



DISRUPTING THE MASCULINIST PARADIGM IN *CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN*: A FEMINIST STUDY

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Abstract

Our society represents the women as secondary to men from ancient times and the Japanese literature describes the Patriarchal norms. The idea that women are incomplete without men can stem from historical, cultural and social constructs. However, this perspective is being challenged. The novel of Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* interprets the protagonist, Keiko Furukura and her relationship with others. She finds fulfillment and identity in her work at a convenience store, yet faces constant pressure from her family and society to conform to traditional roles, such as getting married and having children. The aim of my study is to examine the tension between the individual desires and societal pressure. My analyses contribute to the existing body of feminist literature by foregrounding the complexities of women's experiences in contemporary Japan. Further, my study critically demonstrates the woman rejection of traditional feminine roles and her pursuit of independence. My research uses Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "The Other" and "Existential Feminism" to analyze this novel. The result of my study illustrates that women can serve as a powerful critique of traditional masculinity and femininity norms. My study suggests that *Convenience Store Woman* offers a nuanced portrayal of an unconventional woman who challenges patriarchal norms and expectations, highlighting the need for greater autonomy and self-definition for women in modern Japanese society and all over the world.

Keywords: *Individual Desires, Patriarchal Norms, Self-Definition, Societal Pressure, Traditional Notions.*

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1. Introduction

The concept of masculinity has been socially constructed and reinforced throughout history, with various forms of masculinity emerging and evolving over time. In the context of Japan, where the novel *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) is set, traditional masculinity has been shaped by cultural and societal norms that emphasize traits such as strength, courage, and dominance. However, traditional masculine norms persisted, with men expected to be breadwinners and women expected to be caregivers. The 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of feminist movements in Japan, with women advocating for equal rights, reproductive freedom, and an end to gender-based discrimination. Against this historical backdrop, *Convenience Store Woman* offers a powerful critique of traditional masculinity and its impact on women's lives. My analyses of protagonist, Keiko, is a convenience store worker who challenges societal expectations of women and masculinity, offering a nuanced and thought-provoking exploration of gender norms in contemporary Japan. This study undertakes a feminist analysis of *Convenience Store Woman*, examining how the text disrupts the masculinity paradigm and challenges traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. The goal of my study underscores that women have the power to challenge and subvert traditional masculinity and femininity norms through the character of Keiko.

Sayaka Murata is a Japanese author born in 1979 in Tokyo, Japan. The book is written in 2016 and translated into English in 2018, has won various awards such as the Akutagawa Prize, is a best-selling novel, and received positive reviews from leading critics. However, Murata's own experiences working in a convenience store influenced her writing of the novel and her experiences during that time informed her portrayal of the protagonist. My research tells the story of Keiko Furukura, a 36-year-old woman who works in a convenience store and struggles to conform to societal norms. An unconventional woman who defies societal norms from childhood to adulthood. Keiko's journey begins as a child who is deemed strange and abnormal by her family and peers, and continues as. She navigates the challenges of adulthood, including her struggles to find employment and her reluctance to marry and start a family.

My analyses use Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminist theory and can be analyzed to reveal how women break free from the stereotypes of being mothers, incompetent individuals, and sex objects. She embodies Beauvoir's notion of "existence precedes essence," where individuals create their own essence through their choices and actions, rather than being defined by predetermined roles or expectations. My study illustrates the concept of "The Other", a term coined by Simone de Beauvoir to describe the way in which women have been perceived and treated as objects, rather than as subjects. The research objectives of my study are: To examine the portrayal of Keiko Furukura as an existential feminist character. To investigate the ways in which Japanese women resist and subvert patriarchal norms. To analyze the tension between individual desire and societal expectation for Japanese women, as depicted in the protagonist Keiko's experiences. The research questions of my article are: How does Keiko's character embody the principles of existential feminism, as outlined by Simone de

Beauvoir. What strategies do Japanese women use to resist and subvert patriarchal norms in their daily lives. Why does societal expectations in Japan conflict with the personal desires and aspirations of women like Keiko.

This research employs feminist analysis to criticize the oppressive nature of Japanese masculinist paradigm by highlighting the tension between women's individual desires and the societal expectations imposed upon her. The main character's rejection of traditional female roles and her unique identity serve as a powerful example of women challenging and subverting these expectations. Japanese culture's control and policing of women's bodies, desires, and identities limit their autonomy and freedom. In contrast, women's resistance and defiance of these expectations enable them to create their own paths and identities. Ultimately, my study emphasizes the importance of self-expression, acceptance, and individuality, encouraging readers to think critically about the societal expectations that shape our lives.

2. Conceptual framework

The primary objective of my study is to conduct a critical examination of the societal expectations and norms that govern the lives of Japanese women. Through a nuanced analysis of protagonist, Keiko's experiences and struggles, my research aims to deconstruct the ways in which the masculinist paradigm perpetuates a hegemonic discourse that constrains women's agency, identity, and autonomy in Japan. By interrogating the intersections between individual desire, societal expectation, and cultural norms, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of Japanese womanhood and the ways in which women navigate, resist, and subvert oppressive norms in their daily lives, thereby illuminating the possibilities for feminist agency and social change.

The theory apply in my research is Feminism. According to Simone de Beauvoir, Existential feminism is a philosophical framework that combines the principles of existentialism with feminist theory. It emphasizes individual freedom and choice, while also acknowledging the social and cultural constraints that shape women's. Therefore, Existential feminism argues that women must take responsibility for creating their own meaning and purpose in life, rather than accepting the roles and expectations defined by s The concept of "The Other" (French: "L'Autre") is a central idea in existential feminism, developed by Simone de Beauvoir. This paper refers to the way in which women are perceived and defined by society, often in relation to men. "The Other" represents the objectified, marginalized, and oppressed status of women, who are seen as deviating from the male norm. This concept highlights the ways in which women are reduced to their roles, bodies, and relationships, rather than being recognized as autonomous individuals.

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) was a French philosopher, feminist, and social theorist. My research applies the Simone de Beauvoir dimension of existential feminism and the concept of the other. Her most famous work, "The Second Sex" (1949) in which she argues that women are not born, but become, "The Other" through social and cultural conditioning.

So, in order to apply Simone de Beauvoir's feminism theory to *Convenience Store Woman*. From the perspective of existential feminism. This research employs textual analysis to examine the life of Keiko Furukara. Through her choices and actions, Keiko asserts her existential freedom and autonomy, resisting the societal expectations that seek to constrain her. Her struggles to maintain her authenticity and individuality in the face of societal pressure illustrate the tension between freedom and responsibility, a central concern of existential feminism. The concept of "The Other" is evident in her experiences, such as being ostracized by her family for not conforming to traditional feminine norms being perceived as "strange" by her colleagues for her convenience store job and facing societal pressure to marry and have children. This paper illustrates that Keiko is constantly defined and judged by others, reinforcing her status as "The Other" and highlighting the tension between her individual desires and societal expectations.

3. Literature Review

This section provides a critical examination of existing scholarly research, focusing on the masculinist paradigm and its perpetuation of traditional feminine roles. Specifically, this survey aims to synthesize and critically evaluate the current state of knowledge on the ways in which societal expectations and patriarchal norms shape and constrain women's lives, with particular attention to the tension between individual desire and societal expectation.

Toril Moi's 1994 book, *"Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman,"* offers a nuanced exploration of Beauvoir's life and work. In this book, Toril Moi provides a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of Beauvoir's life and work, with a particular focus on her intellectual development and her theory of existential feminism. Moi's analysis of Beauvoir's theory of existential feminism highlights the ways in which Beauvoir challenged traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, and argued for the importance of women's autonomy and freedom. Moi argues that Beauvoir's concept of "the other" is central to her theory of existential feminism, and that it highlights the ways in which women are often treated as "the other" in patriarchal societies.

The Handmaid's Tale (1985) by Margaret Atwood a dystopian novel that explores a patriarchal society where women's bodies are controlled and commodified. It highlights the ways in which women are reduced to their reproductive roles and are denied agency and autonomy. From an existential feminist perspective, this objectification of women's bodies can be seen as a form of "bad faith" (Sartre, 1943), where women are denied their freedom and autonomy, and are instead reduced to their biological functions.

The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath (1963) is about the constraints of societal expectations on women's lives and identities, particularly in the 1950s. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is a talented and ambitious young woman who is struggling to reconcile her own desires and aspirations with the societal expectations placed upon her. Esther's rejection of feminine roles is a central theme of the novel. Esther is expected to conform to traditional feminine norms, including marrying well, having children, and being a domesticated homemaker. However,

Esther rejects these expectations and instead seeks to pursue her own interests and ambition. This sense of alienation is a key theme in existential feminism.

Julia Kristeva's concept of "The Other" in her work *"Strangers to Ourselves"* (1988) posits that our understanding of the self is always mediated by our relationship with others, and that we must acknowledge and respect the alterity of the Other, recognizing the fundamental difference and uniqueness that cannot be reduced to simple binary oppositions. Existential feminism, as seen in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and Kristeva, argues that women must take responsibility for their own lives and create their own meaning, rather than relying on societal expectations or patriarchal norms.

Hiromi Kawakami, in *The Japan Times* (2018) analyze the Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*. Kawakami's analysis of the novel focuses on the theme of identity and how it is shaped by societal expectations. Kawakami argues that the novel "offers a nuanced exploration of the ways in which societal expectations can shape and constrain individual identities" (Kawakami, 2018). Kawakami also notes that the novel highlights the tension between individual desire and societal expectation, particularly for women.

Yoko Ogawa has written a *Blurb* or endorsement for the English translation of "Convenience Store Woman", which was published in 2018. The quote from Yoko Ogawa's blurb: "A fascinating and nuanced exploration of the human condition... Keiko's story is both deeply personal and universally relatable. A wonderful and thought-provoking novel." Yoko Ogawa, a Japanese author known for her novels that explore the human condition, praises Murata's work for its nuanced portrayal of Keiko's inner world.

Simone de Beauvoir (French philosopher and feminist): Beauvoir's work *"The Second Sex"* (1949) is a foundational text of feminist philosophy that explores the concept of "the Other" and the ways in which women are perceived and treated as secondary to men. "The woman who works is not freed from the feminine role; on the contrary, she is more deeply enslaved" (Beauvoir, 1949). Beauvoir argues that women who work are often expected to fulfill traditional feminine roles and responsibilities. "The independent woman is a contradiction in terms; she is a woman who has renounced her femininity" (Beauvoir, 1949) Beauvoir's existential feminism emphasizes the importance of women's autonomy, agency, and self-definition. She argues that women who seek independence are often forced to renounce traditional feminine roles and expectations. Therefore, my research article also uses this dimension of Simone de Beauvoir in *Convenience Store Woman*.

This critical review of relevant works provides a rigorous foundation for my study, contributing to the existing body of critical literature. Furthermore, through the character of Keiko, this research demonstrates how women possess the agency to challenge and subvert traditional masculinity and femininity norms, thereby redefining their own identities and experiences.

4. Analysis

Societal pressure on women manifests in various forms and can significantly affect their mental health and overall well-being. From a young age, women are often subjected to expectations regarding appearance, behavior, marriage, and career choices. These pressures can stem from cultural norms, traditional roles, media representations, and familial expectations, creating a narrow definition of success and femininity. Disrupting the masculinist paradigm involves actively challenging the entrenched norms and values that uphold male dominance in a patriarchal society, where women's roles are often relegated to secondary status. This disruption is essential for creating a more equitable society, as it seeks to dismantle the systemic barriers that limit women's opportunities and reinforce harmful stereotypes.

In "Convenience Store Woman", Sayaka Murata masterfully depicts the complexities of Japanese society through the eyes of her protagonist, Keiko Furukura. With a keen eye for detail, Murata portrays Keiko's struggles to navigate the societal expectations placed upon her, from her family's pressure to marry and her colleagues' assumptions about her personal life. Writer's personal experiences significantly influenced her novel. Growing up in Japan, she faced societal pressure to conform to traditional values, such as marrying and having children, which is reflected in Keiko's experiences. Murata's own work experience at a convenience store. Her feminist perspectives and emphasis on individuality are also evident in Keiko's character, as she asserts her autonomy and challenges expectations. By drawing on her personal experiences, Murata creates a nuanced and relatable portrayal of life in Japan, particularly for women, shedding light on themes such as mental health, social pressure, alienation, and the struggle for individuality.

The story of the novel begins from the Keiko Furukura, the protagonist of "Convenience Store Woman," starts working at the convenience store at the age of 18. As Keiko approaches her 30s, she begins to feel the weight of societal expectations. Her parents and society at large expect her to get married and have children, but Keiko has no interest in doing so. She is content with her simple life working at the convenience store, but she feels pressure to conform to societal norms.

She has been doing the same job for 18 years, which has become a significant part of her life and identity. She challenges masculinist paradigm, traditional norms and societal pressures by choosing to work in a convenience store for eighteen years without gap, despite society's expectations for her to pursue a more conventional career or lifestyle. Her dedication to this job raised eyebrows among her family members and friends, who questioned her choice but surprisingly, she considers this work as a form of distraction against social pressure at a certain age. She works day and night at Hiromachi station Smile Mart, immersing herself in the routine and structure of her job, she finds a purpose of life and peace that protect her from the external pressures to conform to traditional feminine roles. Working in a convenience store allows her to create a world where she feels in control, peace and accepted, in spite of societal norms. Sayaka beautifully represent these scenarios in between chapters. This novel depicts the autobiographical elements and relate with writer's life. At the beginning of the novel, Keiko

refers to convenience stores as the “World of Sounds” while Sayaka vividly express these emotions through the starting lines

“Tinkle of the door chime to the voices of TV celebrities advertising new products over the in-store cable network, to the calls of the store workers, the beeps of the bar code scanner, the rustle of customers picking up items and placing them in baskets, and the clacking of heels walking around the store. It all blends into the convenience store sound that ceaselessly caresses my eardrums”. (Murata,2016, P.1)

These textual lines define the structured environment of the store provides her with clear guidelines and tasks, offering a sense of stability and fulfillment that she may not find in other aspects of her life. In this way, Keiko find peace and stability at her work-place and can be interpreted as a coping mechanism, she resists and subvert the complexities of societal expectations by working at a store. The convenience store serves as a shelter where Keiko can escape the judgment and traditional norms of those around her, allowing her to feel comfort and self –determined, where she feels valued and understood. After a few chapters, a character named Shiraha appears, his communication between with Keiko which reflects his deep-seated patriarchal norms and negative views about woman.

“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 a secondhand 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,2016, P.91)

As mention in the above lines “Stone Age woman past childbearing age” and comparing her to “secondhand goods,” Shiraha presents his belief in traditional gender roles and societal expectations that disrespect women who do not conform to these norms. Asexuality can be defined as the lack of sexual attraction to other people or the absence of interest in or desire for sexual activity. In this case, Keiko’s friends have a prejudice that Keiko is asexual because she doesn’t get married or any type of sexual desire contains. My study explains through the textual lines.

“You need to wake up, Furukura. To put it bluntly, you’re the lowest of the low. Your womb is probably too old to be of any use, and you don’t even have the looks to serve as a means to satisfy carnal desire. But then neither are you earning money like a man. Far from it, you’re only working part-time without even a proper job. Frankly speaking, you’re just a burden on the village, the dregs of society”.(Murata,2016, P.108)

In the quote above, the social context that define Shiraha as a man, he criticizes Keiko's womb and appearance not be able to satisfy men, and based on those words it can be seen that there are still those who judge women to be sex objects and the words spoken by shiraha so discriminated against Keiko as a middle-aged woman who was unmarried and had only worked part time all her life. This is closely related to Beauvoir's statement about feminist existential theory which says that as culture develops, men assume that they can dominate by creating

myths about women. Men are always looking for the ideal woman who will make him complete, and this is what Shiraha does to Keiko by using words that tend to discriminate.

“Back at the store, I was angling for marriage, sure, but you’re far from being my ideal marriage partner, Furukura. You don’t earn much working in a convenience store, which means I won’t be able to start my own business, and I won’t even be able to satisfy my sexual needs with someone like you.” (Murata,2016, P.109)

From the quote above, it can be seen that Shiraha's words are very hurtful to keiko, he wants to get married but thinks that she is not an ideal partner for him. He said that keiko wouldn't even be able to satisfy his own sexual needs. It can be seen that men like Shiraha only use Keiko to fulfill all his needs but look down on Keiko because he thinks Keiko is unattractive to him and can't satisfy him in terms of sexuality. The family pressure on Keiko to get married.

"You're thirty-six, Keiko,' my mother said, her voice stern. It's time you got married. You're not getting any younger. She spoke as if marriage was something you could just go out and buy, like a bag of potatoes." (Murata,2016, P.34)

In this passage, Keiko's mother is pressuring her to get married, emphasizing that she is thirty-six years old and "not getting any younger." This statement highlights the societal expectation in Japan that women should marry at a relatively young age. Keiko's mother views marriage as a necessary step in life, rather than a personal choice. This pressure from her mother creates tension and stress for Keiko, who is hesitant to conform to societal norms. Throughout the novel, Keiko struggles with the expectations placed upon her by her family and society, leading to a deeper exploration of her own desires and aspirations. This phenomenon is in accordance with Simon de Beauvoir's statement in the book *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir said "woman is just uterus." That is, the fate of women is determined by this anatomy and when facing the natural order, it will be difficult to change due to patriarchal culture.

According to Keiko, a Marriage is just a matter of paperwork and nothing else. “An erection is a psychological phenomenon”. She describes existential feminist character under the perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir theory and the concept of “The other”. My analyses of this article analyze the tension between individual desire and societal expectations in Japanese society. She selects her own individual freedom, and fulfillment over societal expectations and feminine roles. Keiko identify her autonomy and agency in shaping her own life at convenience store. At the end of novel, Murata finally concludes eccentrically by crafting that,

“I was wasting time talking like this. I had to get myself back in shape for the sake of the store. I had to restructure my body so it would be able to move more swiftly and precisely to replenish the refrigerated drinks or clean the floor, to more perfectly comply with the store’s demands” (Murata,2016, P.162).

It depends upon the reader whether it's a better ending or not. For Keiko, returning to the convenience store symbolizes her commitment to living life on her own terms and finding a peace, self-definition in a place where she feels most authentic and valued. It can be viewed as a victory for self-acceptance and defiance against societal roles that seek to dictate her worth based on traditional standards.

5. Conclusion

An analysis of “Convenience Store Woman” under the perspective of Simone De Beauvoir’s theory of existentialist feminism. My article describes the journey of Keiko Furukura, a woman who spend their life in patriarchal society and struggle against them. It's unjust treatments and hypotheticals against someone, particularly grounded on a person’s coitus that leads to the part that he or she should play in the society. Keiko target by her family, friends and coworkers to admit the traditional feminine roles. Keiko is frequently considered an unskillful person because she only works as a convenience store clerk, and does not try to find competent and promising work. Keiko is also not considered immature because unlike her other colleagues or friends who get wedded and also have children and are considered unfit to be an ideal mate because of her old age. Keiko also got veritably unhappy words from shiraha and sounded condescending as a woman. Through Keiko’s trip, her life explores the complications of societal pressure on individual identity and tone- worth. Keiko’s choice to work at the convenience store despite societal disapprobation reflects her defiance against conventional places, emphasizing the significance of embracing one’s oneness. Eventually, Keiko’s story serves as an important memorial of the significance of tone- acceptance and staying true to oneself in the face of societal pressures. Furthermore, my research highlights the tension between individual freedom and societal expectations.

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