



The Paradox of Conformity and Deviance in Sayaka Murata's Convenience Store Woman

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Open Access

Manuscript ID: BIJ-2025-OCT-067

Subject: English

Received : 26.09.2025

Accepted : 08.10.2025

Published : 31.10.2025

DOI:10.64938/bijri.v10n1.25.Oct067

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Abstract

Sayaka Murata's Convenience Store Woman (2018) is a Japanese novel featuring a young protagonist named Keiko Furukura, who has been working in a convenience store for more than eighteen years. She chooses to do so because she cannot find another job that both satisfies her and makes her feel 'normal'. Keiko is treated as 'weird', 'strange' and a 'freak' by society because she lacks the ability to read emotions and understand social cues. She is however, an extremely efficient worker who perfectly understands every aspect and requirement of her job as a convenience store worker. She refuses to find another job even though she is getting older as this job is her only source of comfort. With Keiko's character as the centre of focus, this research paper examines how the concepts of conformity and deviance are depicted by the author. Modern society is characterised by its celebration of individuality and uniqueness. Yet it also expects a certain degree of conformity. This paper therefore examines Keiko's struggle to find her sense of Self and identity within such a demanding socio-cultural setup that is highly contradictory in its own beliefs.

Keywords: Sayaka Murata, convenience store woman, Japanese literature, conformity, deviance

Oscar Wilde once said, "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation."

(Wilde 15) This quote is a pertinent description of the character of Keiko Furukara, the protagonist of the novel Convenience Store Woman by Sayaka Murata. Murata is a critically acclaimed Japanese novelist who is famous for her works that celebrate the 'outsiders' – characters who do not fit within the moulds that society has deemed worthy. Her characters are often caught in struggles featuring gender, sexuality, motherhood, identity etc.

Convenience Store Woman is her most famous work that has also won the prestigious Akutagawa Prize in 2016.

This is a complex novel that speaks about identity, gender bias, prejudice, alienation etc. It is also a work that is heavily focussed on the impact of socio-cultural beliefs upon the individual and their place in society. It is important to note that when references are made to identity and individuality, the following concepts of 'conformity' and 'deviance' cannot be ignored.



In Sociological theory, conformity refers to the tendency of a person to match their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours with those of a larger group that deigns to ascertain which actions are 'appropriate.' Conformity can take place either consciously or unconsciously.

The opposite is deviance. This refers to behaviours, attitudes, or characteristics that go against established social norms, rules, or expectations. Such behaviour is generally considered as unacceptable. However, there are instances where deviance may be accepted as 'normal.'

Convenience Store Woman is a compelling novel about a young woman, Keiko Furukara, who finds it difficult to fit into the society of her birth. The novel traces her journey of self-discovery as she tries relentlessly to be an 'effective' member of society so that she can fulfil the wishes of her family and friends.

There have been various theorists who have examined these ideas of conformity and deviance. Robert Merton was a famous sociologist who propagated the 'Strain Theory' in Criminology to explain the nature of deviant behaviour. Though he had used this theory to explain the nature of criminal activity, the basic proponents could be applied to study the choices that the characters make in Murata's novel. In its simplest terms, the theory suggests that social pressure and the "inequality between culturally valued goals and the legitimate means to achieve them" create a "strain" on individuals. (Merton 672) When people find it difficult to attain 'culturally approved' goals, like financial success, through socially acceptable channels, they are likely to turn to deviant behaviour.

In this novel, Keiko Furukara is described as a 'foreign object' because her behaviour does not concur with that of the socially approved standards of behaviour. Keiko is a 'convenience store worker' who has been working in the same job for 18 years. She is an 'outlier' whose personality does not fit into the standards set by society and culture. She is 'different'. In fact, she is completely ignorant of the qualities and behaviours that are required to be 'human'. Keiko is like an 'automaton', a robot, who relies on emotional cues from close associates or family members to understand and navigate

the social and cultural space. She severely lacks a sound emotional quotient. Keiko herself is keenly aware of her fallacies and describes herself as a 'strange' person. She also acknowledges that her understanding depends upon how clearly situations and expectations are described to her.

This dearth of emotion affects her ability to make decisions as well. She can make decisions only that are based on logical reasoning rather than emotional cues. She is unable to understand the subtle nuances in social codes and behaviours, as evinced by the incidents that took place during her childhood with the dead bird and the violence against her classmate. Keiko's choices and behaviours prove to be strange and troublesome, as she does not inherently understand the reasons why her actions were construed as wrong. In her mind, they are all logically sound actions that would prevent situations from escalating.

This inability to think and act like a normal 'human being,' forces her to choose to 'mimic' what she sees and 'do' what she is told, to avoid any further incidents. Throughout the novel, she faces an array of fraught experiences that teach her why her actions are deemed unworthy according to society's rules.

Keiko had started working in the convenience store at the age of eighteen, to earn easy money. But continuing to work there even after eighteen years, was her own choice. This job gave her a sense of comfort and stability, which she found lacking in her interactions with the rest of the society, even her own family. To Keiko, this store represented a 'microcosm' of Japanese culture, one that prided itself on discipline, order, and structure. This 'dead-end' job was her only source of consolation as it was the first time that someone had "taught (her) how to accomplish a normal facial expression and manner of speech." (Murata 15) She felt comfortable being a part of a 'homogeneous' being, all wearing identical clothing and behaving according to a pre-programmed set of instructions provided in a 'manual'. The rigid structure and the set of rules that she had to follow helped her understand human behaviour, social rules, and etiquette to a considerable extent. As she herself described in the novel, working in this store had helped her pick up



useful information about customer behaviour, their needs, and expectations, which she was able to fulfil to the highest extent within the confines of the store. She considered herself 'a cog of the society', a 'functioning part of the world', a 'normal' person.

Although she equated herself and all the workers on the same platform, there was inherently a considerable gulf between them. To the other workers, this was just a 'job', merely a costume that they were able to 'remove' and 'revert to their original state' of being different creatures. Their work and their personal lives were separate. But Keiko, on the other hand, could not do so. The skin of the convenience store worker was one that never came off. Her whole existence revolved around the store – the sounds of the store lulled her to sleep at night, the sound of the doorbell reminded her of church bells, she yelled out at home as if she were still in the store, she ate her meals at the store etc. She felt that being a part of the 'machine of society,' gave her a sense of purpose, a 'rebirth.' Both she and the convenience store were 'always connected.' She had no clue how she was supposed to behave like a normal person. She was only aware of how to behave as a convenience store worker, as outlined by the strict rules and regulations directly mentioned in the 'store manual.' Normalcy for Keiko existed only within the glass walls of the store.

This inability to process emotions nor empathise was a problem that her family tried to solve by finding a 'cure'. However, they were unsuccessful. In fact, Keiko had to find a solution herself: by working in a pre-structured environment like the convenience store, where life was continuous and where change seems to have forgotten to enter. Though the workers, customers and products might change according to the season and time, the practices do not. And it was this fixed existence that Keiko found 'normal' and which had given her the faith that she could survive in this world even though she could not understand it.

Beyond the confines of this 'brightly lit cube,' Keiko found human interaction to be a dull and pointless process. She often felt that ascertaining the actions and behaviours of 'normal' people was a confusing and tedious process. Despite her reservations, she always made it a point to meet

up with her family and close circle of friends whenever possible, to continue the charade of being 'normal.' But these forced interactions proved to be challenging, as she was the only person there who was 'different.' They balked at hearing that she worked in a convenience store, that she was yet unmarried and that she had not considered the thought of procreating. At every meeting, suggestions were made to 'cure' her; but they only proved to be both difficult and uncomfortable for all involved.

Keiko had learned that to fit into society, she would need to 'pretend' to be human. When questioned about her lack of a decent job, she would say she was 'sick'; when asked why she was still unmarried, she would say that she was still wounded from a previous relationship and was taking time to recuperate. All these answers had been programmed into her consciousness by her sister to satisfy people's curiosity and not make them suspicious. Since society dubbed her 'weird', Keiko resorted to 'mimicry' of the actions and behaviours of people around her so that she could fit in. She imitated speech patterns, mannerisms, and even the styles of her coworkers to appear "normal" and blend in with society. This was a kind of social camouflage that protected her.

The novel also features another 'outsider' named Shiraha, a young man who worked along with Keiko in the convenience store. Unlike Keiko, however, his attitude towards the job was one of complete distaste. He refused to follow every single rule; never did the work assigned to him and most importantly refused to fit into the small community that was formed within the store. Despite being fired, he continued to degrade Keiko in every conversation that they had and constantly kept degrading her saying that she was 'weird,' a 'freak', 'second hand goods' and nothing but a burden to society.

Based on Merton's theory of Deviance, Shiraha's behaviour could be a form of rebellion. He was unable to conform and so he chose to rebel against the rules of society. At least in his words and physical actions.

But despite all this deviant behaviour from both Keiko and Shiraha, they reach a point in their lives where they grow weary of the social pressure that was gradually breaking apart their carefully crafted facades. Keiko's programmed excuses could not



sustain her as she aged, while Shiraha was trying to hide from the real world. As 'outsiders' they could never be accepted into society. Hence, they choose the logical path, to get married, live together and start a family. By making this choice, they had both hoped to show the world that they were 'normal' and that they too were a part of the society.

But this choice proved to be too much for Keiko. Her carefully constructed world began to crumble before her eyes; she felt that she was slowly starting to lose her identity; the noises that calmed her were now completely silent; the other workers whom she considered to be her 'perfect' colleagues were breaking rules and acting 'weird' by being happy that she was finally getting married and leaving the store for a more 'fulfilled' life. All these changes were too much for Keiko to accept and this 'unbalanced' her. She became depressed and when she eventually left the perfect 'bubble' of the store for the reality of life, she felt traumatised. She no longer felt like she had a sense of purpose – why would she need to eat, to sleep, to take care of her body? All these basic human actions were tied directly to her job. It was because of her job that she had been scrupulous in taking care of her appearance. Now that she was away from the spotlight, why would she need to spend her time and energy to accomplish these tasks anymore? Giving up her job to get married and become one with society was the worst possible choice that she could have made.

Shiraha on the other hand, thrived while being at home, away from the responsibility of maintaining a job. He was a wastrel who would rather criticise social institutions and speak about how things had not changed since the Stone Age, instead of actively going out and making a name for himself. Shiraha's departure from the job was celebrated, as he was universally disliked, while Keiko's departure made everyone feel a sense of genuine happiness as they were all worried that she was working in the same place for too long.

This novel is truly remarkable for how it tackles these concepts of conformity and deviance. Through the character of Keiko, Murata seems to suggest that the real problem is not Keiko's behaviour but society's contradictory demands. Keiko was criticized for being too rigid and

unchanging, yet when she attempts to change by living with Shiraha, her choices are still condemned. Modern society seems to demand both conformity and individual achievement, stability and growth, authenticity, and social acceptability, all of which are fundamentally difficult to achieve in totality as they are paradoxically non-aligned. There is no chance of clearly demarcating a 'conformist' and a 'deviant' in the context of such a complex society. That is why this paper concludes that Keiko was both a 'conformist' as well as a 'deviant'. Through her struggles, the very contradictions within social expectations themselves are clearly exposed.

Keiko proves to be a conformist in her own way. Despite her struggles to understand and live by the unspoken rules of society regarding marriage, career, and motherhood, she chose to find her own ideal way of life that satisfied her. Wilde's erstwhile quote is therefore a fitting descriptor of Keiko's character. She tried to be 'other people'; Her thoughts were 'someone else's opinions', her life was 'a mimicry', her 'passions just a quotation'. The structured and rule-bound way of life that the convenience store offered her made her feel more 'normal' than normal life could ever offer her. Within the confines of the store, she was the 'queen', completely in charge of her actions and able to anticipate exactly what customers needed. Though her life seemed to be highly mechanical and structured, it had its own purpose. Every action was a test of perfection. Whenever she found herself failing, she made sure to pull herself up and make the required changes accordingly.

It was only in her personal life, that the 'deviance' is felt. Durkheim in his work *The Rules of Sociological Method*, suggested that "without deviance, society would lack the impetus for reform and progress, effectively stagnating." (Durkheim 70) The enthusiasm and the confidence with which she performed her job were entirely missing in her personal life. This inability to understand and perform as required by social rules, used to put her ill at ease in the beginning of the novel. Living with Shiraha and experiencing his hypocrisy and parasitic actions, helped her learn to understand that she did not need to live for the satisfaction of society, but for her own self. No matter how much she tried to fulfil



the expectations of her family and culture, it would not be enough. She would be the one who would continue to suffer, as she would no longer be true to her 'Self' and her unique identity. Despite the flaws in her character and her inability to understand the nuances of social norms and customs, she managed to find a space wherein she had mastered a particular set of human interactions that made her likable and valuable to society. She had carved that niche for herself, despite a lack of support from people. This transformative choice by Keiko is reminiscent of the argument made by sociologist Travis Hirschi, who said, "The question is not why people deviate but why they conform." In fact he identified four bonds that prevent deviance: attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief - all of which are found in Keiko's experiences with the convenience store - She 'attached' herself to the store; she 'committed' to doing her best for the store; she 'involved' herself in every aspect of the functioning of the store and she 'believed' that her life and her happiness were tied to the successful management of the store.

In conclusion, she proved to be a 'deviant', who went against the expectations of society, and a 'conformist' in the way she tried to craft her own identity by being individualistic and uncovering her sense of Self - all vital characteristics of being a member of the 21st century.

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