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The Mundane and Resistance: Keiko in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Women*

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Abstract

This paper explores Sayaka Murata's Keiko Furukura, the protagonist from *Convenience Store Woman,* through the lens of how her daily mundanity, works as a site of resistance, and a sense of autonomy amidst the societal expectations on productivity and gender roles. The study applies Yuriko Saito's framework of *Everyday Aesthetics* to analyze the significance and deeper meaning of Keiko's ordinary practices to demonstrate how meaning can be shaped beyond their mere utility. Additionally, this paper will also incorporate Judith Butler's theory of *Gender Performativity*, to analyze how Keiko's behaviors both reflect and subtly rejects the social expectations of conventional femininity. This study therefore examines Keiko's interaction with the mundane practices and how it presents a unique narrative of embodied resistance while evoking sense of self and meaning within the constraints and conformity of gender.

Keywords: mundanity, embodied resistance, everyday aesthetics, gender performativity

Introduction

Sayaka Murata is considered as one of Japan's most provocative contemporary authors, whose works explores on the themes of societal norms, gender, and individual identity. Born in Chiba, Japan, in 1979, Murata, as stated in one of her interviews, that her novel *Convenience Store Woman* was partly influenced by her experience of working as a part-time clerk in a convenience store (McNeill). Murata's narrative style often flows on a minimalist, clear prose, understated humor, and most of her featured protagonists often reject or resist the standards of conventional femininity. Her books often navigates the issues of isolation, conformity, and societal pressure which in result, resonates with the readers navigating the same issues. In addition to *Convenience Store Woman*, she has written notable works such as *Earthlings* and *Life Ceremony*, each delving into the boundaries of morality, embodiment, and agency within contemporary Japanese culture.

The *Convenience Store Woman*, which won the 155th Akutagawa Prize in 2016, follows the life of Keiko Furukura, a 36-year-old woman who has spent the past 18 years working in the same convenience store. Throughout her life, Keiko has faced a challenge of being labeled as strange and struggles to grasp societal norms. Through her job at the convenience store, she structured her environment with a clear set of behavioral guidelines, that enabled her to blend in

and find a sense of purpose. She would often mimic the speech, attire and action of her coworkers, at the same time maintaining an emotional detachment. While outside of her job, Keiko often encounters pressure from her family, and friends, to conform to the societal expectations of marriage and career advancement. When Shiraha, another socially isolated individual, enters her life, where they decide to play pretend couple to deflect societal judgment, this arrangement however draws complication to Keiko's sense of identity. After she decides to quit her job to fit into the narrative of being a in a relationship, she rather feels lost and directionless. Ultimately, Keiko comes to realize that she feels most authentic and content when working at the convenience store. By embracing the mundanity of the store, she subtly subverts the dominant gender narratives, while asserting a personal autonomy by rejecting the societal expectations on productivity and gender roles.

This paper uses Yuriko Saito's theory of everyday aesthetics, as a framework to analyze the routines, and the environments of Keiko, and how each act holds a deeper aesthetic meaning that influences her views and values. It enables a view that recognizes the subtle empowerment within her mundanity, rather than viewing routine and her structure duty in the convenience store as compliance. This paper, aims to demonstrate the aesthetic dimension of the ordinary, advocating to integrate the act of being mindful, caring, towards everyday routines and environments. Additionally, Keiko's embodied behavior and views to negotiate with the societal constructed notion of femininity will be studied through Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. It will explore how Keiko's everyday routines is an act of performance, while presenting the limitations of societal script concerning femininity. This paper thus argues that the mundanity and the deliberate act of embracing the embodied routines as seen in Keiko's life serve as a subtle persistent form of feminist resistance. The analysis not only enhances our understanding of Murata's work, but it also aims to expand the scope of feminist literary studies that attends to the politics of the ordinary. This paper highlights how autonomy, and meaning can be crafted within the structures of everyday existence.

Literature Review

Existing critical studies on Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Women* is largely focused on analyzing the conformity, alienation, isolation, societal norms, and gender studies in contemporary Japan. A recent study by Stefani Silli applies Fairclough's critical discourse analysis to show how the novel constructs, reproduces, and destabilizes gender norms, and normative femininity as an effect of discourses rather than as a natural given. However, her account remains at the level of language and social structure, leaving out the embodied, sensory texture of Keiko's daily practices unexamined. Another article reads Keiko through Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity where her responses to social interactions is considered as a deviation from the patriarchal norms through her mimicry, and argues how Keiko frames the convenience store as her sanctuary from all the societal expectations and rather finds the existence in the store meaningful (Sanjana & Mariam). This reading treats the store as a refuge rather than analyzing why mundanity and routines feel meaningful to Keiko in the first place.

Another scholarly study by Vaz & Jayanthi reads the novel through classical sociology while arguing how conformity and deviance coexist in Keiko's character. It exposes the contradictions of how modern society celebrates individuality yet demands conformity, and that the novel exposes the impossibility of fully satisfying society's contradictory expectations. Most

closely, Xiao and Seong reads the novel as an ethic of deviance using Foucauldian apparatus, and Sherman Alexie's mental reservation to explain the ethics of belonging grounded in silence, difference, and emotional detachment; this gestures toward a social mechanism through Keiko's mimicry and ritualized routine. While the account of the paper remains ethical rather than aesthetic, it does not connect Keiko's routine to gender resistance.

Taken together, these studies establish a framework for Keiko's nonconformity as socially produced and her routine as protective, but there is limited study that focuses on the aesthetic dimension of her everyday actions as her ground of resistance. Instituting Yuriko Saito's everyday aesthetics and Judith Butler's gender performativity, the present study aims to fill this gap by arguing that Keiko's deliberate engagement with the ordinary tasks constitutes an aesthetic significance of routine and experience that subtly subverts the gendered expectations of productivity and normalcy. In doing so, it positions Keiko's mundane practices not as retreat from the social order but as a mode of feminist resistance within it.

Everyday Routines

Yuriko Saito, in her book *Everyday Aesthetics*, confronts how aesthetic experience is not only confined to art, museums, or high culture, but is also deeply embedded in everyday life. She believes there is more to how everyday experiences transcend their utility aspects and offer a sense of aesthetic values, influencing ethical values. Saito stresses on how art can challenge us, also changes our worldviews, while engaging us to certain actions, it can also mobilize us to a certain action. She emphasizes on how art also nurtures a valuable sensibilities like sympathy, generosity, and also helps us move society in a certain direction (Saito 54). Additionally, Saito highlights the "two major directions of modern Western aesthetics: art-centered aesthetics and aesthetics experience-oriented aesthetics" (12). She contends that both perspectives limit the aesthetic diversity of our lives and the limitation not only impoverishes the content of aesthetic discourse but also fails to adequately account for the significant ways in which aesthetics profoundly impacts the quality of life and the state of the world (12).

According to Saito, an art-centered aesthetic emphasizes art and its appreciation as the primary core of an aesthetic life (14). Western artworks such as Rembrandt painting, Beethoven symphony, or Shakespeare sonnet, are considered as the paradigmatic objects of art (15). This approach regards artworks as having unique properties or significance and non-art objects are valued only insofar, they resemble art (15). As a result, an art-centered aesthetic highlights the aesthetic qualities and contemplation typically reserved for things considered art, often excludes the ordinary from such consideration. She further exclaims on how art when conceived as something different from our daily affairs, already acquires a special status not shared by everyday life; when the only sole act of art is to illuminate or emulate the aspects of human connection (Saito 35). On the other hand, aesthetics experience-oriented aesthetics shifts the attention from the artwork to an experience a person has (43). It regards experience an aesthetic when we absorbed, detached, encounter something unique, and this makes experience rare, heightened, and extraordinary. It highlights the admiration for art based on its form rather than its utility, suggesting that art elevates us above ordinary concerns and evokes a sense of transcendence. "Art, whatever its designation, no matter how inclusive that notion becomes, and even when its intent is to blur the distinction from life, is necessarily characterized as an exception to or commentary on everyday objects and affairs" (Saito 40). In this context, Saito

critiques the tendency to treat aesthetic experience as necessarily extraordinary or art-like. She argues that aesthetic experiences are extraordinary, but can also occur in the most ordinary of daily objects or experiences.

Saito emphasizes the importance of everyday aesthetics, stressing that they matter as much as the other artworks, as it permeates all aspects of life and are just as aesthetically significant as encounters with art (49). The very act of carrying out the mundane, interactions, and environment, though ordinary, exerts substantial impact on our lives (52). By viewing everyday moments as an aesthetic medium, we can understand their influence on our behavior and morality. Saito further expresses how the aesthetic appreciation we hold for a single object or experience is just as significant as our appreciation for art. "However, an equally significant part of our everyday aesthetic life is the appreciation directed toward an ambience, atmosphere, or mood surrounding a certain experience, comprised of many ingredients" (Saito 119). It is often the small things in life that give meaning to our existence. Maybe through everyday experiences, one can discover their preferences and the reasons behind their affection for specific routines or places. By keeping spaces clean, designing welcoming environments, and caring for routine objects leaves an impact on the well-being of others. For instance, Keiko finds joy in the simple sound of the chimes on the door of the convenience store, the experience of stocking up on products, and the pleasure of walking around, observing how the place makes her feel connected to it. The minute details of her everyday experiences are what make each day worth treasuring. Saito emphasizes that experiences such as eating can also be examined from an aesthetic perspective. She states how eating can be a multisensory experience, that goes beyond the sense of taste and smell while also including other sensory qualities such "tactile sensation (crunchy, mushy, chewy), visual impression, and sometimes even sound quality" (Saito119). Similarly, Keiko does not feel annoyed by the repetition of the food she eats such as the convenience store bread for breakfast, and rice balls for lunch. Rather, it reinforces her sense of belonging to the convenience store as she remarks: "When I think that my body is entirely made up of food from this store, I feel like I'm as much as part of the store… (Murata 22).

Keiko Furukura's routines can be framed in aesthetic terms rather than purely functional activity. Her daily routines free from frustrations or hesitations, emphasizes the essence of conformity to routine. While some may find her repetitive lifestyle boring, Keiko's daily rituals, such as eating the same food, arranging products, and mimicking her coworkers' speech, are not flashy acts. Rather than terming these acts as being mundane, all these contributes to her sense of harmony and belonging within the store. For instance, when Keiko offers a detailed check of the weather forecast, she emphasizes how it serves as a vital source of information for a convenience store. She further explains how the difference in temperature from the previous day can tell what the weather will be the evening (Murata 23). This information influences which foods are likely to sell, further emphasizing Keiko's connection with the store. The repeated phrases directed at customers, such as "Irasshaimase! Certainly, right away, sir! Thank you for your custom!" (30), may seem tedious and repetitive to others, but for Keiko, she loves the moment. She further states how working in the convenience store provides her a stability and feeling of being a normal person in a society (21).

Furthermore, Keiko's act of embracing the routines of the store, illustrates the beauty and the comfort found in the mundane. The structure of her job, is not a mere act of fulfilling her duty but a performance with ritualistic care that reflects her deep connection to her environment.

"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). With this seemingly simple remark, she further exerts her connection with the store, and how the sound of the store becomes a lifeline, and a place where she finds a sense of self and belongingness. Through her experiences, we see how Keiko finds fulfillment in ordinary routines and the gentle passage of time, which aligns to the proposition of Saito on how everyday experiences is also a beauty and plays a vital role in shaping a meaning of our daily existence and that everyday aesthetics are not detached and contemplative like traditional art appreciation, but actively shape how we live and relate to our environment. Thus, there is beauty in the mundanity, as well as a sense of identity, and value embedded in everyday experiences.

Embodied resistance

Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity" redefines gender as a set of acts that are continually rehearsed and imitated rather than as a fixed or innate identity. She notes "There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of "the subject" as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women" (Butler 4). Butler emphasizes that the category of women is no longer seen as stable or unified, but a debate over what it means. Only those who meet the specific criteria can be represented as subjects, meaning that the system shapes who fits as such. She further explains that gender is a contested term, not a unified category and it is not consistent or coherent across all continents, and is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, but gender intersects with "racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities" (Butler 6). Thus, gender cannot be separated from broader cultural and political intersections.

Throughout the novel, Keiko has always wondered what it means to be "normal" according to her family and society as a whole. For them, fitting in, getting married, having children, and maintaining a stable job are considered the essence of normalcy. Ever since her childhood, her family has been trying to change her, with her sister particularly focused on providing guidelines to help her avoid societal scrutiny and blend in. Outside the family, her friends would attempt to set her up with potential partners so she can settle down. So, Keiko's life often evolves around the question of what is normal while constantly facing judgment for her unconventional lifestyle. However, through her job at the convenience store, she discovers her authentic self by embracing the mundane routine and learns to accept her role as a "normal cog" in society (Murata 20). The notion of normal and what consist of normal is often considered as an innate desire but for Keiko it is a performance she absorbs by mirroring others. As she reflects, "My present self is formed almost completely of the people around me" (Murata 25), she also explains why she adopts certain behavior not out of personal conviction but rather to blend in and maintain the identity of being a human (26). For instance, she copies her coworker, Mrs. Izumi's style of dress, because it she sees it as a representation of what women in their thirties wear. She mirrors her clothing not out of envy, but because she wants to fit into the notion of age-appropriate characteristics as she states: "I'm sure everyone must see me as someone with an age-appropriate bag and a manner of speech that has a perfect sense of distance without being reserved or rude" (27). According to Kakoliris in one of her articles, she explains how gender identity does not exist prior to or independently of behavior, but it is through

behaviors that performs and that produces what is recognized as gender (61). Thus, Keiko's act of mimicking the expressions, tone, and speech patterns of her coworkers to appear normal, is the very act that demonstrates how everyday gender norms are not natural, but perpetuated through social mimicry and repetition.

Additionally, Keiko's instant act of adjusting her rhythm to match the employees in the store shows how she depends on the external cues to define her sense of self. Despite the changes in the structure of the store, she confronts this change by trying to keep up with those around her while pretending to be normal. Keiko absorbs the world around her, that constantly changes in order to appear normal (Murata 32). She also insists on how her body has been made up of the food she eats from the store, and regardless of the constant repetition, it gives her the sense of being part of the store ecosystem (22). Through all her daily rituals, and behaviors, Keiko performs a femininity that is defined by neatness, politeness, and responsiveness, traits that are socially learned rather than biologically inherent. Although her actions, speech, and attire may be viewed as a performance of womanhood reflecting social expectations, her conformity also serves as a subtle facade of resistance. Her outfits, manner of speech, and expressions could appear to uphold normative femininity, but they also challenge conventional notions of womanhood that is achieved through performance. While Keiko adopts outward behaviors, she remains unchanged inwardly, illustrating her resistance through surface performance.

Furthermore, Keiko's act of rejecting marriage, stable employment, and motherhood, is a resistance to the societal norms. When one does not conform into a set of rules, the unconventional lifestyle is regarded as abnormality and Keiko's unconformity was no exception. But when Shiraha, another socially isolated individual, enters Keiko's life, and decides to fake a relationship to deflect societal judgment, everyone around her congratulated her. She states how the manual for life already existed and ingrained in the head of everyone and how this decision was already considered as a trait for "ordinary person" (Murata 98). So, when Keiko announces that a man is now living with her, her sister congratulates her, believing she is finally conforming to the traditional ideals of femininity, where getting married, having children, and starting a family are expected. Even her coworkers at the store are excited about her progress in this newly formed relationship and were "all so ecstatic about it" (111). This fake relationship she had with Shiraha act as a glimmer of convenience as she can finally avoid the questions about when and why she is not married. Although this relationship is a divergence from societal norms, it also illustrates how gender roles can be strategically performed without embracing the core ideas framed by the society. This simplifies the act of how Keiko takes up decision in order to blend into the society in her own terms is the embodied resistance in itself.

Thus, Keiko's refusal of marriage and conventional femininity, through her everyday routines subtly rejects the societal identity that is expected from her. Her work at the convenience store is not just a job but rather, it represents a site of freedom, autonomy, and resistance. As Judith Butler emphasized, on how gender is not a fixed entity but rather something we enact through repeated behaviors. Keiko's performance of social roles is not just an act, but it is a refusal and a challenge to conform to conventional notion of femininity and normality.

Intersections

Yuriko Saito's concept of everyday aesthetics, helps us to redefine how Keiko's daily activities at the store is rooted in aesthetic rituals of routine, order, and service. These adaption of Keiko helps us to understand the deeper meaning of stability and belongingness through her mundane activities in the store which further explores the intersection between aesthetic value and performance of gendered identity. Through Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, Keiko's embodied actions, such as mimicking speech, outfits, and adopting specific gestures, are not neutral act but rather an ongoing performance that contribute to the social construction and maintenance of what is considered normative femininity. So, while Keiko's conformity offers a sense of comfort through aesthetic engagement, it also reveals the superficiality and artificiality of conventional femininity. Her performance of femininity through everyday routines rather than innate desires, provides a stance of reconsidering how the ordinary spaces within daily life can be a site for constructing, negotiating, and sometimes subtly resisting identity.

Additionally, Keiko's act of facing the day with pretense and strategy in order to fit into the environment of the store, shows how meaning can be framed in the mundane while at the same time resisting the pressure to conform into societal norms. The complexity to derive the meaning of being normal, and to prove that she is also a normal cog in the society often complicates her stance as an individual. While managing the performance of being normal in the convenience store's environment, she struggled to conform the normality in regards to her family's demand of owing a stable job. Her family considers her job at the convenience store contribute to her unconventional lifestyle, and her sister complains about how strange Keiko has become since she started working at the convenience store: "Ever since you started working at the convenience store, you've gotten weirder and weirder" (Murata 131). To which Keiko responds with a desperate question, "So, will I be cured if I leave the convenience store? Or am I better staying working there?" (131). Although her conformity is viewed as "grotesque," and her connection to the store might lead others to declare, "You're not a human!" (162), she still feels a strong desire to fit into the norms of the convenience store. When she was confronted by Shiraha on how society will not accept her and how she will be persecuted for defying the rules, she responds by acknowledging that having she has no need for his presence and asserts her identity as she states: "But the animal in me, the convenience store worker, has absolutely no use for you whatsoever"(161-162). This clearly rejects the conformity of established societal norms concerning femininity.

The word "strange one" being Keiko's label ever since childhood, and despite all her effort to implement the changes none seems adequate to meet societal expectations. But through her ritual of arranging or stocking products, greeting customers, or predicting the weather, she controls her present within the confines of the convenience store. While Keiko's monotonous lifestyle may appear repetitive to those around her, she subtly rejects all societal expectations. Through her act of embracing her individuality at the end of the book, to which she remarks "I could distinctly feel all my cells stirring withing my skin as they responded to the unison to the music reverberating on the other side of the glass" (Murata 163), shows how fulfilled and whole she feels within her role at the store, her aesthetic realm. The notion of identity, belongingness, and autonomy have always been formed through the subtle acts of conformity and self-introspection. As Saito has stressed, how mundanity, small interactions, and environment is as much as aesthetic as the art, it also helps redefine one's identity and assumption about self. According to Butler, gender cannot be separated from the broader contexts of cultural practice,

political intersections, and social expectations. The category of "woman" is not unified but contested, shaped by multiple intersections of identity and power. So, identity is not singular but multiple and often constructed through social interactions. Thus, in order to understand oneself and others, we should not rely on the fixed or concrete answers but rather the ongoing process of reframing and interpreting the meanings of gender and existence itself. Furthermore, there lies a limitation on how gender roles truly define all the characteristics of women. Like how knowledge has been passed down generation to generation, so is the notion of womanhood. It undergoes the process of construction, which is later passed down and followed by society. So, identity itself is not a singular statement but it is multiple and complex. In the same stance, regardless of how society views Keiko's nonconformity as weird or strange, she subtly resists this judgment through her daily activities.

According to Butler, the universality of "woman" as a subject leads to exclusions and refusals, a concept illustrated in Keiko's daily dilemma regarding what it means to be a woman. The societal definition on femininity and gender roles failed to recognize the true identity of Keiko. As a result, she frames her own identity as a convenience store worker, even if it means rejecting the societal notion of womanhood that is limited to marriage, stable employment, and motherhood. Through the embodied routines, her identity as a convenience store worker, her ritualized mundanity, she subtly rejects societal constructs of gender roles, enabling a unique form of resistance that builds her autonomy, identity and meaning within the societal expectations.

Conclusion

Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* presents a statement on how one can transform the mundanity of the daily life as a site for subtle yet persistent acts of resistance and a process of reframing one's identity. The dedication and the process of being mindful to her everyday rituals of stocking shelves, greeting customers, and embodying the rhythms of the store, captures the essence of how Keiko was attuned to her aesthetic realm. This act of elevating the ordinary experiences is what Yuriko Saito terms as a stance of the experienced-oriented aesthetics. Simultaneously drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Keiko's consistent imitation and repetition of behavior reveal the constructed nature of what defines as normal femininity. It exposes the limits in social script on attempt to define women's lives through marriage, motherhood, or stable jobs. Instead of straightforwardly rebelling against these societal expectations, Keiko derives her own means of finding the agency within them through her act of embracing the mundanity as a convenience store worker. Through Keiko, the significance of the ordinary, which is often overlooked, redefines the possibility of how it can illustrate or act as a resistance towards rigid gender norms and pathway of finding the authentic autonomy.

By incorporating Yuriko Saito's everyday aesthetics and Judith Butler's gender performativity, *Convenience Store Women* invites a narrative that is engaged with aesthetic, ethical, and political possibilities embedded in our everyday mundanities. It draws the emphasis on how ordinary habits can form deeper meaning and site for exploring identity and subtle acts of autonomy and resistance. Through Murata's way of illustrating Keiko's character illuminated by her complex narratives, it deepens our understanding of how one's identity lies not in the

superficiality or the extraordinary, but through the mundane little things, calling us to notice the beauty that emerge from rich textures of daily life.

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