two decades. This sudden disruption to her daily routine leads to a period of emotional turmoil and depression. Without any other options and having lost the sense of purpose to live, she returns to work at another convenience store. She reflects on her role in the industry, stating, "It is what I am. The voice of the convenience store won't stop flowing through me. I was born to hear this voice. I realize now, more than a person, I'm a convenience store worker. I can't escape that fact. My very cells exist for the convenience store" (p. 161). This statement highlights the total disillusionment of the novel's central character and the extent to which her identity has become intertwined with her job.

Murata's decision to feature a female lead character in her story can be understood in light of the ways in which precarity can disrupt gendered social identities. As Vij (2013) argues, "precarity can enable an undoing of attachments to gendered social identities" (p. 122) This is exemplified in the character of Keiko, who, despite 18 years of dedicated service at the store, never received a promotion and was not even considered for the position of the shift manager. This failure to recognize Keiko's contributions is indicative of the larger societal neglect of female precarity in Japan. Feminist scholars have long noted the continuities between contemporary precarious work and the unwaged domestic labour of the past, and have called for challenging the restorative politics that hinder the visibility of women's reproductive and social work (Vij, 2017; McRobbie, 2020). The dominant discourse prevalent in Japan often frames precarity as a man question, prioritizing the loss of waged work for men over the precarity faced by women. This is reflected in the public discourse surrounding precarity in Japan, where the majority of documentaries and news reports focus on the experiences of socially withdrawn men or men with irregular jobs. But recent research shows that Japan's gender pay gap is the second-highest among OECD countries (*OECD*, 2020). While Japan certainly faces a significant issue with precarious work, it

is important to note that this is not a problem unique to Japan, but rather a global issue that disproportionately affects women. However, the primary objective of Murata's novel remains the examination of the underlying causes of affective disillusionment experienced by Keiko, as well as the complex interplay between her struggles against gender oppressive norms and the precarity-inducing living conditions perpetuated by neoliberal capitalism.

## Choosing Precarity

In contemporary capitalist societies, an ideal of invulnerability is often perpetuated through the "entrepreneurial form of subjectivity" (Gilson, 2014, p. 7), as seen in the characters of Keiko and Shiraha in Murata's novel. Entrepreneurial subjectivity is characterized by the desire for control, both over oneself and over the impact others have on oneself. This control is often seen as a means of achieving self-control, as it allows individuals to avoid unpredictable and potentially harmful effects from others. However, this approach to subjectivity masks the fundamental understanding that "human life is conditioned by vulnerability" (Mackenzie et al, 2013, p. 1), and that vulnerability and autonomy are "entwined" (Anderson, 2013, p. 134). Instead, denying relationality and vulnerability with entrepreneurial subjectivity promotes the illusion of self-sufficiency.

Keiko, resembling a humanoid character, struggles to understand and conform to societal norms that limit her individual expression, agency, and autonomy, ultimately resorting to amusingly copying them. Similarly, Shiraha, who is motivated by profit and self-preservation, enters into a pretend marriage with Keiko for practical reasons, such as a place to stay and food (pg). American cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) posits that this ideal of invulnerability can often lead to cruelly optimist attachments. She defines cruel optimism as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (p. 24). In the novel, Shiraha exhibits a toxic fantasy of returning to traditional societal structures, such as the corporate family structure in Japan. This fantasy perpetuates a lack of meaningful relationships, as seen in Shiraha's inability to form connections and his eventual descent into becoming a *hikikomori*. Similarly, Keiko's pursuit of invulnerability, while it could be seen as a coping mechanism, prevents

her from forming meaningful relationships that could alter and transform her, ultimately leading to a sense of purposelessness and loneliness. It could be argued that Keiko is actively seeking to protect herself from vulnerability, as her eccentricity would likely not be accepted by society, leaving her vulnerable to oppression. However, one needs vulnerability in order to experience major transformation, and "acknowledged dependence" is a virtue (MacIntyre, 1999, p. 8). The lack of shared vulnerability between characters like Shiraha and Keiko perpetuates their inability to connect with others and find meaning in their lives. In precarious Japan, individuals like Keiko and Shiraha are raised in a society that promotes this ideal of invulnerability, leading to an increasing number of lonely deaths and suicides (Allison, 2012).

In conclusion, Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* is not just a story about a single individual's failure of understanding her reality, but rather a powerful examination of the importance of choosing "a certain mode of precariousness" in order to effect meaningful change in one's individual and collective lives (During, 2015, p. 35). Through the character of Keiko, the novel illustrates the affirmative potential of precarity, because it is not merely a state defined by uncertainty and uneven vulnerability, it can also enable "an undoing of attachments to gendered social identities" to open up new possibilities for understanding, imagining alternative subjectivities and forming solidarities (Vij, 2013, p. 122). It was through a strong sense of solidarity that the freedom of women saw significant progress in the twentieth century. As Angela Mitropoulos (2006) notes, a different future which challenges the unjust modes of existing and norms "can only be constructed precariously" (p. 4), and it is through embracing relationality and the inevitable dependence of human existence that we can begin to build true solidarity on issues of gender and class. Furthermore, the novel's use of the alien machine metaphor prompts readers to question what it means to be human and to consider the ways in which societal structures and norms can dehumanize us under neoliberal capitalism. Keiki's disillusionment underlines the significance of becoming aware of the terms and norms on which one is being exploited and it necessitates a great need for self-awareness which can bring an openness to one's knowing attitudes. Gilson (2011) calls this openness "epistemic vulnerability", which begins with "being open to not knowing, which is the precondition of learning" (p. 325). The narrative encourages epistemic vulnerability through a creative engagement with a metaphor for machinic enslavement. This metaphor compels the reader to percei-

ve Keiko in terms of the concepts that are reserved for the conceptual structure of an alien machine. Through this creative literary device, the narrative enables readers to break out of habitual patterns of thought and perception on what counts as a meaningful relational human existence. Therefore, while Keiko's ending may be perceived as bleak and hopeless, the novel ultimately serves a cognitive function that reconfigures our understanding of humanity outside of the dehumanizing demands of societal recognition. The novel provides a feminist opening and emphasizes the importance of grasping precariousness in terms of mutual interdependency, as a shared ontological-existential condition that can foster true solidarity and transformative change.

## References:


Allison, A. (2012). Ordinary refugees: Social precarity and soul in 21st century Japan. *Anthropological Quarterly, 85*(2), 345-370. https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2012.0027

Allison, A. (2013). *Precarious Japan*. Duke University Press.

Allison, A. (2015). Precarity and hope: Social connectedness in postcapitalist Japan. In F. Baldwin & A. Allison (Eds.), *Japan: The precarious future* (pp. 36-57). New York University Press and Social Science Research Council.

Anderson, J. (2013). Autonomy and vulnerability entwined. In C. Mackenzie, J. Stoljar, & D. A. Waserman (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New essays in ethics and feminist philosophy* (134-161). Oxford University Press.

Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.

Butler, J. (2009). Performativity, precarity and sexual politics. *Aibr-revista de antropologia iberoamericana (AIBR), 4*(3), 1-13. http://dx.doi.org/10.11156/aibr.040303e

During, S. (2015). Choosing precarity. *South Asia: Journal of south Asian studies, 38*(1), 19-38. https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2014.975901

Gilson, E. (2011). Vulnerability, ignorance, and oppression. *Hypatia*, *26*(2), 308-332. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2010.01158.x

Gilson, E. C. (2014). *The ethics of vulnerability: A feminist analysis of social life and Practice*. Routledge.

Itoh, M. (1992). The Japanese model of post-Fordism. In A. J. Scott & M. Storper (Eds.), *Pathways to industrialisation and regional development* (pp. 102-118). Routledge.

Kenney, M., & Florida, R. (1989). Japan's role in a post-Fordist age. *Futures, 21*(2), 136-151. https://doi.org/10.1016/0016-3287(89)90002-5

MacIntyre, A. (1999). *Dependent rational animals: Why human beings need the virtues*. Open Court.

Mackenzie, C., Rogers, W, & Dodds, S. (2013). Introduction: What is vulnerability and why does it matter for moral theory? In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers, & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: new essays in ethics and feminist philosophy* (1-29). essay, Oxford University Press.

McRobbie, A. (2020). *Feminism and the politics of resilience: Essays on gender, media and the end of warfare*. Polity.

Mitropoulos, A. (2005). Precari-us? transversal texts. Retrieved December 22, 2022, from https://transversal.at/transversal/0704/mitropoulos/en

Murata, S. (2019). *Convenience store woman* (G. T. Takemori, Trans.). Granta Publications. (Original work published 2016)

OECD (2020). *Gender wage gap* [Data set]. OECD iLibrary. http://doi.org/10.1787/7cee77aa-en

Reiko, K. (2022). Youth Employment in Japan's Economic Recovery: 'Freeters' and 'NEETs'. *Japan Focus: The Asian-Pacific Journal*, *4*(5), 1-5.

Rosenthal, B., & Zimmerman, D. L. (2012). Hikikomori. *International Journal of Mental Health*, *41*(4), 82–95. https://doi.org/10.2753/imh0020-7411410406

Saladin, R. (2022). Androids for the stone age? Individuality, space, and gender in Murata Sayaka's *convenience store woman* 縄文時代のアンドロイド？村田沙耶香の『コンビニ人間』における個性、空間、ジェンダー. *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal*, *61*(1), 98-119. https://doi.org/10.1353/jwj.2022.0004

Vij, R. (2013). Affective fields of precarity. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, *38*(2), 122-138. https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375413488031

Vij, R. (2017). Cinematic narratives of precarity. In K. Iwata-Weickgenannt & R. Rosenbaum (Eds.), *Visions of precarity in Japanese popular culture and literature* (222-242). Routledge.

Whitelaw, G. H. (2018). Konbini-nation: The rise of the convenience store in post-industrial Japan. In *Consuming life in post-bubble Japan* (pp. 69-88). Amsterdam University Press.

Woźny, A. (2022). Herbivorous men, carnivorous women: Doing masculinity and femininity in Japanese "marriage hunting." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *47*(3), 715-740. https://doi.org/10.1086/717703