The Modern Shape-shifter Maiden in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*

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Motto:
Who teaches us to be normal when we are one of a kind?
(*Legion*, TV Series, season 1, episode 5)

Abstract
Convenience Store Woman by Sayaka Murata won the Akutagawa Prize in 2016. The novel focuses on the daily routine of Keiko Furukura, a female part-time worker in a convenience store who struggles to be acknowledged as a normal person, even if she is single, does not have any romantic relationship or a well-paid job – three stereotypes which have transformed her into an abnormal, asexual being, a maiden deprived of any sex appeal who could not fit in the actual society. In order to get rid of this stigma she learns the "art of imitation" and develops a "shape-shifting strategy", a bakeru mode. Bakeru is a Japanese word which means "to take the form of, to transform into, to disguise oneself as" and this is exactly what she experiments: the speech mode bakeru, the fashion mode bakeru, the emotional mode bakeru, the situational mode bakeru, the absorbing mode bakeru. In all her attempts the convenience store works as an anchor to normalcy and it helps her preserve the very essence of her human nature.

Keywords: *femininity, asexual, Japanese society, shape-shifter, bakeru, maiden*

Introduction: Sayaka Murata and the Japanese femininity stereotypes

Sayaka Murata (1979-) is a Japanese writer who was the recipient of several literary awards. She made her debut as a writer in 2003 when *Junyū* (Breast-Feeding), a short story, received a merit award in the Gunzō Prize for New Writers competition. In 2013 she won the Mishima Yukio Prize for *Shiro-iro no machi no, sono hone no taion no* (Of Bones, Of Body Heat, of Whitening City), but her most prominent

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novel, translated in English, French, Spanish, and German, was *Konbini ningen* (Convenience Store Woman), which won the Akutagawa prize in 2016. This novel is quite recent[2] and little research has been done on it, therefore I shall use specific passages from the primary source and critically analyse them in order to highlight Murata's perspective on the intersections between femininity and normalcy and to identify the current cultural stereotypes of womanhood, a successful career as well as sexuality, by mirroring two divergent views on the same phenomenon: the heroin's perspective and her "survival strategy" (developed as the art of imitation) in contrast with the majority's position that takes for granted the notion of a (normal) human being.

As a matter of fact, the writer herself has worked in a convenience store[3], as she confesses in a Japan Society talk called: *Convenience Store Woman – Meet Author Sayaka Murata* (the 3rd of November 2018), hosted by Ginny Tapley Takemori[4]. She first started working in a convenience store when she was a student and then she moved from one store to the next for about twenty years. She created a daily cycle in each store in order to combine writing with working: she woke up at 2 a.m., wrote for a couple of hours, ate some sweet bread and then worked in the store from 8 a.m. till 1 p.m. She would have lunch in a café and return home where she continued writing till about 7 p.m. After that she tumbled into bed, and within seconds was fast asleep[5]. This daily routine has helped her sketch the life style and the working habits of Keiko Furukura, the protagonist of the *Convenience Store Woman*.

The book is a thought-provoking novel about a 36-year-old-woman who has been working in a convenience store for the past 18 years. Beyond having no career ambitions, she lives alone, has very few close friends and has never been involved in a romantic or sexual relationship of any kind. From the widely accepted social standards she is quite "abnormal" and her

[2] It was translated in English in 2018.

[3] In Japan the first convenience store (called *konbini* in Japanese) was Seven Eleven, which opened in 1974, followed a year later by Lawson. Nowadays there are more than 50,000 stores throughout Japan. Such stores sell a variety of goods (ready-made meals, sandwiches, rice balls, drinks, freshly brewed coffee, stationary, thread and needle sets, first aid bandage, black ties for funerals, *manga* etc.). In a convenience store one can easily pay the utility bills, buy concert tickets, make photo copies, or use the cash dispenser.

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Eag3-URh2I (accessed 1.12.2018)

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Eag3-URh2I (accessed 1.12.2018)

life does not necessarily line up with that of the normal successful people. Her friends and family worry about her and she gets a lot of pressure to start looking for a full-time job or/and to settle down and find a suitable husband. In spite of the others' expectations, Keiko seems happy with her life, especially when she has the chance to work in the convenience store, which has almost become a natural extension of her own body. At the end of the novel, when she is forced to quit her job, she is tormented by the thought that the cells of her body, which have harmoniously fed on the food and the water from the convenience store, are going to be replaced by new ones:

> I realized I was thirsty. Mechanically I turned the faucet to fill a glass with water and drank it down in one go. I suddenly recalled hearing once that the water in a person's body was replaced every two weeks. It occurred to me that the water I used to buy every morning in the convenience store had already run through my body. The moisture in my skin, in the membrane over my eyeballs was probably no longer formed by the water from the convenience store (Murata 2018: 149).

Over the years Keiko has created a very powerful bond with the *konbini* and has a hard time living outside the pristine world of the convenience store. She "sings" in tune to every sound of the store and anticipates any subtle change in the customer's mood:

> I automatically read the customer's minutest movements and gaze, and my body acts reflexively in response. My ears and eyes are important sensors to catch their every move and desire. Taking the utmost care not to cause the customer any discomfort by observing him or her too closely, I swiftly move my hands according to whatever signals I pick up (Murata 2018: 3-4).

Keiko keeps doing her job to a point in her life when everyone is waiting for her to get married or get a better job, but neither of these things particularly appeals to her. Even if she finds that the others' expectations are quite illogical from her own point of view, she tries to play along and develop a set of automated replies that can get her out of any unpleasant situation.

The author also grew up in a suburban neighborhood and was constantly reminded that she should be pretty and fit in the society in order to be accepted by a man and eventually get married[6]. The words are in fact

[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Eag3-URh2I (accessed 1.12.2018)

the leitmotif of the novel and are annoyingly repeated over and over by almost any character of the novel, except the heroine herself. They represent the *raison d'être* of any respectable woman in a functional society. The traditional perception on womanhood was that of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife, wise mother), a slogan which has long been the focal point of girls' education. Masanao Nakamura, who coined the term in one of his essays in 1875, claimed that woman are naturally endowed with a moral and religious sense and are more qualified for child rearing than their husbands (Cherry 1987: 49). The girls should develop their *onnarashisa* (femininity) in order to comply with this standard. Even if the term *ryōsai kenbo* was coined more than a century ago, the femininity criteria do not seem to have changed much over the years. For instance, in "What is Feminine? Asking Japanese Girls what A Real Feminine Girl Is" (2016)[7], an interview conducted by Cathy Cat, which was part of the series called *Ask Japanese* , most of the female interviewees said that a feminine person should be someone skinny/who could cook/who was popular among men/who was kind and observant of the other's needs/who had a clean and tidy up room/who had a high standard of beauty/who paid attention to small details (her looks, skin, hair and nails)/who put on make-up even if she went out for a short moment/who carried cute things/who spent a lot of money on keeping up her appearance (using the best and most expensive beauty products) [8]. In other words, the respondents placed a lot of emphasis on the appearance, beauty and the practical abilities required in a marriage (being kind and polite to the people around and knowing how to cook).

According to tradition, the right age for marriage, *tekireki*, ranged from 23 to 25 in case of the women. The vast majority of the Japanese females manage to find a suitable husband during this peak period, though nowadays women are marrying later than in the past (Cherry 1987: 53). A woman who remained unwed past the *tekireki* is called *ure-nokori* (unsold merchandise). Some people attempted to rephrase her embarrassing situation more politely, using the words *orudo misu* (old miss) or *hai misu* (high miss), both referring to old maids or spinsters (Cherry 1987: 136). A similar contemporary slang term is *mojo*, written with two characters, one for "mourning" and the other for "woman" and it means an unpopular woman, who is not liked by men.

[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAyE0-OPwjI (accessed 1.12.2018)
[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAyE0-OPwjI (accessed 1.12.2018)

Keiko Furukura might fall within this conservative framework: she has long passed the *tekireki*, therefore can be considered a *ure-nokori* or an *orudo misu* who has failed to fulfill the *ryōsai kenbo* dream. In this respect, one of her male co-workers, the misogynist Shiraha, describes her quite rudely:

> You need to wake up, Furukura. To put it bluntly, you're the lowest of the low. Your womb is probably too old to be of any use, and you don't even have the looks to serve as a means to satisfy carnal desire. But then neither are you earning money like a man. Far from it, you're only working part-time without even a proper job. Frankly speaking, you're just a burden on the village, the dregs of society (Murata 2018: 105).

1. The Asexual Maiden or the Herbivore Woman

Shiraha, the bitterest character of the novel, is cruel and overreacts in many situations, claiming that the contemporary society remained the same as in the prehistoric period where men went hunting and women procreated. Obviously, his words are not to be taken seriously. However, according to the above-mentioned standards of femininity, Keiko is not exactly feminine. She does not spend a lot of money to look attractive, is not popular among men, her room is small and crammed, she does not carry cute things. On the other hand, she is quite observant and makes surprising psychological connections that help her navigate through the jungle of human relations.

In addition, her lack of sexual desire surprises the others to the utmost degree. They are shocked to learn that Keiko has never been in love or has never had a relationship, and feel compelled to react and help her out of this unpleasant situation although Keiko responds more to their reaction than is embarrassed by "her condition". When Miho, a friend of hers, organizes a barbeque party, everyone introduces oneself in terms of marital status or successful career, while Keiko has to be quite apologetic and to provide a lot of excuses for her "abnormal" situation.

> "I'm living in Yokohama now. It's better for work, after all."
> "Oh, have you changed jobs?"
> "Yes! I'm in a fashion accessories firm now. The atmosphere in my previous job was a bit, well … you know."
> "I got married and live in Saitama now. I'm still in the same job, though."

"As you can see, I had a baby and am on maternity leave," Yukari said, and then it was my turn.
"I'm working part-time in a convenience store. My health …"
I was about to give the usual excuse my sister had made for me, when Eri leaned forward. "Part-time? Oh, so that means you got married!" she said, as if it were self-evident. "When was that?"
"No, I didn't," I answered.
"But, then, how come you're only doing that sort of job?" Mamiko asked, puzzled.
"Well, you see, my health … (Murata 2018: 76-77)

Among the people who gathered together at the party, there were two others who were not married. The author compares Keiko with the two ladies who are aware that they live on the boundary between being socially accepted and being cast out. Their predictable reaction matches perfectly the community rules: "unmarried Miki whispered to me: <We're the only ones here who can't hold our heads up high, aren't we?>" (Murata 2018: 76). Even if they do not say it aloud, they consider themselves *mojo* and *ure-nokori*, hence their obvious public shame. Sayaka Murata subtly introduces the concept of "we are what we believe we are". Our thoughts and our attitude construct ourselves and place us within an acceptable framework of happiness and self-esteem. In contrast, Keiko is not at all unhappy with being single, or with not having been in love and feels trapped in the net of the social conventions that offer safe decisions already made for her by the vast majority.

I'd never experienced sex, and I'd never even had any particular awareness of my own sexuality. I was indifferent to the whole thing and had never really given it any thought. And here was everyone taking it for granted that I must be miserable when I wasn't. Even if I had been, though, it didn't follow that my anguish would be the obvious type of anguish they were all talking about. But they didn't want to think it through that far. I had the feeling I was being told they wanted to settle the matter this way because that was the easiest option for them (Murata 2018: 37).

Keiko lives in her asexual universe and is perfectly happy with it, ignoring "the beaten track" followed by the ones playing by social rules and by the biological urges of procreation. Sayaka Murata holds up two cameras that show a different perspective on each other: one is the plurality's point of view which considers marriage, family and a successful career as the apex of our lives. Thus the society projects an aura of shame,

anguish, emergency and despair on the misfit individuals. They should be cured. From this point of view, Keiko is definitely not fully incorporated in the clockwork machinery of a functional society. She is perceived as an outcast, a loser, a triply handicapped person, as Shiraha – who eventually moves in her apartment to appease the incessant gossip regarding age and the need to have a romantic relationship – puts it:

> He grabbed me by my shoulders in his excitement. "Furukura, you're lucky, you know. Thanks to me, you can go from being triply handicapped as a single, virgin convenience store worker to being a married member of society. Everyone will assume you're a sexually active, respectable human being. That's the image of you that pleases them most (Murata 2018: 140).

Even if Shiraha is a parasite and a social misfit, he defines normalcy as relying on three pillars: marriage (vs. Keiko who is still single), sexual intercourse (vs. Keiko who is a virgin) and a full time job (vs. Keiko who likes working in a *konbini* without even thinking of getting promoted). Metaphorically speaking, Furukura is only a part-time member of society, since she refuses to comply with the above-mentioned rules. She is an active part of society only when she attends to her duties in the store and is helpful with the customers. Unlike Keiko, Shiraha's bitterness derives from the fact that he is still longing for romance, sexual accomplishment and success and blames the outer world or the petrified social hierarchy for not being able to achieve such goals. His rage also hides a sense of nostalgia for the lost paradise of success, career and marriage.

On the other hand, the whole story is told in the first person singular, therefore the second camera belongs to Keiko and provides us instant insights into her way of thinking. From her point of view, humans are weird, emotional and they lack proper reasoning: "listening to my friends go on about me and Shiraha was like hearing them talk about a couple of total strangers. They seemed to have the story wrapped up between them. It was about characters who had the same names as we did, but who had absolutely nothing to do with me or Shiraha" (Murata 2018: 112).

In her opinion, "human beings" seem not only the prisoners of some silly rules that do not necessarily make them happier, but also the slaves to their own biological impulses. Furukura is fully aware that people like her ought not to procreate and they should keep their genes away from the social turmoil, as Shiraha's sister-in-law advices her:

> "Keep those rotten genes to yourself for the course of your lifetime and take them to heaven with you when you die without leaving even a trace of them here on earth. Seriously". "I see," I said nodding to myself, impressed at her ability to think so rationally (Murata 2018: 153).

In the previous years there was a buzz word that was frequently mentioned in the Japanese media: herbivore man (*sōshoku danshi*). The term was first coined by Maki Fukasawa in a series of articles in the *Nikkei Business* online website in October 2006, but it was not until 2009 that the term really took root. The *sōshoku(kei) danshi* is a young man (in his 20s or 30s) who earns little, takes a keen interest in fashion and appearance and believes in platonic relations among men and women. Actually, the first features of the herbivore man were chiefly connected with his love life. He has little carnal desire, hence the name *sōshoku danshi* pointing at a diet or a life style involving no meat (Morioka 2013: 3-4). The general opinion sees him as a tender-hearted, shy, thrifty, young man who has a sweet tooth and who is not very pro-active about sex or romance (Nicolae 2014: 74). Even if she does not pay much attention to her looks, Keiko too can be regarded as a "herbivore woman" since she is interested in neither sex or romancing. She avoids the questions regarding her love life, but is not embarrassed of being single. It is actually the people around her who, by projecting their own frustrations and expectations onto her, think that Keiko is ashamed of her own virginity.

As a doctrine, virginity has been a cultural artifact. For much of human history, it has been held in high esteem for young women approaching marriage: virginity has been an essential quality for determining their market value (MacLachlan 2007: 3). Centuries ago virginity was considered a virtue – the symbol of purity and innocence –, but nowadays it has become a social stigma, a tag to be pinned unto the women who are not attractive enough. Dexter distinguishes two types of potency released from the energy reservoir of the virgin female: the type that is outwardly directed, serving men in a patriarchy, and that which is retained in the female, leaving her independent of male control (Dexter 1985: 57-74). The celibate choice was made by independent women such as Elizabeth I or Joan of Arc, who repudiated liaisons with men, preferring the power released by personal independence (MacLachlan 2007: 5). Keiko is none of those heroines. She is labeled as lacking charm, but her virginity is not a display of the power of choice, but a consequence of her asexuality.

She is not a maiden[9] who valued the option of celibacy, but a woman whose only emotional bond is to the convenience store in which she works. Anyway, people react quite violently to the danger of (modern) virginity as it allows no biological intersections: the world of men and the world of women do no longer interact with each other. In other words, males and females create their own gendered cocoons, condemning humanity to slow suicide.

2. The shape-shifter[10] and the struggle for normality

The Japanese title of the book is *Konbini ningen*[11] (The Convenience Store Human Being)[12]. In English it has been translated as *Convenience Store Woman* (the same in French, Italian, Spanish and Romanian). This change made me wonder why *ningen* (human being) became *woman* in translation, and I started looking for clues. The story is told in the first person singular and in Japanese the nouns do not have masculine or feminine forms. The book starts chronologically, and gives the account of a child who displays a logic which is quite different from that of ordinary people. The mother is sometimes shocked by her kid's unconventional ideas: an already dead bird can be considered a proper meal, not a poor animal that needs to be buried in the park, with a bunch of flowers on its tomb. This is the first time when the name of the main character appears: Keiko. In Japan, most of the girls name end in *–ko*, written with the character meaning child, which indicates a tiny, cute person. Keiko恵子 can be roughly translated as a blessed/a tender-hearted child. But the name is used in the imperative, a warning that she has done something wrong or inappropriate.

[9] *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1985), defines maiden as a woman who is not married (p. 707).

[10] Shape-shifting is an important mechanism in the folklore of all peoples. A shape-shifter is a creature or an object which is able to change its shape either at will or under specific circumstances (Leah, 1972: 1004)

[11] I still believe that "human being" would have been a better translation because Keiko is not interested in exploring her womanhood and the others, including the men around her, regard her as an asexual being.

[12] In the Japan Society talk called: *Convenience Store Woman – Meet Author Sayaka Murata* (the 3rd of November 2018), Ginny Tapley Takemori, the translator of the novel, explained that it was actually the publisher's choice, not hers, to come up with a more catchy title (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Eag3-URh2I, accessed 1.12.2018).

> "Keiko!" my mother exclaimed reprovingly, finally coming to her senses. "Let's make a grave for Mr. Budgie and bury him. Look, everyone's crying. His friends must be sad he died. The poor little thing!"
> "But it's *dead.* Let's eat it!" (Murata 2018: 7)

To Keiko the burial is completely pointless since the bird is already dead and eating it could have been more useful than murdering some flowers and put their corpses on top of the tomb. In this manner Keiko is placed in the spotlight because she thinks outside the box and does not act as a normal girl should do. This vignette of weirdness will be placed around the character throughout the novel, constantly reminding her that she is a socially awkward person. However, she continued to believe that "being useful is better than looking nice", and this will become her secret motto according to which she will live her entire life.

After another similar episode, the little girl finally finds out that the Japanese saying *deru kui ga utareru* (lit. the nail that stands out is going to be hit; great winds blow on the high hill) is quite true. She has finally learnt her lesson that she should think as everybody else and do what the others do. In other words, she has learnt the art of imitation.

> My parents were at a loss what to do about me, but they were as affectionate to me as ever. I'd never meant to make them sad or have to keep apologizing for things I did, so I decided to keep my mouth shut as best I could outside home. I would no longer do anything of my own accord, and would either just mimic what everyone else was doing, or simply follow instructions (Murata 2018: 10).

She had the chance to be completely reborn, to begin a normal life only after she started working in the *konbini*. Imitating the voices on the tape and using standard expressions (such as "welcome to our store", "certainly. Right away, sir!", "thank you for shopping here!") were part of her pre-work training:

> I was good at mimicking the trainer's examples and the model video he'd shown us in the back room. It was the first time anyone had ever taught me how to accomplish a normal facial expression and manner of speech (Murata 2018: 15).

The convenience store offers a sort a manual of how to deal and talk with people without upsetting or shocking them and Keiko is getting used to wearing the uniform of normalcy while she is in the store, even if she still does not know how to behave in the outside world. Little by little the

convenience store has turned into Keiko's private sanctuary – a promise that here she can be safe, useful and normal.

The people around her are also o source of inspiration for attaining "a satisfactory level of normalcy" because she can copy their gestures and voices. Mrs. Izumi, her supervisor, is a housewife a year older than Furukura, and wears flashy dresses and high heels in her free time. Sugawara is a twenty-four-year-old young lady who sings in a band. She is loud and cheerful and an enthusiastic member of the staff. From her female co-workers Keiko learns how to talk properly. She is so good at imitating people and she has come to believe that imitation is almost a law of nature, a means to preserve our humanity:

> 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 […] Infecting each other like this is how we maintain ourselves as human is what I think (Murata 2018: 25-26).

Furukura gradually discovers the bliss and safety of shape-shifting. In Japanese the verb *bakeru* 化ける[13] means "to take the form of, to transform into, to disguise oneself as" and this is exactly what she does: she experiments on the various meanings of the word *bakeru*. Firstly, she tries to speak in the manner of the women surrounding her, since they are the perfect example of normalcy. This stage could be called the speech mode *bakeru*.

> I answered, copying Sugawara's speech pattern, but using a slightly more adult tone. Her speech is a rather excitable staccato, the exact opposite of Mrs. Izumi's, but mixing the two styles works surprisingly well (Murata 2018: 27).

Because she has no idea what she should wear outside the store without looking ridiculous, Keiko goes into the fashion mode *bakeru* and spies on Mrs. Izumi while she is in the toilet, checking her clothes and the brands which she prefers. She is eventually thrilled to find out that she did a good job.

> "We've got quite similar tastes, haven't we? I like your bag too," Mrs. Izumi said with a smile.

[13] The character (化) is made up of two parts: 人and 匕. According to its etymology the left side represents a person standing up in normal position and the right side, a person who assumes a strange bodily posture; together they mean a person changing one's position, i.e. a person who transforms oneself (Kanjigen 1994: 780).

> It's only natural that my tastes would match hers since I'm copying her. I'm sure everyone must see me as someone with an age-appropriate bag and a manner of speech that has a perfect sense of distance without being reserved or rude (Murata 2018: 27).

Moving to a higher level, Keiko becomes aware of the emotional mode *bakeru*. Her keen eyes notice the subtle changes in the others' moods and concludes, in her own peculiar style, that imitation could be another form of communion:

> I'd noticed soon after starting the job that whenever I got angry at the same things as everyone else, they all seemed happy. If I went along with the manager when he was annoyed or joined in the general irritation at someone skiving off the night shift, there was a strange sense of solidarity as everyone seemed pleased that I was angry too. Now, too, I felt reassured by the expression on Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara's faces: Good, I pulled off being a "person" (Murata 2018: 29).

However, the most successful experiment was, by far, the situational *bakeru*. She has seen the disappointment in other people's eyes when she told them that she had no romantic relationship, and, as a result, she decided to take Shiraha in, feed him as a pet, and pose as a happy couple. Once again we have different approaches to the same problem – two cameras showing different pictures. People's perspective on this situation is that they are finally getting a better glimpse of Keiko who is about to be engaged in a serious rite of passage and eventually marry. On the other hand, Keiko is aware that they are trying to rewrite the story of her life in their own words.

> Everyone seemed happier than when I'd told them I'd never been in love, and they were carrying on as if they knew everything about my situation. The previous me—who'd never fallen in love or had sex, who'd never had a proper job—had sometimes been hard to read. But everything about the new me—the one who had Shiraha living with her —was clear, even my future (Murata 2018: 112).

Another rule of shape-shifting is to assimilate everything around. If the world changes, you should absorb the change, and transform yourself along with the whole universe.

> After all, I absorb the world around me, and that's changing all the time. Just as all the water that was in my body last time we met has now been replaced with new water, the things that make up me have changed too. When we last met a

> few years ago, most of the store workers were laid-back university students, so of course my way of speaking was different then (Murata 2018: 32-33).

Before being hired at the *konbini*, Keiko had practiced the proper pitch of her voice and the words she should use when talking to the customer. Similarly, her two friends seem to have also attended the same school of good manners which taught them the standardised gestures of femininity. Moreover, Keiko extends her judgment on the power of imitation and comes to believe that copying others is actually a wide-spread habit practiced by everybody on a daily basis in order to be acknowledged and appreciated.

> Miho and Satsuki wear exactly the same expression and speak the same way, perhaps because they live close to each other and often meet up. The way they eat cookies is especially similar, both breaking off tiny pieces and putting them in their mouths with hands that have perfectly manicured nails (Murata 2018: 33).

In the end, after tapping into the vast reservoir of the *bakeru* wisdom, Keiko is satisfied with the overall result of her normalcy, even if it poses serious problems regarding her own identity. To her, imitation means survival among other human beings. The Darwinian *credo* of "survival of the fittest" is thus replaces by "survival of the most skilled imitator".

> 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 (Murata 2018: 25).

In Keiko's opinion, the store is the very definition of being normal: "a convenience store is a forcibly normalized environment where foreign matter is immediately eliminated" (Murata 2018: 60). From this point of view she resembles a modern Antaeus as she feels normal, almost invincible as long as she remains in contact with the convenience store. She renews her life force every time she comes to the *konbini*. After the unpleasant conversation at the barbeque party she returns to the convenience store and feels pleasantly restored. Or, after her long sickness, she gets better only after she sets foot on the convenience store on her way to the company in which the interview for the new job was supposed to take place.

Although Keiko seems to have found the algorithm of shape-shifting, she is at a loss when there is nothing else to imitate. As a result, she desperately sticks to the *konbini*'s familiar world in her attempt to patch up the emotional gaps with parts cut out from the convenience store life.

> "We were aiming for a hundred chicken skewers today, weren't we? But there aren't any ready for the lunchtime rush yet, and the POP ad hasn't been put out either!" I told them.
> I'd expected them both to respond, "Oh no, that's terrible!" But Mrs. Izumi just leaned over to me and said, "Hey, Miss Furukura, what's all this I hear about you and Shiraha? Is it true?"
> "What? But Mrs. Izumi, the skewers—"
> "Just a moment, how long has this been going on? You're a good match though! Come on, tell us. Which one of you made the first move?
> Was it Shiraha?"
> "Oh, she's too embarrassed to let anything on … We'll have to take her out drinking sometime. Make sure you bring Shiraha too, Furukura!"
> "But, the skewers!" (Murata 2018: 117)

3. Conclusion

Even if the book is hilarious and easy to read, its conclusion is quite disturbing: in our world, a normal person with problems is better than an abnormal person with no problems. The general opinion on normalcy relies on several restrictive perspectives: to get married or, at least, to have a romantic relationship and/or to climb a career ladder. From those points of view, Keiko is considered an asexual, ambitionless person who does not follow the yellow brick road to success and biological fulfillment. Under the demanding public eye, the heroine attempts to adapt to these social requirements and believes that the key to become a "normal" citizen is to imitate the others in every respect: how they dress (the fashion mode *bakeru*), talk (speech mode *bakeru*) and even to copy situations (the situational *bakeru*) that mimic a normal romantic relationship. She has become a modern shape-shifter who regularly practices the art of imitation and employs different strategies in order to be upgraded from a part-time member to a full-time member of normalcy. In this respect, the ending is quite prophetic and it parallels Keiko's situation. Since in her professional life she has failed to get a full-time job and got back to the old one, as a part-time worker in a convenience store, probably she will not make any

progress as a full-fledged normal person. She will always remain "a part-time human being." This is the best she can do.

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Links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Eag3-URh2I (accessed 1 December 2018)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tAyE0-OPwjI (accessed 1 December 2018)