
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Joy of Not Fitting in: Asexuality Dynamics in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*

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ABSTRACT

The notions of success, sexuality, and happiness are largely arbitrary and mediated by culture, gender, and societal norms. The linear narrative of many women's lives has largely been circumscribed and bound by family structures. The vocal feminist defies these norms flagrantly, but what if the woman is just another Fly on the wall, doing a mind-numbing routine for two decades yet finds comfort in the banality of her existence? Sayaka Murata's protagonist Keiko Furukura is an ordinary saleswoman in a supermarket at the heart of Tokyo. Juxtaposing Keiko's ordinariness with the opulence and grandeur of uptown Tokyo, this paper explores the struggles and subtleties of living a life of nonconformity without regard to sexual orientation. At 36, with no great career, no companion, no money and no prospects of a 'bright' future, Keiko is 'different', the oddball without purposefully intending to be one. Reading Keiko's life in the light of contemporary asexuality theories, this paper chooses to play on the binaries of success/failure, sexual/ asexual, society/individual, insider/outlier and illuminate the cause of the most marginalised stream of sexuality studies: asexuality.

Keywords: asexuality, linear narrative, nonconformity, juxtaposition

FULL RESEARCH PAPER

The first step in acknowledging the nuances of sexuality began with the breaking of the gender binaries, followed by the efforts to bring in sexual minorities and people displaying different sexual alignments within the sphere of inclusivity. Though the struggle of the sexually marginalised in every form has been made a conspicuous battle garnering visibility and generating impact, there is a deafening silence on the other side – of asexual people. Asexuality Studies is slowly and steadily emerging from its nondescript, invisible space into the edges of conversation and emerging discourses on sexuality, identity and being.

Though asexual studies, especially asexual reproduction (which is the primary area of most available literature on the topic), have been studied, understood, and researched in the animal world, it has always suffered from the stigma of belonging to subordinate organisms, primarily the unicellular, indistinct life forms. It is interesting to note that asexual reproduction results in offspring that are an exact copy of the parent – with no genetic change in their makeup and hence the method itself is seen as perpetuating a species without any evolutionary progress or development in the subsequent generations – a status quo with no intergenerational change for evolving a better generation of the species.

Asexual reproduction has been accorded a position where it is stagnant survival versus the change in the genetic composition of the offspring in sexual reproduction. So the term has come to imply a position of existence and survival instead of progress and development. It stands to reason that in humans, it is a similar reflection of this status. Setting aside reproduction, asexuality itself is not seen as a way of life. Asexuality is neither acknowledged nor understood. In the last few decades, with the mushrooming of literature and research on sexuality in its most liberated and inclusive avatars, we do have the binary now – sexual and asexual. However, it is lopsided and highly tilted towards the former in literature, research, activism, etc.

After gaining traction, the task ahead to remove the stigma of it being deemed a 'pathological' condition requiring medical intervention for 'cure' had to be addressed. While there was willingness to open the discourse on the myriad manifestations of sexuality and move away from the male/ female binary and action initiated and implemented in responding to the voices of the sexually repressed and discriminated minorities, there appeared to be no forward movement towards

initiating conversations around asexuality as a gender identity. Sexuality is perceived as a spectrum, enveloping and accommodating the needs of every person who has a sexual orientation, with its contours constantly being shaped and reshaped dynamically. By contrast, asexuality is stark and monochrome and devoid of all the education needed to understand those at the end (or rather beyond) of the sexuality spectrum – a group of people who exist outside the sphere of sexuality. Since asexuality “subverts a cultural assumption about what it means to be human, it is often difficult for asexual people to recognize, let alone embrace their identity” (Parshall). The author quotes Hille, a sexuality educator who says that saying “you don’t experience sexual attraction is still like saying you don’t eat” making an asexual person ‘abnormal’ and lacking human wants and needs. (Parshall). Gupta speaks of how the majority subscribes to two convictions: first, most people feel sexual attraction; and second, if people do not feel sexual attraction, it is most likely a sign of moral, medical or psychological disorder” (132).

Today, with the emergence of the ‘woke’ culture and the assertion of individuality and the acknowledgement of personal choices as against acceptance by society, asexuality is coming into its own space. With organisations such as AVEN (Asexual Visibility and Education Network), the community network building of asexual individuals took shape. From non-existence, to ‘pathological’ tag to acceptance and creation of a separate and demarcated space – asexuality had arrived, the assertion of an identity.

This paper examines the life of Keiko, an asexual person living outside the ‘prescribed’ conventions of society. It juxtaposes it with society’s perception of her sexual identity and draws the points of divergence between the two perceptions – self and society. She is ‘aromantic asexual’ going by this classification on the sexuality spectrum – described as a person who does not desire sex or ascribes to any romantic attributes (McDonough)

From childhood, Keiko is not ‘normal’ – she does not fit in. Although not explicitly stated, understood between the lines is that Keiko Furukura, the protagonist, is on the autism spectrum. She knows she is not normal when she sees her younger sister. She is everything that society deems unfit – unmarried, lowly employed, unsuccessful, in a dead-end career as a convenience store salesgirl at 36, and this is the conclusion that society arrives at – an unhappy woman. This is where Keiko is a rebel – nobody can understand how the ordinary, unexciting, uneventful, mind-numbing routine of a salesgirl could be comforting, soothing, and actually make her happy.

The noise of the store – all kinds of sounds emanating from men, machines, products and utilities is strangely comforting for her – “It all blends into the convenience store sound that ceaselessly caresses my eardrums” (Murata 1). She is not smart but efficient; she is not interested in gossip but focused on work; she is attuned to the timing and material needs of the people around her, though their emotional quotient baffles her. She is hardworking and becomes a ‘reliable resource’

She is tremendously aware of everything and everybody around her. She watches, she observes, she adjusts and hence understands that she is not fitting in. She decides to follow others. She says, “ 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 mimic...or simply follow instructions” (Murata 10). Keiko navigates through the world – through silence and imitation. Trained by her sister, she learns to respond to situations with premeditated stock responses she has stored in her mind.

The one thing that stumps her is the question of her being single with no history of any relationship. Keiko can manage this when younger, but as she grows older, the long arm of society intervenes – “When I was in my early twenties it wasn’t unusual to be a freeter, so I didn’t really need to make excuses. However, subsequently everyone started hooking up with society, either through employment or marriage” (Murata 36). To be connected to society, she needed to be married or have the semblance of a relationship. She had neither. “Have you ever been in love, Keiko?” Satsuki asked teasingly. (Murata 36) Knowing fully well that the topic would discomfort Keiko. Then another co-worker develops the thread, questioning if she has dated anyone, and then they realise that she has never spoken about her sexual life.

The discussion, once it starts, makes her co-workers realise that dating, relationships, love and marriage are alien in Keiko’s world. Keiko’s sister, anticipating this, had told her to pretend that she had boyfriends earlier, without giving details. “This would give the impression that I’d at least had a lover or something that might have involved some kind of physical relationship, even if I’d never had an actual boyfriend” (Murata 37). When Keiko is bombarded with these questions, she remains silent, which is the only reaction she has learnt to give when she can’t handle questions and conjectures. Then her co-workers hint at other possibilities with comments like: “So I kind of get it. These days you can also be asexual or whatever you like...Oh yes, I heard that’s on the increase. Like there are young people who just aren’t interested in it at all.... It’s apparently really hard for them to come out too” (Murata 37). They conclude that Keiko is asexual but without acceptance and a respect for her choice of life and privacy – only to fit her in, because they can’t slot her anywhere else.

It is this conversation that makes Keiko aware that others consider her a total misfit but a convenient worker because her work is good and she is unlikely to leave the low-paid job. She assumes that people are not interested in her life. Her colleagues do not call her to the private get-togethers and outings that her co-workers and their partners attend. Her non-existent social life suddenly bothers them, and that, in turn, bothers her. She sees herself thus - "I'm a convenience store worker, a cog in society. This is the only way I can be a normal person" Murata 21).

This conversation about her relationships (or rather the lack of them) with her colleagues prompts her to think and acknowledge to herself that she has never thought about sex – it was never in her mind. The outcome and the conclusion of the entire banter about her amongst her colleagues is that she is miserable because she has no sexual life, and Keiko knows that being asexual is not equal to being unhappy and that she is doing fine. She feels left out.

Keiko's discovery that her lack of sexual interest would never allow her to fit in provokes her to find a way to tackle this, and she wonders, "What a pain I thought, wondering why everyone felt such a need for reassurance" (Murata 38). She eventually realises that to be in a relationship will prompt society to accept that she is 'cured'. She recalls the thought she had when young – "My family always loved and cherished me, and that's why they were so worried and wanted to cure me. I recall hearing my parents discussing how to do this, and wondered what it was about me that needed correcting" (Murata 11). Although she does not understand why she needs to be 'cured', Keiko decides to do what society dictates.

The honest, transparent Keiko thinks of a devious plan – she invites an ex-colleague, Shiraha, to share her apartment – he is jobless and lazy, has unpaid dues, and rants about society and its bias against the poor and insignificant people. Shiraha attempts to latch on to female customers, female co-workers – anybody on whom he can have a parasitic existence. It becomes a win-win situation: he moves in with Keiko, and everyone assumes he is her boyfriend, even though he is unemployed and a drifter. Keiko is not interested in a relationship with him, and Shiraha agrees to the arrangement only because of Keiko's assurance that this is a 'no strings attached' cohabitation for convenience.

It is Shiraha and Keiko's 'arrangement' that makes it abundantly clear what the plight of an asexual being, particularly a woman, particularly in the eastern culture, will be. In Asian countries, women get married at a certain age, have children at a certain age, have grandchildren later, and the cycle of life is perpetuated. Boyfriends and

relationships are seen as transient phases in this eventual road to 'marriage'. Any form of sexuality –society needs to know people's sexual orientation – is better than asexuality. The asexual person is perceived as emotionless – making them less human than others. Keiko is worried about this assumption of society – what Gupta calls 'compulsory sexuality' – "that all people are sexual, the norms and practices that compel people to experience themselves as desiring objects, take up sexual identities and engage in sexual activity, the norms and practices that marginalize various forms of non sexuality"(132) and hence she decides to cohabit with Shiraha - a convenience store woman in a situationship of convenience.

It is this wanting to be seen as normal that changes Keiko's honest, straightforward nature. Keiko begins to create false impressions, though she does not harm anyone and does so to protect herself from society's prying eyes. She realises that she is seen as normal and accepted amongst her co-workers and friends after Shiraha moves in with her. "It was as though everyone was saying that.. I was part of their circle. (Muraka 113). She feels welcomed and accepted. This deception works as the Store Manager and her co-workers ask her to bring Shiraha along for their social outings. It is only at this point that Keiko realises the people who work at the store meet up socially after work. It adds to her certainty that this façade of a relationship with Shiraha is essential to 'belong' to the people, to society, to the world.

The carefully crafted illusion is broken when Keiko's sister arrives and discovers Shiraha is using the old bathtub as a bed, settling himself, comforting. He is almost like a creature, a pet, given shelter and food by Keiko - For breakfast, she puts the boiled potatoes and rice in a basin and hands it over – "I held his feed out for him, and he took it" Murata 129). Looking at the entire arrangement, Keiko explains, " It's a bit of a hassle, but it's convenient having him here. Everyone is really happy for me. They're all congratulating me. They've all convinced themselves my new situation is great, and they've stopped poking their nose into my business. So he's useful(Murata 130). Hearing this, her sister breaks down, muttering how she never imagined this. She utters in despair, " Will you ever be cured, Keiko?....How can we make you normal?" (Murata 131). It is then that Keiko understands that her arrangement with Shiraha is seen as her being 'cured' by her own sister, who initially believes it is a real emotional and intimate relationship. Shiraha steps in to rescue Keiko, uttering that they had had a fight and that eventually things will work out - " I know. I am looking for work, although it's going slowly, and of course we're thinking in terms of getting married soon" (Murata135). Her sister leaves, happy that Keiko is now a normal woman with normal problems, including a jobless fiancé.

The arrangement is not without its baggage. Shiraha has strong patriarchal ideas and looks down upon Keiko. Without a job and a proper education, he still assumes superiority over Keiko. Keiko realises that his rant is the result of being unsuccessful in life – “You’re still in a dead-end job at your age, and nobody’s going to marry an old maid like now. You’re like secondhand goods. Even if you are a virgin, you’re grubby. You’re like a Stone Age woman past childbearing age who can’t get married and is left to just hang around the village, of no use to anyone, just a burden. I’m a man, so I can still make a comeback, but there’s no hope for you” (Murata 91). Keiko does not respond to the misogynistic attack and wonders why he is targeting her.

When Shiraha’s sister –in- law arrives, the impression continues, and after her exit, Shiraha tells Keiko how he has ‘helped’ her: “ 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. Isn’t it wonderful? (140). Even Shiraha knows that Keiko is not doing it for herself to feel better but for ‘them’ in the outside world.

Keiko starts her life as a salesgirl and continues to do the same job for 18 years. She leads a systematic life- monotonous yet organised, boring yet consistent and this compulsion to be seen as a normal person with normal sexual needs pushes her into bringing Shiraha into the household. Shiraha is unhygienic, lethargic, and complaining; is obnoxiously patriarchal and offensive; and does not support Keiko, financially or emotionally. Keiko senses this starkly. At the convenience store, Shiraha is irregular, not punctual, does his work carelessly, looks down on the job, and is expelled unceremoniously. Keiko is his opposing binary – she is regular, punctual, does her work with the utmost care and never sees the job as lowly but as just a job. When Shiraha says the job is meant for women and not men, Keiko quickly retorts, “Shiraha, we’re in the twenty-first century! Here in the convenience store we’re not men and women. We’re all store workers” (Murata 51). Though Shiraha himself blatantly admits to living off her as a parasite, he is also aware that he is needed to maintain the pretence of normalcy in Keiko’s life – “...you have no choice but to keep me around....I always did want revenge on women who are allowed to become parasites just because they’re women. I always thought to myself that I’d be a parasite one day. That’d show them. And I’m going to be a parasite on you, Furukura, whatever it takes” (Murata 123). Though Keiko takes this in quietly, she acknowledges his parasitic existence and worries about the future. Again, when Shiraha wonders about the terms of living, Keiko

says "...if you're not fussy I can provide your feed for you....Oh, sorry. It's the first time I've kept an animal at home, so it feels like having a pet, you see" (109), making clear his place and position.

The final act of rebellion happens when she leaves the apartment to attend an interview after 18 years of being a salesperson and, on her way, sees another supermarket that beckons her – calls out to her. When Shiraha is agitated that she may not attend the interview and he cannot continue to live on her parasitically – she replies with clarity and composure – "For the human me, it probably is convenient to have you around, Shiraha, to keep my family and friends off my back. However, the animal me, the convenience store worker, has absolutely no use for you whatsoever" (Murata 162). Better to be seen as an animal on her own terms rather than be a human on society's terms is her decision. With that, Keiko once again becomes the convenience store worker, leaving behind the expectations of society – its idea of sexuality, marriage, children and the whole cycle of creation. Keiko, without making a sound, becomes a feminist, asserting her will. This is in line with the view that feminist movements must pay attention to asexuality as a feminist mode of expression (Cerankowshi and Milks).

One aspect that warrants close observation is that Keiko is emotionally challenged and possesses basic survival skills. Hers is a fight to lead her life without intrusion from society as an asexual person. This is the opposite of what disability activists have been voicing for years - to remove the taboo that disabled people are asexual – that they are sexual beings and have sexual needs, desires, and expectations. As Cuthbert notes, "There has been an active movement to dissociate asexuality from disability" (243). Disability in this sense revolves around physical disability – that is visible, tangible, measurable and open. The novel raises the pertinent question for the other side – those with no sexual interests or needs: is it fair for society to straitjacket them within a given sexual orientation, imposing the constraints of relationships and marriage?

From oblivion to acknowledgement to acceptance to identity, it has been a long line of little accomplishments for the asexual community. The natural progression from here would be to identify and appreciate how asexual people see another aspect of people that wouldn't be discernible to others. As one interviewee points out in a study, "both LGBT and straight communities place a premium on sexual attractiveness whereas asexuals are more likely to see people as having characteristics outside of those that make them sexually desirable" (Cuthbert). This is clearly seen in the novel, where Keiko can read the people around her much better than others. She is unbiased

in her assessment of people and hence more tolerant and less judgmental. She is grateful for her supportive parents and colleagues. In fact, though Shiraha is not neat, ordered and careless about his personal appearance, she does not point it out, though she is completely aware of it. This supports the view that "this framing of the asexuality community/sexuality in general as especially enlightened (since there is no sexual attraction to 'get in the way'") (Cuthbert) - paving the way for understanding asexual people as probably more tolerant, perceptive and receptive in their outlook on others. This significant strain of thought and research would render the future of asexuality studies relevant and significant. What is the final word on understanding asexuality? Perhaps, like many ideas, it is negotiating a labyrinth of multiple factors – gender and culture, as in Keiko's case. The key to understanding asexuality and its nuances, probably, yet again lies in embracing its intersectionality.

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