

Alienation, Loneliness and Asexuality in Mieko Kawakami's *All the Lovers in The Night*: A Portrayal of Modern Japanese Womanhood

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Abstract

All the Lovers in The Night is a contemporary novel by the Japanese author Mieko Kawakami, which was first published in 2011 and later translated from Japanese into English by Sam Bett and David Boyd. The novel presents a striking and poignant portrayal of the emotional and psychological struggles experienced by women in the modern Japanese society. The narrative, while intimate in scope, resonates with broader themes of alienation, loneliness, and the complexity of asexuality within a society that places rigid expectations on women regarding work, relationships, and sexuality. This paper delves into the themes of alienation, loneliness, and representation of asexuality in the novel, contextualizing them within modern Japanese society. The analysis will draw on feminist theory, discussions on asexuality, and critiques of societal norms to analyze the depiction of women's position within the Japanese society, their compliance with social norms and how they are perceived based on their willingness to conform to prevalent social hegemonies of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: Womanhood, Society, Alienation, Asexuality

Introduction

Mieko Kawakami made her literary debut in the year 2006 with the novella, *My Ego, My Teeth, and The World*. Known for her portrayal of unconventional and complex female protagonists in contemporary Japanese society, Kawakami created ripples in the Japanese literary scene, posing a challenge to its male-dominated status quo. Her work has been translated into multiple languages and widely read across the globe. In 2008, Kawakami won the Akutagawa Prize, Japan's most prestigious literary award, for her novella "*Breasts and Eggs*." Recently, her novel, "*Heaven*" was shortlisted for the 2022 International Booker Prize. *All The Lovers in The Night* is a thoughtful novel that explores the monotony of ordinary life and loneliness of the inhabitants of the metropolitan cities of contemporary Japan.

The novel follows the story of a thirty-four-year-old woman, Fuyuko Irie, who works as a freelance-proofreader. Fuyuko's reclusive, lonely life and her longing for a meaningful companion serve as a contrast against the densely populated city of Tokyo. Fuyuko has lived in the same apartment for a long time and has worked only as a proofreader throughout her adult life. She has avoided being part of any group and socializing, which has resulted in her not having any close friends despite living in the same city for more than a decade. After being an outcast at her previous employment, Fuyuko becomes a freelance proofreader, physically isolating herself from the outer world as much as possible.

One day after her chance meeting with Mitsutsuka, a fifty-eight-year-old physics teacher, Fuyuko, developed an emotional and intellectual bond with him. We get to know that the friendship between the two was not based on honesty and soon fizzled out. While Mitsutsuka pretends to be something he is not, Fuyuko is an over-thinker who often overanalyzes her every move, and thus she relies on alcohol to talk to Mitsutsuka. Fuyuko gets heavily drunk before every planned meeting with Mitsutsuka in order to 'let go of her usual self'. This backfires in the end, as Mitsutsuka finds it difficult to reciprocate her feelings and later abandons her, leaving her dejected. After being rejected by Mitsutsuka, Fuyuko completely withdraws from her day-to-day routine, spending several days in bed while pondering over the loss of a companion and blaming herself for everything that went wrong in her life. In the end, we get to know that Fuyuko took a lot of time to recover from her heartbreak and slowly worked her way back to the person she used to be prior to meeting Mitsutsuka. Towards the end of the narrative, we notice a positive shift in Fuyuko's worldview. Overcoming her depression and loneliness, she embraces the joys of womanhood through female friendships and displays a healthier approach towards life in general.

Alienation

Alienation is often defined as 'the feeling or sense of being alien, or a feeling of being similar to an outcast or not belonging to one's milieu (Gale,2009). The themes of the human plights of alienation and loss are widely addressed in contemporary feminist literature. Alienation is a recurring theme in Kawakami's works and is aptly portrayed in her novels *Breasts and Eggs*, *Heaven*, and *All the Lovers in The Night*, where protagonists grapple with existential isolation in the face of societal expectations.

In *All the Lovers in The Night*, Fuyuko's experience of alienation is emblematic of the broader experience of women in the contemporary Japanese society, particularly in the post-modern metropolitan setting where 'individualism' and 'self-reliance' are essential for survival yet, they paradoxically lead to profound isolation. Fuyuko's social alienation is evident in many instances in this novel. Throughout the narrative, she often

refers to her fellow women as "those women," "they"—a species that she is not a part of. Fuyuko looks at herself as 'the other', she is an alien as compared to all of them who conform to societal standards for women her age. "These women had so many choices...and the choices they made would change the color of their lives. They were surrounded by possibilities" (Kawakami 89). Fuyuko looks at the 'other women' as someone who is empowered, who had choices whereas she did not.

Before starting as a full-time freelancer, Fuyuko also experiences isolation at her workplace where she would struggle to socialize or form any camaraderie with her co-workers. Her inability to acclimate herself with her workplace atmosphere, eventually leads her to become an outcast in the office. Fuyuko's resistance of the accepted workplace and social conventions made her the subject of gossip and ridicule amongst her co-workers. The feeling of 'not belonging' amongst her colleagues and her inability to form any social bond with her coworkers even while seeing them on a daily basis, results in her being socially alienated. This eventually forces Fuyuko to quit and seek a more reclusive lifestyle as a freelancer who could work from the comfort of her home.

Fuyuko's disconnection from society is further exacerbated by her detachment from her own body and physical desires. She notes that her body doesn't even matter to her, she describes it body as "depressing to look at" something "even worse than her old, faded clothes" (Kawakami 176). The alienation she experiences is thus twofold- she is alienated from both, society, and herself, unable to reconcile her internal sense of identity with the external pressures to conform to.

Asexuality and a longing for connection

One of the most subtle yet significant theme of the novel is its exploration of asexuality. While Fuyuko's asexuality is never explicitly stated, her disinterest in sexual relationships challenges the heteronormative assumptions of womanhood prevalent in the society. Kawakami's subtle portrayal of asexuality through Fuyuko's character, aligns with broader discussions of womanhood and sexuality in the contemporary feminist literature.

Kawakami uses a dream sequence to depict her protagonist's inability to experience sexual attraction and pleasure. Fuyuko keeps having a recurring dream in which she experiences a pleasurable sexual intercourse with Mitsutsuka but as her dream progresses, she realizes that the person having the intercourse with Mitsutsuka is not her but her friend Hijiri. She realizes that all the pleasure which she felt was not hers but Hijiri's. Fuyuko's futile dream is representative of her inability to experience physical pleasure. Fuyuko's asexuality becomes a hindrance in her quest to seek romantic relationships.

The protagonist's asexuality, whether intentional or not, serves as a commentary on the rigid expectations placed on women in Japanese society and also, everywhere else in the world.

Loneliness and lack of meaning often felt by city dwellers

Fuyuko's isolation is not simply physical but emotional and psychological. Living in the densely populated city of Tokyo, Fuyuko is surrounded by people, yet feels profoundly alone. She is overwhelmed by interactions with people and after returning home, she often lies down on the kitchen floor, exhausted from her minimal, necessary public interactions. While in public spaces, such the office, library, etc., she describes herself as invisible and non-existent - "I wasn't even there for her to see...as if, I didn't exist anywhere at all" (Kawakami 178). Her interactions with people are minimal as she avoids day-to-day conversations even with her friends and coworkers. Despite feeling isolated and lonely, instead of breaking the ice with her colleagues, Fuyuko further isolates herself by quitting her job and going freelance full-time.

She realizes her yearning for emotional intimacy after meeting Mitsutsuka, a physics teacher whom she befriends at the culture center. Her social anxiety and lack of confidence is evident when she starts relying on alcohol to hold basic conversations with Mitsutsuka. Despite being asexual, Fuyuko longs for an emotional and romantic companionship, but her attempts to forge such a connection with Mitsutsuka go in vain. Mitsutsuka, harboring a secret of his own, could not provide the solace and connection which she wanted him to and later, abandons her. After being abandoned by the only person she saw herself creating a bond with, Fuyuko realizes how lonely she has been all her life. She comprehends that there is absolutely no place for her in the world, except her apartment. She doesn't have a workplace, a family, or a home to return to. Shattered by this realization, she mulls over her past decisions, blaming her vulnerability and fear of getting hurt that her eventually lead her to this catastrophe.

In one of her interviews, Kawakami remarked on the centrality of human connection in her works, noting that her characters often grapple with the impossibility of fully understanding or being understood by others (Yoshio, 2020). Fuyuko's strong feelings of loneliness and her failed attempts at companionship coincide with growing number of Japanese women, who choose or are forced into – lives of solitude. Being forced into a reclusive lifestyle is either a result of those women rejecting the traditional roles of wife or mother or because of their inability to find meaningful relationships. Naturally, Fuyuko blames herself for her predicament, as she regrets over all her past decisions and choices.

Conclusion

Mieko Kawakami's *All the Lovers in The Night* presents a bleak yet powerful depiction of alienation and loneliness experienced by a major portion of the modern Japanese working women. She has successfully created a complex portrait of womanhood in a modern society by masterfully weaving together the themes of asexuality, loneliness, depression, and societal expectations. These themes not only reflect Fuyuko's journey but also broadly depict how cultural and societal forces have shaped the lives of women in modern Japan. Moreover, the novel's exploration of asexuality, though subtle, stands as a form of resistance to the compulsory conformity that dominates the socio-economic scenario in Japan. Kawakami has constructed a narrative around a character whose lifestyle conflicts with the established social hegemonies of gender and sexuality. Ultimately, the novel offers a profound reflection of the ways through which societal norms and expectations shape female identities and experiences because Kawakami's imperfect, unconventional protagonist is essentially a product of the socio-economic conditions of twenty-first century Japan.

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