

THE INFLUENCE OF THE STORE AS SPATIAL SETTING TOWARD THE MAIN CHARACTER'S DEVELOPMENT IN SAYAKA MURATA'S *CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN*

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Abstract: This research examines Keiko Furukura's character development influenced by the convenience store as the main spatial setting in Sayaka Murata's novel entitled *Convenience Store Woman* (2018). The study is a literary criticism which uses the theory of New Criticism, especially its argument that centers on the analysis of the main character in the story. This research proposes that spatial settings can become one of most determinant factors to affect the character's development in the story. The finding proves that the store is influential to the main character's development as it plays as the character's life-anchor to evaluate, measure or even, eventually, decide how worthy the main character is as a human.

Keywords: *New Criticism, character development, spatial setting*

Convenience Store Woman, originally コンビニ人間 (*Konbini Ningen*), is a well-known work by Sayaka Murata, a modern, female Japanese literary author. Many of her novels revolve around sexuality, gender, and motherhood placed within a socially complex network. But, as Yano (2017, as cited in Sautto, 2022) and Kurihara (2013, as cited in Sautto, 2022) have suggested, the *Convenience Store Woman* is unique among her other work as the novel tells more of an essential portrayal of normalcy in the complexity of Japanese landscape.

Firstly published in 2016, *Convenience Store Woman* is Murata's debut to be translated into English by Ginny Tapley Takemori and has now been translated into more than 30 languages (Page, 2019). The book navigates through the lens of a 36-year-old woman, Keiko Furukura, a social outcast who has only worked in a convenience store (or *konbini*, as Japanese society calls it) for almost her entire life.

Since the story is heavily focused on Keiko Furukura, her character is often analyzed through psychological and sociological theories (Anggra, 2019; Gaur, 2022; Hidayat & Febrianty, 2021). This leaves many intrinsic elements, such as the plot, characters, and settings, are often overlooked, if not even probably even underrated. Also, many critics and forum discussions dedicated to this work are frequently preoccupied with the underlying social topics brought by the author, sometimes even leading to misperceptions toward the main character¹. In response to such an overlooking condition and lack of diversity in intrinsic analysis which also coincide with what Wellek & Warren (1956) state about the significance of internal narrative's structure, i.e. "... each of main intrinsic elements is determinant of the others" (p. 216), this research examines the main character's development as it is influenced by one of the most important spatial settings in the story, the convenience store.

There are some previous studies related to *Convenience Store Woman*, but they are mostly pivoting on Keiko's character, which is portrayed as having no career ambitions aside from her job at the convenience store. Of Keiko's struggles in living up to social expectations, Hidayat & Febrianty (2021) took a psychological look into her conformity which is dominated by her social groups' pressures and other influences from people whose presence even Keiko herself seemed to enjoy. The examples of these are when she tried to mimic the co-worker she admired for being an 'ideal' person, or when she took mental notes regarding some concerns about her being from her friends and family. This struggle for conformity also ties into a preceding study by

¹ There has been a rather intensive online discussion regarding Keiko's character development throughout the story (Hadi, 2020.; Jessica, 2021; Renata, 2021; Yoo & Yueh, 2021.). Although in separate media, the discussion basically revolves around how Keiko's character development feels too minimal and almost pointless.

Anggra (2019), which analyzed Keiko's ideal self and intrapersonal conflicts caused by childhood trauma and social judgment. This study concluded that Keiko used conformity to achieve the idealized version of herself in the story.

In the sociological scope, Keiko is considered a non-stereotypical woman as she is shown to be a misfit among some social stereotypes implied in the story, such as women as mothers, incompetent workers, or sex objects (Herlina, 2022). Her breaking from these stereotypes was due to her social chastity and shape-shifting nature, which is also strongly stigmatized by her surroundings (Khofifah, 2022).

One study noticed that Keiko failed the conservative expectation of *ryōsai kenbo* or *good wife, a wise mother*, a typical slogan in Japanese society (Nicolae, 2021). On the other hand, a later study by Pratama (2022) argued that Keiko's character had succeeded in fitting into the popular Japanese stereotype, but as a spinster, that later impacted her selfhood pursuit.

The above previous studies show more or less the novel as a story of a woman's struggles to find her place in a society that simultaneously demands her to follow the constructed mindset. This more psychological and sociological reading of the novel gives a wider chance to study the main character's development and its correlation with the titular convenience store as the story's main setting. The relationship between Keiko's development and the setting is only slightly mentioned by Thornbury (2020), who stated that her spatial disorientation in the settings, aside from the store, represents urban placelessness and loss of identity. Yet, Guerin et al. (1992) and Klarer (2013) argue that such a text-oriented approach is necessary to understand the basic traits of a character because it allows the literary work to be perceived objectively as an independent entity without peripheral aspects.

The character-setting relationship is not an uncommon treatise in literary criticism. Texts ascribe all properties to characters, including physiological and locative (space-time location) properties or the setting (Chatman, 1972). O'Toole (1982, as cited in Ronen, 1986) defines the setting as any informational items relating to background materials about characters and events. In Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor and Park*, Ellisa (2018) finds that as the social setting in *Eleanor and Park* concerns racial and gender discrimination, its contribution to the main characters' development is primarily shown through the characters' experiences at school and home. In another case, Amalia (2013) examines how Jane in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* progressively attaches herself to the places, as implied in the highlighted architectural details in the story. Faced with a marginalized setting from the lords of the houses, Jane's character develops as she interacts with each house's inhabitants and surroundings. Therefore, a place and people are tightly linked, as the correlation results in the sense of belonging and how one discerns themselves (Antonsich, 2010; Hauge, 2007).

Thus, this research then examines how the main character, Keiko Furukura, develops in the story as she gets more and more attached to the convenience store as the novel's main spatial setting. This study does not try to delve into psychological conditions or sociological settings, such as character-to-character relations, mental problems or conditions, or any other concerns in these topics.

METHOD

This study interprets the English translation of Sayaka Murata's novel, *Convenience Store Woman*, using New Criticism as one of the literary approaches to texts. The method is based on the characterization theory by M. J. Murphy in his book *Understanding Unseens* (1972). Murphy suggests that a character can be perceived through their physical appearance, direct comments from the author, description by other characters, conversations, speech, past life, thoughts, manners/habits, and reaction.

This analysis follows Keiko Furukura's character traits that revolve around the convenience store as the setting. The parts paraphrased and analyzed are picked according to the nine-point character traits suggested by Murphy (1972).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To highlight Keiko's character's attachment to the store, the findings will be divided into three sub-sections representing three stages of her life: Pre-Convenience Store, Peri-Convenience Store, and Post-Convenience Store.

Pre-Convenience Store

In the Pre-Convenience Store stage, Keiko's character development is mainly illustrated in vagueness and passivity. However, there is a glimpse of Keiko's past life that shows her basic character traits and later shaped her character as a person. This is in line with what Murphy (1972) believes that a character's past life can exhibit these aspects of a character in the narrative. In this part, it is mentioned that Keiko grew up in a suburban residential area and within a normal loving family (Murata, 2019, p. 6). A suburban area in Japan is

predominantly a result of major internal migrations back in the 1960s as people moved from the countryside to near the urban areas (Okamoto, 1997).

No exact timestamps are mentioned in *Convenience Store Woman* except that the Hiromachi Smile Mart was opened first on May 1, 1998 (Murata, 2019, p. 12). Inferring from her present age of thirty-six, Keiko was eighteen when she applied for a part-time job for the first time (Murata, 2019, p. 20). These hints imply that Keiko was born in 1980, thus, the Pre-Convenience Store stage occurred around 1980-1997.

The narration of Keiko's first memory starts when she finds a dead bird as a child, and her first instinct is to cook the bird and eat it. It is said that the dead bird reminded her of how his father liked *yakitori*, which she found to be nothing different from the one in the playground (Murata, 2019, p. 7). From Keiko's own perspective, her action and reasoning earned an unsettling impression from other characters - she was logical yet inhumane. Keiko's mother then attempts to explain and convince Keiko that the dead bird and *yakitori* are different (Murata, 2019, p. 8). However, not only does Keiko fail to understand, but she also cannot feel the supposed sadness as she perceives everything similarly.

Another significant memory that reveals Keiko's character is a big commotion during her primary school years. Keiko witnesses some boys fighting during break time, and it seems that the fight is becoming more intense as the other kids start wailing and asking someone to stop it. After hearing the request, Keiko immediately picks up a spade and stops the fight by hitting the boys' heads. Again, this impulsive action results in a similar unsettling impression from others as the teachers cannot accept Keiko's reasoning. The teachers tell Keiko that violence is wrong, so she does the quickest way to stop it, although her choices are different (Murata, 2019, p. 9).

The commotion scene reveals some basic traits of Keiko's character, i.e., she is logical and composed but lacks compassion for reality. This is highlighted by the part of the story when she explains that she did what everyone asked. Unfortunately, none of her teachers seemed to try to explain thoroughly to her about her mistake nor give a clear, practical example for her to follow. Watching her mother apologizing repeatedly was the sign that nudged Keiko because, in her understanding, apologies are commonly associated with mistakes. However, she fails to understand again because she takes action based on everyone's request or commands with a dichotomous perspective.

The non-ambivalent reasoning is revealed even further in another incident that involved Keiko's young teacher. At one time, she became hysterical and began bawling in class, causing the clueless students to cry. The students begged her to calm down by saying they were sorry and asking her to stop. Seeing these signs of 'mistakes' again as she previously did in her mother, Keiko took the matter and pulled the teacher's skirt and knickers down. The teacher was shocked but eventually calmed down (Murata, 2019, p. 9). When interrogated, Keiko's answer indicates that Keiko might have accidentally stumbled upon an obscene scene on TV and perceived the scene on TV as an unequivocal procedure for dealing with a certain situation. After the incident, the teachers hold another meeting and summons Keiko's mother again. Projected as a repetition of the incident with the boys, it evokes Keiko again to understand that what she did was wrong, although she still does not understand why.

Based on the three significant past events in her life, it can be inferred that Keiko's basic character traits are logical, obedient, blunt, and dichotomous. She perceives social cues and situations in a black-and-white perspective of what should be done and what not, therefore concurrently taking the slightest cues as a command. Keiko's tendency to imitate what she sees appears to result from observational learning. Bandura (1969) defines observational learning as children observing their surroundings, mainly in three principles: observation, imitation, and modeling. However, this learning pattern also requires certain cognitive skills from the individual (Schunk, 2012). Cognitive skills are developed during childhood in various ways to each individual's respective background (Piaget, 1971). This explains Keiko's stark difference in processing emotions and situations around her as she soundly relies on observational learning.

After those incidents, Keiko stopped acting on her own intuition and started to strictly follow the instructions from her surroundings, especially outside her home (Murata, 2019, p. 12). She also appeared to mingle less in social situations and only talked if necessary. From this point, Keiko's character becomes more obscure. Moreover, as she believes that any anomalies (dead bird, commotion, teacher's breakdown) should be immediately eliminated, Keiko becomes pessimistic about her self-worthiness. Her alienation from her surroundings and lack of self-respect result in her character's obscurity, which stops the plot progression as Keiko, the narrator, does not even remember what to tell anymore. Tomashevski (1925, as cited in Chatman, 1972) argues that although a character is secondary to the plot, it is still a fundamental appeal in narratives. Therefore, Murphy (1972) states that when the character is static, it needs a push from other narrative elements, such as the setting of place as in this novel.

Peri-Convenience Store: Inside the Convenience Store

As the book title suggests, the convenience store is the most crucial device to Keiko's character in this story. The setting can be crucial to the plot because it greatly affects the character's personality, actions, and ways of thinking (Murphy, 1972). This section aims to disclose and analyze Keiko, her interactions with the primary spatial setting, the convenience store, and her character development in the narrative.

In the previous section, Keiko admits that her memory of her life before the convenience store was vague. In contrast, her reminiscence of the day she came across the convenience store for the first time is narrated in detail (Murata, 2019, pp. 12–13). Keiko immediately signs up for the job when she reaches the convenience store building and finds out it is looking for part-time staff. Although her family financially supports her, Keiko states that she is still interested in part-time activities (Murata, 2019, p. 14). This hints at another trait of hers: her zeal to escape the social detachment described in the previous life stage.

Her meticulous diligence after being accepted into the convenience store illustrates this ardency. During the two-week training, everyone was required to practice various professional phrases and gestures for the job, and Keiko, who became very good at following instructions for almost all of her life, has found no problems in doing such training (Murata, 2019, p. 15). The provided manual allowed Keiko to utilize her basic nature of being logically reasonable and blunt to step into social situations again as she did in the past. Instead of taking action on her own intuition, Keiko now relied on a complete manual on how to socialize, i.e., the convenience store's standard of procedures. In the morning, she came early and immediately focused on the store's operation and how the surroundings affected it. She checked the weather forecast every morning to arrange the sale of food according to its temperature and took mental notes about the concurrent sales promotion schedule (Murata, 2019, p. 22). Her actions unveiled and further drove her character traits to be more complicated compared to her pre-convenience store's life. Keiko's diligent habits as a convenience store worker are in line with Murphy (1972), who states that habits show a growing attachment between a character and the setting.

Reacting to the narrative's situations can also show the development of character traits (Murphy, 1972). At work, Keiko was far more considerate to others, although the manual fully dictated her action. For example, a commotion at the store was caused by an unknown man who gave abrupt orders to other customers, which irritated another younger customer. A fight ultimately broke out between the two, recalling a similar situation when Keiko was younger. However, Keiko again stood firm and decided to follow the store procedure, saying that she should not get involved and instead pressed the alarm to let the supervisor handle the problem (Murata, 2019, p. 59). This part tells of a significant change in Keiko's character as she follows the rules rather than her own thoughts or conscience. This is in lieu of her own past trait in which she always knew that fighting was wrong ever since she was in school, but she had no one to tell her how to behave or deal with such a situation.

The standard of protocols in the convenience store demonstrates the store itself as a better model for Keiko than all of her old school environments as Bandura & Walters (1963) state that characteristics of a model influence an individual's attention in learning. Compared to everyone and everything from her previous schools, the convenience store provides Keiko with clear guidelines for each scenario, procedure, and its consequences, making the store a more salient spatial place for Keiko.

Keiko also started learning to mingle in social situations now that she felt more at ease and well-functioning in the work environment. However, she was not doing this of her own accord but to maintain her position among her co-workers, as she admitted that she was composed by others. For example, Keiko carefully paid attention to Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara's speech styles, only to later mimic it in her social situations as she hung around with her friends. Or when Keiko was involved in a conversation with Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara about a new employee who failed to turn up for his shift, she still could not understand why the guy was absent, albeit her being upset for him that led to her imitating Sugawara's complaint (Murata, 2019, p. 28).

Murphy (1972) suggests that what and how a person speaks to another can be a way to show a character. Keiko's parroting way of speaking implies a reaction to her anxiety about people's perception of her. Still unable to understand the context or the cue, her complaining, such as that that imitated Sugawara's, reassures herself and calms her anxiety. This is because many similar occurrences had happened before, and Keiko kept recounting how people seemed pleased with her whenever she got angry at the same things everyone did the same (Murata, 2019, p. 29). Yet, this is a pattern Keiko does not fail to observe and adds it up as her personal instructional cue, similar to that in her childhood when she associated apology with a mistake. However, she had no complete idea about it at all.

Keiko's other attempt to socialize is shown as she tries to copy her co-worker's fashion style to get a gist of how a thirty-year-old woman should dress (Murata, 2019, p. 26). However, Keiko does not just copy the style. Rather she manages to show her intelligence as she combines her own research on fashion to select suitable clothing brands. Again, she does this as part of wanting to look or feel normal after working in the department store for some time.

Thus, Keiko's learning shows that the store is an important factor in her character development compared to her pre-convenience store life. The job helps reveal another side of Keiko's personality which is diligent, attentive, and intelligent in her wanting to be called normal. In the convenience store, Keiko feels safe from the (social) judgment of others since people perceive her as equal to other store workers. One of the characters, Manager #8, described her as a faithful disciple (Murata, 2019, p. 63). The word 'disciple' is an important term since this might, at this point, already turn Keiko from a loose nobody into an attached-self to something, or in her case, that very space of the convenience store.

But that does not mean Keiko managed to get at ease with herself. In the story, she was still told to feel pessimistic and unworthy as she could not grasp how to function properly nor spot what was wrong with

herself. Yet, the convenience store gives her a reason to fit into the system and no matter how simple such a reason may seem to others, that still the very reason that feeds her with the feelings of self-worthy and confidence.

As a quiet person, Keiko often narrates the story with her thoughts. A character's inmost thoughts are another convenient way to show the readers what kind of a person the character is (Murphy, 1972). Thoughts can also represent the character's stream of consciousness, which conveniently conveys the character's complex mental process (Dorrit, 1988). Keiko's pessimistic view of one's self-worth influences how she perceives others, especially her co-workers. She is quite judgmental as she often uses the store's protocols to evaluate others, such as how well they played their roles as convenience store workers. For example, she got upset when she discovered Shiraha played with his cell phone during work, reflecting his inability to follow a simple directive from the store's rules.

This condition creates conflict as Keiko expects others to draw a strict line between professional and personal lives. Being self-attached to the store, Keiko has always tried to be professional for as long as she has worked there. Yet, some unfortunate accident changed her perception toward her co-workers. For instance, she grew to hate Manager #8, who she admired as the perfect model because the Manager kept talking about Shiraha (Murata, 2019, p. 124). She fears that her connection to Shiraha might disrupt her role as a convenience store worker, elicit further unnecessary social probing into the relationship, and, unavoidably, her personal conditions. In other words, Keiko found the convenience store and everything in it may threaten and degrade her from a good store worker into a regular female or woman (Murata, 2019, p. 125).

Peri-Convenience Store: Outside the Convenience Store

Under the layers of attitude that she shows at work, Keiko remains the same as before the convenience store. Keiko becomes less human once she removes her uniform, even more at home when no one from society sees her for who she is. This aligns with her conviction that everyone differs from their original state in their convenience store uniform (Murata, 2019, p. 16).

Keiko lets her store worker's persona down when she is at her apartment. Living alone, she tends to be less on guard and strict. She described her living space with the toilet, which didn't flush very well, the grubby futon, and the presence of cockroaches (Murata, 2019, p. 101). But even so, what is more interesting is that she perceives the apartment as a mere place of transit before she returns to the convenience store. This makes her less-care attitude not evidence of rest or self-composure, but of a halt, before she becomes something again in the store.

This may conclude that the convenience store has become deeply ingrained in Keiko's character. The store has successfully coaxed Keiko to play her role in society and unveiled more of her personality. Before the convenience store, Keiko was cold and dichotomous. Even some would say it is almost inhuman. However, as the store equips her with a clear manual and purpose, Keiko gradually becomes a functioning social being. She turns into a facet of herself that is diligent, attentive, and considerate to others while she remains her old self outside her work.

Post-Convenience Store

The narrative further tells of Keiko's growing romantic relationship with Shiraha. However, this is more problematic to Keiko and her relationship with the store. As soon as more and more people discover her romantic affair, Keiko is forced to resign from her part-time employment at the store. Not only does she do this to avoid social probing of her conditions, but also to let Shiraha play a traditional role of a family man who supports the whole family. Such a drastic measure significantly impacts her character's development in the story.

As a person, Keiko had barely described her own physical appearance. Throughout the book, the only slight description is that she kept her body in good shape to avoid problems at work (Murata, 2019, p. 75). She also held a strict sleeping schedule to adjust to her shifts and was always content with the hourly pay as long as it covered her basic needs (Murata, 2019, p. 95). The only further detail of her physical appearance is her neatly trimmed fingers which suggests that Keiko only narrated part of her body, which was essential for her job. Hence, her nails are undoubtedly neatly trimmed for practical purposes, similar to how Keiko takes bits of her co-workers' style to appear normal rather than to appeal for her own personal satisfaction or gratification. Again, this lack of physical description only stresses how important the convenience store has become for Keiko's personal life guide.

Yet, the moment she resigned from the convenience store - also due to her relationship with Shiraha, she suddenly listed the changes in her physical appearance. She described unshaven black hairs on her fingers, arms, and above her lips. She also gets more careless such as when she burns her hand while frying croquettes a short moment after her resignation (Murata, 2019, p. 147). From this description, it is safe to assume that Keiko seems to have lost her life anchor when she decided to live with Shiraha, meaning also to live outside the convenience store.

With more of her life manual getting lost, Keiko's character gradually regressed to the vague narration in the pre-convenience store life. She became more depressed and, at times, even lost the sense of time and

date (Murata, 2019, p. 148). She recalled a specific description of her pre-store life where her memory is unclear. She no longer acts independently and instead lets herself be ordered around by Shiraha. This is directly opposite to when she works at the store where she could navigate her life fully, regardless of her inability to understand the social rules.

Further, Keiko kept losing her rational guidance as she interacted with people like Shiraha's sister. At a time when both women are on the call, Keiko hears a baby crying in the background. This is when she realizes that she is no longer a convenience store worker but instead even lesser than a human, as she resembles an animal of the human species whose primary purpose is to breed (Murata, 2019, p. 152). And when Shiraha's sister-in-law exclaims that she should bear no children because her genes are worthless to humanity, Keiko finds herself impressed by the argument instead of humiliated (Murata, 2019, p. 153).

This kind of character's conversation can be a good clue to understanding the story since any character can be demonstrated through their speech and thoughts (Murphy, 1972). In this conversation, Keiko might sound genuine in asking for the other woman's opinion as she sought alternative guidance after the store's manual. Although it seems harsh, Shiraha's sister might also give an equally genuine comment based on social reality. This should only emphasize how further Keiko's development falls after she leaves the store.

At the end of the story, Keiko regains her once-lost 'faith' and 'light' when she enters the convenience store out of the blue. Then, she acts as if she is a part of the store by immediately going into the store operation rooms and addressing the workers in a way that makes them believe she is another worker or even a manager. When confronted by Shiraha, Keiko rejects his argument stating that she realizes that she has always accepted her normalcy as a convenience store worker.

Keiko and the Convenience Store

Based on the findings above, it can be assumed that Keiko's character development is closely related to the existence of a spatial setting, the convenience store. This store proves to be part of herself and even her ultimate purpose. As this study shows, the store motivates Keiko to live and directs her life in a particular manner with its protocols and manual. Such a finding also correlates with Margolin (1990), who explains that extensional featuring on a character is essential as a constitutive condition for a character to exist in a narrative and proceed along the plot. Thus, Keiko gets more individualized as she is within the convenience store and gets less when outside because a change of place or people may change one's prior commitments and salience of identities (Benwell, 2006; Serpe, 1987).

At some point, Keiko is indeed depicted as a regular store worker within an urban situation in Japan as Okamoto (1997) states that the migrants or suburban residents were more likely to synchronize their activities with the urban industrial routine or Gaur (2022) who explains that the Japanese workers during post-recession in the 1990s were pressured to the point that such a forced environment as a convenience store was perceived as a safe haven. But that does not change the story's fact that Keiko is also narrated as significantly affected by the spatial setting of the store. Recalling the Manager #8's word that Keiko resembles the store's disciple and comparing her own description even when she was at her own home, it can be safely concluded that Keiko does take the convenience store as more than just her place to work, or even her place to rest. Interpreting how zealous she was as a 'disciple' of the store, Keiko has turned the store into her own private sacred sanctuary where she could act not as a worker but as shrine-maiden, a temple guardian who takes care of everything at her shrine. We can say that in relation to the spatial setting of the store, Keiko never actually works there but devotes herself to the sake of her convenience store.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

With the narrative that heavily focuses on the main character, it is important to see the textual relationship between Keiko Furukura as the main character and the convenience store as the setting of *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata. As the dominant setting of the story, the convenience store plays a huge role in Keiko's character development. Before the convenience store, Keiko had an obscure personality with a logical and dichotomous mindset, resulting in her isolation from society. When she started working at the convenience store, Keiko found a life manual in the store's regulations. The life manual helps her adjust to fit in society, including how her reactions, manners, habits, and even clothing styles are supposed to be. She was also depicted as diligent, attentive, and considerate while remaining or working in the store.

However, this adjustment only happens inside the store. Outside and even post the store period, Keiko was evidently a different person as she regressed back to her obscure personality and became almost inhuman. This necessitates the importance of the setting because the story makes the store act as an anchor for its main character's development. How significant the store is to Keiko can be ascribed within a statement that though the former may be able to continue to exist without the latter, the opposite cannot be held valid.

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