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SAYAKA MURAKA'S CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN: A LITERARY RESPONSE TO GIG ECONOMY

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Abstract:

At the turn of the century emerged the Gig Economy and with it a change in the lives of millions of people. Gig workers became a huge part of the workforce. This influenced the way writers viewed the changing scenario. Sayaka Murata's Convenience Store Woman became one of the novels depicting the life of one such gig worker, who is at the lower rung of the workforce ladder. The novel poignantly looks at Keiko Furukura, a gig worker's life and delineates how work absorbs the worker even when there is no security of employment and not much savings. Keiko finds the sameness of her daily routine as an escape from the normalcy of life outside the store, it absorbs her "different-ness". In contrast, Shiraha, another employee at the convenience store Keiko works at, is fired because he does not follow the norms. Both characters, even though opposite in nature, do not fit in the social norms that, according to Shiraha, have not changed since the Stone Age and this causes discomfort for both Keiko and Shiraha. The novel thus is a fitting commentary on life today.

Keywords: *gig economy, convenience store worker, sameness, different-ness, opposite in nature, commentary on life today*

Literature has always reflected human society with all its advancements be it in agriculture, industry or technology. It is commonly known as a mirror of human life, but more importantly, it is a critique of human civilisation and culture. Its multidimensional approach to human experiences makes it a unique subject of study, unlike any other. While all other disciplines are based on statistics and facts alone, literature measures the human cost of these same facts. Therefore, early story-telling included animal characters when animals were part of human life; as civilisation progressed, literature looked at the human cost of industrialisation and war. Then developments in science and technology brought in science fiction and the breakdown of the family and social structure.

The turn of the twenty-fifth century saw the surge of tremendous changes especially the digital revolution and electronic technologies with the internet and computers entering our homes. With this came new employment opportunities and types, but in which work preceded family and friends. In these fast-changing times, both employer and employee began to look at work as just a financial source. Work efficiency without emotional attachment was prime. The employer wanted customer satisfaction and profits without being burdened by employee demands; the employee wanted a no-strings-attached well-paying job that gave them freedom to live their lives on their terms. Deepak Sood, Secretary General, ASSOCHAM, puts it accurately:

A gig economy is cost effective for companies, given that they can accommodate temporary workforce, according to the customer requirements or business needs, leading to saving administrative and compliance costs. This framework allows startups and smaller companies to leverage skilled professionals as required. Companies may choose to enter into contracts with the professionals for specified time period. This relationship is rather symbiotic, and both parties have equal freedom to look for options that cater to their

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needs. (ASSOCHAM, 2024, p 7)

This gave rise to “gig-workers”, those who worked on contractual or temporary basis or were freelancers and the term “gig economy”. The term "gig", first coined by journalist Tina Brown in 2009, is a slang word for a job that lasts a specified period of time. It comes from the music industry, where one-time or brief performance are known as "gigs". (Embroker Team, 2023; Agarwal, 2024)

The emergence of the gig economy ushered in novels with gig workers as protagonists delineating their lives according to the new lifestyle. One such novel is Sayaka Murata’s *Convenience Store Woman*. Originally published in Japanese in 2016, as *Konbini Ningen* (“Convenience Store Human”), the book became an instant hit in Japan with 1.5 million copies being sold. The novel was awarded the prestigious Akutagawa Prize, Japan’s most prestigious literary award, given to up-and-coming Japanese writers. It was translated into English by Ginny Tapley Takemori in 2018. (Horne, 2022)

Convenience Store Woman is written in first person and narrated by Keiko Furukura, a convenience store (or what we in India call a “mall”) worker whose life revolves only around her work. The novel begins at the highly mechanised world of the convenience store and the deep connect Keiko feels with it:

“A convenience store is a world of sound. From the tinkle of the door chime to the voices of TV celebrities advertising new products over the in-store cable zetwork, to the calls of the store workers, the beeps of the bar code scanner, the rustle of customers picking up items and placing them in baskets, and the clacking of heels walking around the store. It all blends into the convenience store sound that ceaselessly caresses my eardrums.” (Murata, 2016/2018, p 6)

Keiko cannot think of herself as anything but a convenience store worker, so much is she immersed in and in love with work. Keiko calls herself “one of the cogs, going round and round” (Murata, 2016/2018, p 8) signifying the extent of mechanisation where human beings also work like the machines they tend. This reflects what D. H. Lawrence, in his poem “Man and Machine” published in a collection back in 1932, Man invented the machine

and now the machine has invented man. (Lawrence, n.d.)

Keiko, like many others who work with her, is “a part in the machine of society” (Murata, 2016/2018, p 17). As is common to gig economy, even after working for eighteen years at the Hiiromachi Station Smile Mart, Keiko, now thirty-six is not a permanent employee and works at the checkout till most of the time. She is attentive to all that goes on in the store such as the sale of the day, the products on prominent display for the day and pays close attention to what the customers need. There is no change in her work routine, no perks or promotions. The only concession is that she is allowed to take home dented cans or those products just past their expiry date.

The story goes on to describe in detail the nature of her work, in which “Speed is of the essence…” (Murata, 2016/2018, p 6) The pressure of work affects her whole life so much that she finds herself operating the checkout till in my dreams (Murata, 2016/2018, p 18). Convenience store employees follow strict scripts and procedures, like any other gig workers and must conform to algorithmic control. This is succinctly captured in the description of their daily routine is machine-like and de-humanised, beginning with the three of them being instructed by the manager about their work for the day.

“Today’s special is the mango-chocolate bun. Let’s all remember

to keep announcing it. Also, it’s cleanliness crackdown time.

Lunchtime is busy, but even so let’s be diligent about keeping the floor, windows, and the area around the

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door clean. We're running out of time, so I'll just trust you to get on with it. Well then, let's practice our phrases, shall we? All together, repeat after me:

"Irasshaimasé!"

"Irasshaimasé!"

"Certainly. Right away, sir!"

"Certainly. Right away, sir!"

"Thank you for your custom!"

"Thank you for your custom!"

We three repeated in unison the phrases we used with customers, checked our appearance, and one by one filed into the store calling out "Irasshaimasé!" as we went. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 23)

While describing the sameness of the daily routine, she admits,

I gently placed the eggs in a plastic bag. The same eggs I sold yesterday, only different. The customer put the same chopsticks into the same plastic bag as yesterday, took the same change, and gave the same morning smile. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 49)

Working together for a long time and doing the same things over the years has made them an amalgam of each other's personalities. Keiko's quirky sense of humour is demonstrated in her self-description, when she states,

My present self is formed almost completely of the people around me. I am currently made up of 30 percent Mrs. Izumi, 30 percent Sugawara, 20 percent the manager, and the rest absorbed from past colleagues such as Sasaki, who left six months ago, and Okasaki, who was our supervisor until a year ago.

My speech is especially infected by everyone around me and is currently a mix of that of Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara. I think the same goes for most people. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 20)

She later confesses

Once we donned our uniforms, we were all equals regardless of gender, age, or nationality – all simply store workers. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 28)

Keiko looks at all seniors as numbers; they are all the same. So, there is a Manager #1, Manager #2, Manager #3 and so on.

Through Keiko, Murata frowns upon how capitalism views gig workers. The convenience store makes Keiko such a perfect worker-machine that she has no other identity but that of "a useful tool" (Murata, 2016/2018, p 54). Rather than appreciate her contribution, however small, to the profits the store makes, it so absorbs into her that she is unfit for "normal" society expectations, making her uneasy with others, even with her own sister, Miho. She is a laughing stock among friends because she has not married or raised a family. She is uncomfortable with talk on trivial things like hairstyles or fashion or dating. Her mind constantly travels back to the convenience store during conversations (Murata, 2016/2018, pp 23-28). She is bombarded with advice to get married, or at least a boyfriend and scorned for having a low-status job (Murata, 2016/2018, pp 51-52). She realises that

When you work in a convenience store, people often look down on you for working there. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 44)

Murata also exposes the insecurities of workers in a convenience store which is not unlike other gig workers. A retired person in need of a job is rejected because such work requires a strong back. Keiko notices that

When you do physical labor, you end up being no longer useful when your physical condition deteriorates. However hard I work, however dependable I am, when my body grows old then no doubt I too will be a worn-out part, ready to be replaced, no longer of any use to the convenience store. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 54)

Manager #6 quits his job when he hurts his back, even if it could have been because of the work. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 50). Taking care of one's body and health is therefore of utmost importance to Keiko. Although

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Keiko is meticulous and extremely efficient in her work, when she decides to quit in order to try to get a conventional job, she gets nothing from the store. All she has are her meagre savings she has managed to collect over eighteen years. This, in spite of being part of an essential service provider.

The other character of interest in Murata's novel is Shiraha, the antagonist. He is an antithetical character to all that Keiko stands for. To Keiko's reserved nature, he is overtly talkative; in contrast to Keiko's disciplined and efficient work ethics, he is disorderly and disobedient. Keiko conforms to rules, Shiraha never bothers about them. Keiko works for eighteen years in the same store gaining a lot of praise from her colleagues, while Shiraha gets fired within a few months of being appointed. He complains all the time about everything while doing nothing to change the situation. In contrast, Keiko is pro-active, assisting new recruits (Murata, 2016/2018, pp 40-41) and even going to the extent, at the end of the novel, of setting things straight in a new store she is in no way connected to (Murata, 2016/2018, pp 100-101).

It is ironic that the gig economy depersonalises those who are different from "normal" human beings, but only those who conform to the discipline of work. Keiko describes how different she was from others as a child at the beginning of the novel. Her fascination with the convenience store and her work springs, perhaps, from the fact that it absorbs her "different-ness" and allows her to escape from attempts from family and friends to "cure" her (Murata, 2016/2018, p 53). It is this very nature of the store however, that makes Shiraha an alien and just strikes him off the roll.

Much like a leech, Shiraha latches on to Keiko at the first opportunity. Taking advantage of her kindness and her desire to be "normal", he starts living in her apartment and is of no assistance to her. Ironically, he is the one complaining all the time and she is the one working all the time. Representative of intellectual couch potatoes, his scathing commentary and criticism of the world are often valid and accurate, but his ineptitude at work or in the house stands in stark contrast, making his views ineffective because he has no listeners.

Shiraka believes that thought patterns of people have not changed since the Stone Age and that modern society is an illusion.

"...Women have been like that since the Stone Age. The youngest, prettiest girls in the

village go to the strongest hunters. They leave strong genes, while the rest of us just have to console ourselves with what's left. Our so-called modern society is just an illusion. We're living a world that has hardly changed since prehistoric times…" (Murata, 2016/2018, p 46)

He reiterates

"Anyway, nothing's changed since the Stone Age. It's just that nobody realizes that. In the final analysis, we're all animals," he said, going on a tangent. "If you ask me, this is a dysfunctional society. And since it's defective, I'm treated unfairly." (Murata, 2016/2018, p 56)

Keiko also begins to agree with him.

I thought he was probably right about that, and I couldn't even imagine what a perfectly functioning society would be like. I was beginning to lose track of what "society" actually was. I even had a feeling it was all an illusion. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 56)

At another point in the novel, he angrily states

"This society hasn't changed one bit. People who don't fit into the village are expelled: men who don't hunt, women who don't give birth to children. For all we talk about modern society and individualism, anyone who doesn't try to fit in can expect to be meddled with, coerced, and ultimately banished from the village…. But we live in a world that is basically the Stone Age with a veneer of contemporary society, you know. Strong men who bring home a good catch have women

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flocking around them, and they marry the prettiest girls in the village. Men who don't join in the hunt, or who are too weak to be of any use even if they try, are despised. The setup hasn't changed at all." (, Murata, 2016/2018, pp 58-59)

Keiko too realises the constancy of human behaviour and views and for once, agrees with Shiraha:

It was probably the same as the convenience store, where it was just us being continually replaced while the store remained the same unchanging scene.

This place really doesn't ever change, does it? The words of the old lady in the store echoed in my head. (p 59)

Through both Keiko and Shiraha, Muraka seems to suggest that anyone who does not fit into their surroundings at the level of social or professional expectations "becomes a foreign object" (Murata, 2016/2018, p 53). Keiko rues,

The normal world has no room for exceptions and always quietly eliminates foreign objects. Anyone who is lacking is disposed of. (Murata, 2016/2018, p 53)

It now dawns on Keiko the reason why her family had tried "to fix" her and leads to her desire to be "cured". She looks upon Shiraha as a chance for a convenient alibi to appear "normal" and offers him an abode in her house. People around her - her sister, acquaintances and colleagues - begin to treat her differently, welcoming her into their fold. No one bothers to listen to or know about the motive behind her decision. As days go by, she decides to quit her convenience store job, on Shiraha's insistence, to search for a "normal" one. However, the convenience store is so much into her, that she realises that she is meant only for it and nothing else. The novel ends with this epiphany. The gig economy is here to stay because of the dedication of the workers like Keiko it creates. As Jean-Baptiste Alphonse-Karr wrote as early as in 1849,

The more things change, the more they stay the same (Wagner, 2023)

Sayaka Murata's novel is a fitting satirical commentary on how the gig economy limits the growth of individual temporary workers who are the base of this new financial system. They end where they had begun many years ago. This system is so rigid that it has no place for detractors. The patriarchal capitalist system has changed only on the surface in that the scenario of the workplace differs from that of a few decades ago, and yet, human behaviour and attitude have remained the same. Murata's narrative style is such that all this is described in the light-hearted disposition of the protagonist. Not once is the reader intimidated by the harsh observations made through Shiraha's character. In just over a hundred pages, Murata has thus brought before us the world that is ours today.

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