



## COMPOSITION AND PLOT CONSTRUCTION IN SAYAKA MURATA'S NOVEL "CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN"

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### Abstract

This article presents an analysis devoted to compositional building of an I-novel called "Convenience store woman" written by famous Japanese writer Sayaka Murata. In her provocative, topical and exciting novel, Murata explores the boundaries of such important concepts as "normal life" and "social success". Showing the life of a woman who stubbornly builds her own destiny across all the typical ideas of "norm", "happiness" and "achievements", Murata masterfully has an emotional impact on the reader and makes the reader doubt things that seemed unshakable and self-evident.

**Keywords:** I-novel, Japanese literature, Japanese novel, story, subject, plot, artistic composition, Sayaka Murata

### Introduction

In 2016, "Convenience store woman" was published in Japan about a woman working tirelessly in a combini — a small convenience store "within walking distance", providing a wide range of goods and services. The author Sayaka Murata had already released several works by that time; all of them were positively received by local critics. Murata is the winner of ten Japanese literary awards. But, despite this success, she did not leave her job at the combini for a long time. The autobiographical novel "Convenience store woman" has become the most successful work of the young author: over six hundred thousand copies of the book have been sold in Japan [3]. The novel was awarded by the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, translated into many European languages and became the best-selling in the Foyles London store in 2018 [5]. This is because it is not so much an "Asian" story as a universal one — since people all over the world face manifestations of social pressure, which is mentioned in the novel.

Since in many ways this novel is autobiographical and is based on Sayaka Murata's own life experience, she managed to deeply reveal many topical problems of modern society not only concerning Japan, but also the whole world.





The novel fits perfectly not only into the reality of Japan, but also into the reality of the person who at least once stood face to face with the rules imposed by society, as noted above, and did not dare to do it his own way.

Murata herself worked in six different convenience stores within walking distance, which served as the writing of the "Convenience store woman". "The store where I worked when I was writing the novel was imbued with a much more homely, calm and cozy atmosphere than in the novel. Although the rules of work in the store, which I had in mind when describing the duties of its employees, were much stricter than in the novel, and more people worked there. I used all my experience working in different stores to create a fictional version that best suits my main character, who is a decent, ideal employee [2]."

Since Sayaka Murata wrote this novel while working in a convenience store, it was very important for her to establish her own work rhythm. She got up at 2:00 a.m. and wrote until 6:00 a.m., then worked in the store from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., who gave her new ideas and inspiration for writing a novel, after which she spent half a day writing her thoughts in a cafe until 17:00, and went to bed at 21:00 pm. This is the rhythm in which this work was written [4].

The narrative of the novel begins with descriptions of the interior, the environment of the convenience store and the atmosphere that reigns in it – a Japanese combini, in which a woman named Furukura Keiko works.

"The minimarket is full of sounds. A bell rings on the front door, and the voices of celebrities are heard from the speakers advertising new products. You can hear the shouts of sellers and the beeping of barcode scanners. Here someone threw the goods into the basket, and someone took a bag of bread. Heels click on the floor. All these sounds merge into a single "Minimarket Sound", which continuously knocks on my eardrum [1]."

The novel is written in retrospect. The plot periodically returns to the main character's past – to the events that served to develop her personality. In the beginning, Furukura Keiko, on whose behalf the story is being told, has been working in the same store for 18 years.

"I remember my life before I was reborn as a Minimarket Employee vaguely. I was born and grew up in a simple family in the suburbs, my parents loved me, everything was like everyone else. However, I was not an ordinary child [1]."

The author does not reflect the whole life of the main character from beginning to end, but shows the most important passages from her life for the formation of the Keiko's character. For example, the 18th anniversary of the opening of the minimarket in which she has been working for all these years.





"Recently, the store celebrated the first of May for the 19th time, that is, 157,800 hours have passed since our first working day. I turned 36 years old, and the store and I, as its employee, are 18. For a long time, there is no one from those with whom we started. The head of the combini also changed 8 times. Even the goods that were in the beginning, there was nothing left. Only I'm still here [1]."

The main character of the novel, Keiko Furukura, is a 36-year-old woman who has been working part-time at the convenience store for the past 18 years. She knows from childhood that she is not like everyone else, "abnormal" and that the expression of her own views and actions inexplicably adversely affects the opinion of others about her and causes problems.

"My mother and father were worried about my antics, but still loved and pampered me. I really didn't want to upset my parents and make them constantly apologize for me, so I began to try not to express myself too harshly in public. I started either imitating others or listening to someone's instructions - in general, I stopped following my own impulses once and for all [1]."

Having become an employee of the combini, Keiko happily obeyed clear and understandable instructions: the working day begins and ends in time, the scope of duties is strictly outlined, there is a behavior prescribed by the management for each situation. There are not even men and women here – wearing a uniform, a person becomes just an employee.

"Passersby are busily scurrying behind the cleanly washed glass. A new day begins. The time when the world wakes up and its gears start turning. Having turned into one of these gears, I spin along with the others. I have become a detail of this world and I spin around in its morning hours without stopping [1]."

The strictly regulated world of combini, where every action is prescribed by the corporate leadership, allows her to maintain a "mask of normality" acceptable to others.

The repeated remarks of Furukura Keiko herself that she is a part of this world run like a red thread through the entire work.

"I managed to become an element of the universe for the first time. I felt like I had just been born. And indeed, as a functioning detail of this world, I was born on this very day [1]."

She copies in every possible way the behavior, style of clothing and even the manner of speech of her colleagues.

"Most of my "I" consists of those around me. A third from Izumi, a third from Sugawara, 20% from the Director and a little more from Sasaki, who left six months





ago. And I still have a little bit of Okazaki, our former supervisor, and other people from the past, whom I absorbed into myself and became what I am [1]."

Furukura Keiko maintains friendly relations with colleagues and often sees her sister, but it becomes increasingly difficult for her to explain to them why, after 18 years, she is still single and works as a part-time salesman in a convenience store.

"– Come on? Is it really still on a side job?! I thought about it for a while. By this time, I already knew that – as I was told – at my age, not being married and not having a permanent job is not accepted. But it was uncomfortable for me to evade the answer in front of my girlfriends, who knew the truth anyway, and I nodded: yes, it is [1]."

But soon she meets Shiraha, a man who cannot find a permanent job and fit into the realities of society, as he does not find out "normal" standards. Although they have no affection for each other, Shiraha eventually moves in with Keiko. They decide that by pretending to be a couple, they can avoid problems with families and society, which expects romantic relationships, children and stable work from them.

"Compared to the day when I told my friends that I "never loved", today they were genuinely happy and spoke to me very friendly. At our last meeting, the attitude of friends showed that they could not understand a person who had never loved and was not interested in family life, and also did not have a normal job. Now that I have settled Shiraha at home, they are almost ready to predict my future – everything seems to have become so clear to them [1]."

As part of this plan, Keiko eventually quits her job at the combini, although she immediately feels that her life has lost its meaning. She stays at home, doing nothing, and only at the insistence of Shiraha tries to get a permanent job.

On the way to her first interview for the position of an employee of the company, Keiko and Shiraha stop at a combini. She sees that everything in the store is not in order at all, and immediately entering the store, she begins to rearrange the goods and help the staff. She explains to Shiraha that her goal in life is to be an employee of the combini, although she knows that it would be easier and more convenient for her to live with him and portray a semblance of a "normal" life. Shiraha tries to persuade her, endlessly repeats that her act will change her position in society forever, that he and a new prestigious job in the office are her only chance to fit into society. However, all persuasions are in vain and Keiko, determined to return to her former life, rejects all his proposals. Then she leaves the enraged Shiraha, cancels the interview and decides to return to work at the combini, gaining self-confidence and dedication to her favorite job.



"Then I turned my eyes to my reflection in the glass of the showcase. I thought that these arms and legs were made for a combini, and for the first time in my life I felt like a living being filled with meaning – it looked at me from a glass showcase [1]."

Keiko Furukura, who has not been particularly good at communicating with other people since early childhood, felt for the first time that she was able to adapt to society thanks to working in a store. When people asked if she wanted to find a serious and prestigious job or why she didn't get married and have children, Keiko kept joking and coming up with various excuses, trying to evade the answer. But over time, Keiko's feelings and self-awareness in society began to gradually change. She makes a firm decision to change, rethinks her actions, emotions, feelings and, finally, develops her own lifestyle.

She has gained the right skills for a manager in working in a store, extensive practical experience, professionalism and, finally, great self-confidence that she can set up work and even lead. Through a simple storyline, the evolution of a person who has grown from a sense of alienation and uselessness in society to a sense of her personality capable of action is shown.

The composition of the novel outlines two lines – the first is connected with the current situation of the main character, the second with a retrospective of her past life, built as memories of the past – childhood, adolescence, school, job search, etc. These lines are intertwined, complement and explain each other in the construction "cause – effect or vice versa – effect, and then the cause."

Such a construction of the novel, when the arrangement of its parts and their interrelation violate the direct linear composition and gravitate more towards the inversion composition, gives the work a special appeal and expressiveness. The writer is a master of the art of compositionally rearranging elements of reality. In reality, the cause precedes the effect, but in the writer's artistic consciousness, the effect is presented before the cause. At the very beginning of the novel, Keiko appeared as a 36-year-old woman, formed in her views on life. And then the author traces her life in the opposite direction through her memories.

Thus, in Sayaka Murata's novel, the concept of time is complicated, that is, as we see how a chain of memories is superimposed on a chain of events, and this is not just a return to the past, but to different segments in the main character's life. Hence the flow of monologues, memories, lyrical digressions. This phenomenon is characteristic of psychological prose of our time, although the writer has her own style of narration. To sum up, this principle of construction of the work helps the author to realize her creative idea and solve specific ideological and aesthetic problems.



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