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Beyond the Normal Mind: Neurodiversity and the Construction of Cognitive Normality in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*

Sakshi
Assistant Professor, Department of English
Guru Nanak Khalsa College, Yamunanagar
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Abstract

Neurodiversity has challenged conventional notions of cognitive normality, calling into question the belief that there is one right way to think, communicate, behave and participate in society. Contemporary literature offers an important space where one can examine the production and imposition of such ideas of normality. Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* introduces Keiko Furukura, a woman whose actions and decisions do not conform to traditional expectations of adulthood. The novel does not explicitly identify Keiko as neurodivergent, but her experiences can be read through a lens of neurodiversity-informed Disability Studies. Keiko does not respond to social situations in the expected ways and is therefore treated differently in childhood. As an adult, she flourishes in the meticulously organised environment of a convenience store that provides her with stability and a sense of belonging. But her family and society continue to push her toward a conventional career, romantic relationship, marriage and family life. Thus, the novel raises questions about who defines normal behaviour and why conformity is seen as necessary for social acceptance. This paper discusses the construction of cognitive and behavioural normality in *Convenience Store Woman*, focusing on Keiko's childhood, work, relationships, gender expectations and ultimately, her resistance to social conformity. It argues that the novel depicts normality not as a fixed and universal state but as a social norm that is constructed through repeated expectations and practices. By challenging these standards, Murata's novel encourages the reader to question the assumption that difference needs to be corrected or normalised.

Keywords: Neurodiversity, Disability Studies, Cognitive Normality, Social Conformity, *Convenience Store Woman*.

1. Introduction

The concept of neurodiversity has helped to expand our understanding of human cognitive difference. Neurodiversity recognises variation in human minds as part of human diversity, rather than viewing differences in communication, behaviour, learning or social interaction as simply deficits of the individual. This perspective is particularly relevant to literature, as literary texts often include characters who do not conform to dominant expectations of normal behaviour.

Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* provides an example of this issue. The novel centres on Keiko Furukura, a woman who has worked at a convenience store for eighteen years. Keiko does not share the desires of those around her to get married, climb the career ladder or lead a conventional family life. She also approaches social interaction differently and learns ways to behave by observing and imitating others. The convenience store, with its familiar routines and clearly established roles, gives her a sense of order and belonging.

Keiko is constantly told, directly or indirectly, that there is something abnormal about her way of life. Her family worries about her lack of a traditional career and relationship, and people wonder why she continues to work at a convenience store. Her unmarried status and lack of romantic interests are problems that others feel entitled to solve. The novel therefore suggests that normality is produced through social expectations, rather than being simply a natural state.

This paper examines the construction of cognitive and behavioural normality in *Convenience Store Woman* through the experiences of Keiko. It does not try to diagnose Keiko as neurodivergent. Instead, it employs a neurodiversity-informed Disability Studies perspective to explore the novel's representation of difference and the pressure to conform. The paper argues that Murata's work reveals the social processes that label some ways of thinking and living as normal and others as deficient.

2. Neurodiversity and Cognitive Normality

The traditional view of disability has often focused on individual limitations. By contrast, the social model of disability redirects attention to the social environments and attitudes that create barriers for people who are perceived as different. Mike Oliver (2013) discusses the social model and highlights the importance of examining these barriers rather than viewing disability solely in terms of individual difficulties. This perspective is useful for understanding *Convenience Store Woman*, as many of Keiko's difficulties stem not from her behaviour alone but also from the expectations placed upon her.

The concept of neurodiversity challenges the idea that there is only one acceptable form of cognition. People differ in how they communicate, process information, respond to social situations and organise their lives. Patrick Dwyer (2022) discusses neurodiversity approaches and highlights the importance of considering individual differences in relation to the environments in which people live. A neurodiversity-informed approach, therefore, questions whether behaviour described as abnormal is inherently problematic or is judged negatively because it does not fit dominant social expectations.

The concept of normalcy discussed by Lennard J. Davis is useful for understanding how Keiko is perceived as different. Davis (1995) argues that "the 'problem' is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (p. 24). His argument draws attention to how social standards define acceptable behaviour and distinguish between normality and difference. In *Convenience Store Woman*, Keiko's behaviour is repeatedly judged against socially accepted notions of normality.

Normality in the novel is closely connected with conformity. Keiko is expected to behave appropriately, pursue a conventional career, have a partner, get married and become an ordinary adult woman. These expectations are presented as common-sense requirements rather than personal choices. As a result, anyone who does not follow them is viewed with suspicion or considered abnormal. The novel thus demonstrates how social expectations shape perceptions of acceptable behaviour and influences the way individuals who differ from these expectations are treated.

3. Keiko Furukura and the Construction of Difference

Keiko's understanding of being different begins in childhood. She often reacts to situations in ways that adults find inappropriate. This is evident when she sees a dead bird and proposes to take it home and cook it, and when she uses a spade to break up a fight at school. People around her try to correct her behaviour rather than to understand these actions within her own logic. Her family worries when she responds to situations differently from other children.

These experiences teach Keiko that people around her find her spontaneous responses unacceptable. She gradually learns to observe other people. Her experience at the convenience store is important, as it is the first place where she learns socially acceptable behaviours, such as how to "accomplish a normal facial expression and manner of speech" (Murata, 2018, p. 14). Instead of developing social behaviour intuitively, she examines how people speak, dress, react, and behave. Her identity is thus tied to performance, as she repeatedly adopts behaviours that assist her in appearing "normal" to those around her.

The difficulty can also be understood by considering Damian Milton's concept of the "double empathy problem." Milton (2012) challenges the idea that difficulties in social interaction are simply the result of an individual's inability to understand others. Rather, such difficulties can occur when people with different ways of understanding and experiencing the social world struggle to understand one another. In Keiko's case, however, the blame for this difficulty is laid primarily on her. She learns to observe and imitate others because her own ways of responding are considered inappropriate and the people around her rarely try to understand her perspective. The novel thus shows how social differences can be interpreted as individual deficiencies when one way of communicating is considered normal.

At the convenience store, routines are predictable and behaviour is well defined. Keiko knows exactly what she is supposed to do and does it well. She demonstrates competence within this environment. Her experience indicates that what is viewed as a personal deficiency may be partly due to the environment in which a person is placed (Raghav, 2026). The store can thus be seen as more than a workplace. It gives Keiko a structured social environment in which expectations are clear, allowing her to navigate social interactions through clearly established routines.

4. Work and the Expectations of Normal Adulthood

Employment is one of the main ways in which adulthood is measured in the novel. Keiko has been working in the same convenience store for a long time. Society expects adults to build careers and pursue higher professional status. Thus, the fact that she still works at the store is perceived as evidence of her failure to mature.

However, Keiko does not feel this way about her work. The store gives her a sense of purpose, routine and belonging. She knows the rules and takes pride in doing her job. She recalls, "At that moment, for the first time ever, I felt I'd become a part in the machine of society. I've been reborn, I thought. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society" (Murata, 2018,

p. 17). Her satisfaction contrasts with the idea that a meaningful adult life requires professional advancement.

The novel therefore questions the relationship between productivity and social worth. Keiko's work is socially necessary but is thought to have low status. Her family and other people are more concerned with the social status of her work than with the stability and satisfaction it provides her. This conflict shows that ideas of a "successful" adulthood are socially constructed. A person is supposed to go through a particular order: education, career development, marriage, and family. Keiko's life does not follow this sequence. This difference becomes the basis for social judgement.

The novel thus highlights the tension between conformity and deviance. Keiko is viewed as "deviant" because she does not conform to society's expectations about work, marriage and behaviour. At the same time, the convenience store provides her with a structured environment in which she can function under defined rules and expectations and feel capable and "normal" (Vaz and Jayanthi, 2025).

5. Gender, Relationships and Social Conformity

The pressure placed on Keiko is also strongly connected with gender. Society expects her to marry, have a family and behave in ways that fit conventional ideas of womanhood. Sanjana and Mariam (2024) discuss gender expectations and highlight how Keiko's unconventional behaviour and life choices bring her into conflict with the norms imposed by patriarchal society.

As a woman in her thirties, she is supposed to have a love life, get married and start a family. Her lack of interest in these things is viewed as evidence that something is wrong with her. As a consequence, Keiko's body and private life become subjects of social discussion. People feel entitled to ask why she is not married and whether she has a partner. She mentions that "these past two weeks I'd been asked fourteen times why I wasn't married" (Murata, 2018, p. 61). Her private choices are perceived as failures to fulfil the expected role of an adult woman.

Shiraha becomes important in this context. His own behaviour is problematic, but his arrangement with Keiko does give her a degree of social acceptance, at least temporarily. Once Keiko begins living with Shiraha, others become less concerned about her unmarried status, as their living arrangement gives the appearance of a conventional partnership. This shows the extent to which social acceptance depends on visible conformity.

Their arrangement also reveals the dangers of treating conformity as the primary measure of social success. Initially, Keiko modifies her lifestyle not because she truly desires to, but because she wishes to stop being judged. Living with Shiraha makes her appear normal, but it distances her from the life that actually gives her stability.

Gender expectations therefore reinforce the novel's broader argument about normality. Keiko is not just expected to behave like a "normal person"; she is expected to behave like a "normal woman." Her choices are evaluated in terms of assumptions about femininity, marriage, sexuality and adulthood.

6. Beyond Normality: Keiko's Alternative Way of Living

One of the most important aspects of the novel is that Keiko's experiences suggest that conventional conformity does not necessarily lead to happiness or belonging. Her efforts to meet the expectations of others only increase her sense of instability rather than resolving her difficulties.

The convenience store remains central to Keiko's sense of identity. Its routines let her participate in society without always having to guess what behaviour is expected. Keiko reflects, "I still don't have a clue how to be a

normal person outside that manual" (Murata, 2018, p. 17). The language, sounds, movements, and patterns of the store become familiar and meaningful to her.

That does not suggest that the novel portrays the convenience store as an ideal environment or that Keiko is without her own difficulties. Instead, it shows that social participation can take various forms. Keiko's life becomes meaningful through a form of participation that is not recognised by others as legitimate.

The ending of the novel is particularly significant, since Keiko eventually returns to the convenience store. Her decision can be interpreted as a rejection of the assumption that there is only one correct model of adulthood. She chooses an environment where she understands her role and feels a sense of identity, rather than continuing to perform an identity designed to satisfy others. When she leaves the store and sees her reflection, she realises that "For the first time, I could think of the me in the window as a being with meaning" (Murata, 2018, p. 102). This moment suggests that her sense of identity and purpose is closely linked to the environment where she feels she can participate successfully.

From a neurodiversity perspective, this can be understood as a challenge to compulsory normality. The question is not simply whether Keiko is normal or abnormal. The more important question is why society needs people to show their normality in such specific ways.

7. Conclusion

Convenience Store Woman presents normality as a social construction rather than a fixed or universal standard. Through Keiko Furukura, Murata examines how people who communicate, act, work or form relationships differently become subjects of correction and judgement.

A neurodiversity-informed Disability Studies approach allows us to move beyond the question of whether Keiko should be seen as normal or neurodivergent. Instead, the focus shifts to the social standards that determine acceptable cognition and behaviour. Keiko's experiences show that the same person can be perceived as incompetent in one environment and highly competent in another.

The novel specifically questions traditional notions of work, adulthood, femininity and relationships. Keiko's work at the convenience store gives her stability and a sense of belonging, but society considers it insufficient because it does not involve conventional career advancement. Similarly, her lack of interest in marriage becomes a social problem, even though it is not inherently a problem for her.

Ultimately, Murata's novel encourages readers to reconsider the relationship between difference and normality. It suggests that the pressure to make people conform can create more problems than it resolves. *Convenience Store Woman* encourages a broader recognition of human cognitive and social differences by presenting Keiko's alternative way of living without reducing her entirely to a diagnosis or a perceived deficiency.

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