

Delving into Hyper-reality and Consumerism in *Convenience Store Woman*

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the requirements for the degree of
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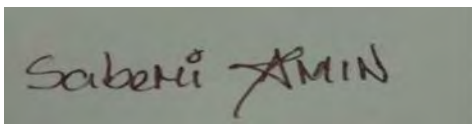
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It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

Student's Full Name & Signature:

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in dark ink. The signature reads "Saberi AMIN" in a cursive style, with "AMIN" in all caps.

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Approval

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Abstract

In the contemporary world, humans act like mere parts of a machine that function to produce certain outcomes in life to give their life a meaning in the eyes of the society. This kind of lifestyle often causes detachment from one's own emotion that leads to self-estrangement. They start to rationalize the meaning of life as if the world has become a huge life-size supermarket / convenience store from which humans shop their materialistic desires to maintain a status in the society. This thesis concentrates on the novel *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata to establish the idea that living in a hyper-real world creates isolation from self and blurs the line between 'real' and 'constructed' life. Therefore, this study observes the consumerist hyper-real society Keiko Furukura belongs to and explore the concepts of hyper-reality and consumerism with the help of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* as the theoretical lens. It concentrates on the novel being a postmodern read and plea for individuality amidst consumerism and hyper-reality.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Background:

In the recent past, I had stopped at a supermarket to purchase a dozen eggs, five packets of pasta, one litre of cola, and six packets of potato crisps. Awaiting service, I was observing the densely populated commercial setting, where customers hurriedly selecting essential items, and cashiers efficiently processing transactions at the tills. Whilst in the queue, I glanced beyond the woman ahead of me to gauge how close I was to paying the bill. Soon, my turn arrived. As I was about to pay, the cashier enquired whether I wished to pay in cash or by credit card. I chose to pay by card and immediately exited the store. I felt a sense of joy at the thought of watching a film that evening whilst enjoying my snacks.

This personal anecdote is shared as my experience within the supermarket environment and my perspective as a consumer relate directly to this dissertation. On that note, one might consider: when was the last time they left a supermarket with a sense of fulfilment from their purchases? From a consumer's standpoint, have you questioned your preferences for certain products or your choice of a particular brand? Was the decision based on product quality or brand image? Have we considered the satisfaction derived from the process of purchasing our chosen products? Was it quantity or quality that shaped our needs? Why do we spend considerable time standing before the aisles? What draws our attention—the precise arrangement of goods or the vibrancy of their colours?

Before delving into the sophisticated theories of hyper-reality and consumerism, it is useful to first examine the concept of convenience stores in Japan. As a long-standing anime enthusiast since childhood, I possessed a prior familiarity with such stores. From subtitles, I learned they are widely referred to as *konbini*, a term translated as “convenience store.” My awareness of their social significance and operational functions developed further a few years ago when I conducted research to gain insight into Japan’s consumer culture in relation to them. Additionally, engaging with Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* during my postmodern literature course at the outset of my Master’s programme inspired me to explore the concepts of hyper-reality and consumerism more broadly. In parallel, I began observing local supermarkets with interest, where I believe both concepts were present, though rarely acknowledged by others.

During the brief period of my postmodern course, I encountered the novel *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata online. Upon reading reviews of *Convenience Store Woman*, I recognised that the concept of the Japanese convenience store bears similarity to the supermarket depicted in *White Noise*. In Japan, convenience stores operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, with multiple outlets often located within each neighbourhood. In addition, to selling groceries and snacks, they provide ATM facilities, utility bill payment services, parcel delivery options, and magazine stands offering manga. The Japanese model was initially influenced by the gas station culture of the United States, which incorporated small convenience outlets. However, the Japanese *konbini* has evolved into a more diverse and accommodating institution, offering a broader range of products compared to U.S. gas station stores. In the Western context, convenience stores are

primarily points of payment for fuel, with a limited selection of essential travel items and a small assortment of light reading materials.

Statement of the Problem:

In the context of consumerist cultures, it is to say that people struggle with their sense of self and independence against the global backdrop, which contributes to the tensions brought by hyper-reality and the all-consuming waves of materialism. We can analyse one's hyper-real existence, their immersion in the frenzy of consumer needs, and the overall echoes of a world deeply interconnected by globalization using the theoretical framework provided by Baudrillard's insights into consumer culture and hyper-reality. The major sources of hyper-reality are social media, adverts, internet and television. We are deceived to think that they are simply for our leisurely purpose or business in general. Through simultaneous flow we are pulled towards these media for consumption, but it is not all that meets the eye. Almost flawless lifestyle gets promoted through the uninterrupted flow of images. In addition to this, the natives of the society feel the sense of lacking due to desire these images nurture. The lack then leads people towards consumption. After the consumption is complete, simulation of the consumed images begins. Later, these simulated images generate specific product, no matter what that will be. This takes us to the third stage of pure simulacrum. This simulacrum is a different image now that is unlike the original illustration and is more unique than the previous image. Thus, the natives of the society cultivate hyper-reality more often than anyone can measure. The fact that, inside the reality, the birth of hyper-reality occurs, it makes the hyper-real difficult to be distinguished. The novel *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata

makes us face this trajectory of consumerism and hyper-realism that is investigated into in the current study.

Rationale:

The presence of hyper-real atmosphere around us is difficult to overlook. Even after a critical discussion on such places like Japanese convenience stores and the hyper-reality that they cultivate, these stays silently present. Critical analysis about them always falls short. This establishment promotes ideological control while conditioning the consumer.

In this research, it is observed that the novel *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata takes responsibility to look into the matter at hand. Through the main character, Keiko Furukura, the novel illustrates how consumerist culture curves individual's identity. Through Furukura's obsession with affirming to her part in the convenience store, the influence of consumerist culture is evident. So, simulation of identity and behaviour takes away human experiences that are original. This is exactly what Jean Baudrillard's hyper-reality proves. Indulging into the explanation of hyper-reality will then display how normalcy is defined, valued and created, enforcing Debord's spectacle all together in the context of the society.

In the end, hyper-reality is embedded in the character of the protagonist, Keiko Furukura. It implies that simulated identities are more of significance than the authentic image. I believe such a study is important for our understanding of the world and its many ways to consume human energy and attention for the sustenance of capitalism.

Theoretical Framework:

This research is based on Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*. Maintaining a qualitative study, the theoretical framework is set around the contents of the literature mentioned above. The following literature review will be explaining the chapter "Konbini-Nation the Rise of the Convenience Store in Post-Industrial Japan" from the book titled, *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan*, by Galvin H. Whitelaw, as well as Peng Wang's research paper titled, *Konbini as Microcosms: How Japanese Convenience Stores Both Shape and Are Shaped by Their Society* and we consult the journal article, *The Loss of Longing in the Age of Curated Reality* by Christopher Yates.

Furthermore, looking into the novel from a postmodern perspective we can understand how the *Convenience Store Woman* can evoke a broader and more philosophical ideology. Upon further examination, we find Furukura's conduct and approach is influenced by postmodern idea of hyper-reality. We also see how the society we currently live in, affects Furukura's thinking process. Exploring the concepts of hyper-reality and how it overshadows the actual reality, shows us how today's culture and individual psychology adapts to the hyper-real ideas.

Therefore, by the means of Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, this paper shall explore the novel, *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata is a read that can be categorized as postmodern literature. Thus, this dissertation will provide an insight into the consumerist hyper-real society, through the mind of Keiko Furukura and share the knowledge of how consumerism navigates through hyper-reality.

Research Questions:

The study asks the following questions:

- What social and psychological effects emerge from a hyper-real society where consumerist imagery governs?
- How does hyper-reality influence Furukura's sense of self and independence in a globalized society?
- Can hyper-reality lead to a loss of authentic experience, and if so, how does this impact social identity?

Methodology:

Being qualitative in nature this paper examines opinions, behaviours and experiences of Keiko Furukura. It analyses words and textual data to investigate for evidences of hyper-reality and consumerism throughout the novel. So, the method adopted for this study is literary exegesis, and the primary text that is analysed is *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata. As secondary sources, books, journal articles, materials available on the internet, etc. are used. This is discussed elaborately in chapter three.

Scopes and limitation:

The dissertation at hand could cover only one novel that speaks of such spaces like convenience stores in Japan. After Murata's book, a couple of Japanese books came out that revolved around convenience stores. Through this study, some of the rising postmodern concepts are covered to some extent. There are not many secondary academic

resources that works with this specific novel, and this paper may be useful as a resource for other researches in the field.

Conclusion:

Chapter one gives an overview of what the overall paper is going to project. The literature review section will discuss existing journals and research paper by different scholars. Chapter three will explain the methodology that has been used to analyse the novel along with the theoretical framework for this research paper which are Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* and Guy Debord's *The Spectacle of the Society*. Chapter four critically analyses the selected novel for this research, that is *Convenience Store Woman* authored by Sayaka Murata and finally, Chapter five carefully wraps up the discussion.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The ideology behind the convenience store originates in USA. The store within gas stations mostly for the purpose of paying the bills, also offers quick purchases for the road. The atmosphere of a gas station is usually somber, having the smell of fuel in the air and the cashiers would mostly maintain minimum communication. 7 Eleven is a retail chain by gas stations in USA that also set up their operations in Japan and had encouraged a huge shift in consumer behaviour. Other big names like Lawson and Family Mart, etc. followed them and as a result there was a rise in the number of consumers visiting the convenience stores. The profound effect of retail store chains was embraced in Japan so wholeheartedly that locally they came to be known as *konbini*.

From a postmodern perspective the convenience store is an area which propagates hyper-reality. This is where under pretense the society is mocked and it produces a simulated version of the reality. The space of the consumer store overshadows the anarchy of the real world by navigating the atmosphere inside the store to attract the customers. It is here, that the consumers find a sense of belonging from the hustle and bustle of the outside world.

In this chapter, the contents of the novel will be dissected to prove how reality is reconstructed resembling the society, and where reality makes more sense than the real world.

2.1 Birth of *konbini* in Japan

Gavin H. Whitelaw in his chapter “Konbini-Nation the Rise of the Convenience Store in Post-Industrial Japan” that is included in *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan* writes, “In the words of one Generation X informant, konbini are ‘like the air you breathe’ and for certain generations of Japanese, it is difficult to imagine life without access to these 24-hour stores” (Whitelaw 70). The author identifies how convenience store became a widespread phenomenon starting from the 1990s. According to him,

Convenience stores, or konbini, as they are popularly known in Japan, are so ubiquitous today that they can be forgettable, that is, until you need one. There are currently over 56,000 konbini operating nationwide. The sheer concentration of stores, their long hours of operation, predictable offerings, and speedy service make them a popular daily destination for many people. No matter the time of day or night, anyone can drop by a konbini to purchase an *obentō* (lunch box), pay a bill, read magazines, or use the toilet. Yet, before the early 1980s, relatively few Japanese even knew what a konbini was. Indeed, it was not until the mid-1990s that the word ‘konbini’ entered the Japanese lexicon. (Whitelaw 69-70)

Gavin further explains that the accessibility to convenience stores throughout Japan, significantly increased the number of consumers from various levels of the Japanese society. They all come together to participate in this phenomenon of the convenience stores.

I trace the development of the convenience store in Japan and its beginnings in the late 1990s. By matching the rhythms and needs of various population segments – singles and families, farmers and salary men, hostesses and housewives, toddlers

and retirees, Japanese, foreigners, and even the occasional anthropologist – the konbini has not dissolved societal differences. Rather, these stores have come to reflect the process of ‘structured differentiation’ (Kelly 2002: 241) that has taken place within post-war Japanese society while highlighting the tensions and contradictions that are contributing to the denouement of its New Middle Class arrangements. (Whitelaw 70)

The term “konbini” quickly replaced convenience stores and became a popular name in every Japanese household. An increasing number of convenience stores were being set up in various regions across Japan, influencing the consumers to visit “konbinis” on a daily basis as part of their routine. Soon retail chain stores spread their business in various areas in Japan. These stores were occupied by consumers browsing through the isles or shelves seeking their necessary items twenty-four hours seven days a week. It affected the local population surrounding the convenience stores profoundly. Hence “konbini” is a significant part of the Japanese culture. Whitelaw discusses,

When ‘convenience store’ entered the Japanese language it appeared as *konbiniensu sutoa*, spelled in katakana, a phonetic writing system often used for non-Japanese words and names. Japan’s national newspaper, the *Asahi Shinbun*, introduced its readership to the *konbiniensu sutoa* in August 1970 by running a short article on the new retail model in its evening business section:

‘Small but highly productive’, the words tingle like pepper, and so the *konbiniensu (benri) sutoa*, which our nation appreciates, is rapidly increasing in number. These stores are of particular interest to food makers, large supermarkets and the head offices of voluntary chains. (Whitelaw 77-78)

The convenience store culture was being showcased in various media, especially in the 1980s, several acronyms and terms were used to represent them in promotional activities for the convenience stores. Commercial jingles, newspaper articles, TVC, etc. every single form of media were sending out the messages about the convenience stores. A popular newspaper editorial named *Konbiniensu monogatari* (Convenience story) (1992) was adapted into a short TV drama comprising of six episodes keeping the same name *Konbiniensu monogatari*. “In the postscript of *Konbiniensu monogatari*’s 1990 reprinting, Izumi and co-author Itō discuss in greater detail the evolution of the word ‘konbini’” (Whitelaw 78). How the term *konbini* came to exist is quite vague as it was at that time this term was being used in various cosmopolitan areas.

Convenience stores in the early 1990s were no longer a retail experiment, but a fully fledged industry of 24-hour outlets, equipped with new technology, eye-catching uniforms, and an always expanding horizon of products. The word ‘konbini’ (which in Japanese is written as ko-n-bi-ni) suited this breed of store, which was now coming into its own. The four syllables rolled off the tongue with the same uninhibited ease that customers entered these stores. (Whitelaw 78-79)

A famous Japanese author Takahashi Genichiro mentioned in one of his write-ups how convenience stores are actually *konbiniensu-kyokai*, or “convenience churches.” As explained by the writer, *konbini* was the church for the followers of the religion, *konbiniensu*, within the Japanese society. Here we can see a clear reflection of how the convenience stores and the society surrounding it, was perceived in a hyper-real world. Hence in the year 1993 “konbini” title was finally settled as a part of the local tongue in the Japanese society.

2.2 *Konbini* Mirrors Japanese Lifestyle

This segment explains how the Japanese society, their moral/social values are portrayed in the image of *konbini*. It also shows us how the current population, surrounding the *konbini*, affected its formulation and shaped the importance in the consumers' perception. For the purpose of clarifying the facts, it is necessary to go through the chapter "Konbini-Nation The Rise of the Convenience Store in Post-Industrial Japan" from the book titled, *Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan* authored by Gavin H. Whitelaw. It will also require to reflect on Peng Wang research paper called, *Konbini as Microcosms: How Japanese Convenience Stores Both Shape and Are Shaped by Their Society*.

Different from the purpose of convenience stores in USA, *konbini* in Japan is not just limited to gas stations with minimal service, offering just few items and collecting fuel bills. It is rather an extravagant affair in comparison as it accommodates a number of services and products that systematically connects the neighbourhood; meeting their demands instantly through quick and seamless processes. The services offered included fax machines, mobile recharging units, postal and package delivery service, ATM service, booking concert tickets, paying utility bills, selling newspapers, magazines and etc. Whitelaw states, "Starting in the latter half of the 1990s, *konbini* have been referred to as 'life infrastructure' (*seikatsu infura*), akin to critical public services such as water, gas, and electricity. They are also categorized as 'social infrastructure' (*shakai infura*) (Ōe 2003) alongside hospitals, banks, post offices, and neighbourhood police stations (*kōban*)" (Whitelaw 79).

Konbini remaining true to its identity, is found in every corner of the neighbourhoods in Japan. Conveniently serving consumers who are more frequent at these stores, which are mostly the senior population of the Japanese society. “Paralleling Japan’s large demographic trends, seniors are the industry’s fastest-growing consumer segment. In 2005, 7-Eleven released figures showing continued decline in the percentage of customers under 20 and a steady increase in customers over the age of 50” (qtd. in Whitelaw 79-80).

Furthermore, the exposure to the convenience store culture has been very negative for the young generation, as it stood, it had challenging effect on their mental and physical health. Whitelaw explains, “Konbini are also blamed for over stimulating youth and encouraging them to stay up late at night. One study carried out by university researchers found a correlation between store lighting and poor work habits at school” (qtd. in Whitelaw 81). He adds, “Some researchers argue that konbini have become a replacement for the mother and family. Miura Atsushi, a professor and marketing consultant, has gone as far as to declare the rise of ‘konbini civilization’ (*konbini bunmei*) in Japan. Miura makes the case these 24-hour institutions are raising children” (Whitelaw 81).

Moreover, the contemporary generations are more in favour of the terms *koshuko* and *Ohitorisama*, making it casual concept amongst them. Peng Wang explains the idea of *Ikka danran* in Japanese culture, in his research paper. Looking into the term “*koshoku*” it stands for “single meal”, reflecting upon individuals who prefer having meals on their own. On the other hand “*ikka danran*” means “family eating together, enjoying the mood” which is quite the opposite. The concept is not just about sharing a meal, it is about bringing together every member of the family, exchanging words, bonding and spending a memorable time with whole family in one place. Yet we can see the idea

of “*Koshoku*” is more prevalent in the modern day; whereas it has been once an appalling idea in the Japanese Society. Regardless of this favourable concept, the change towards the idea of *koshoku* has been overshadowing the conventional values (Wang 67).

Thus, against the traditional beliefs these terms *Koshoku* and *Ohitorisama* became more popular in the modern days; as the ideas firmly placed themselves within the Japanese culture.

The connotations of single-serving foods have shifted to become less negative. In Kato’s *Konbini to Nihonjin* (2012), a consumer survey that assessed public perception of *koshoku* asked “what does *koshoku* mean to you?” People tended to choose positive phrases such as “feeling free” or “comfortable” as opposed to negative answers such as “individual food,” “boring,” or “lonely.” Almost half of survey respondents agreed with the statement “I would like to eat alone,” some elaborating with the sentiment that eating alone is a feeling of freedom rather than boredom, and that it feels quiet and peaceful rather than lonely. (qtd. in Wang 67)

It is apparent that *konbini* has a significant role to play in the Japanese social and economic framework. People are seen spending a good amount of time in these convenience stores. Once, there was a time, when every individual had to look forward to in day was spending time at their home (first place), or at their work place (second place), and now there is a third space the *konbini*, the in between space. Whitelaw argues, “Third places are where people can gather and interact. In contrast to ‘first places’ (home) and ‘second places’ (work), third places are social levellers that situate guests on more neutral ground and foster communication and open exchange” (Whitelaw 85). The *konbini* works like a hub between the home and workplace, providing a place to unwind. “Using the *konbini* and observing

how other consumers used them, I felt that the stores were a place between places. They were anonymous, silent, and distancing, but also close, comforting, and possessing a certain effect of their own. Konbini accommodated both faster and slower paces” (Whitelaw 85).

Thus, the *konbini* is deeply rooted in the Japanese society, influencing the modern day choices, that strongly reflects both a social standing as well as the components of individual preferences.

2.3 Curated Reality inside *konbini*

This section looks into the concepts of how the basic human emotions, desire and longing plays an important role in the concept of hyper-reality. Human emotions are the foundation of their perception. Every decision they make, they will conform to their feelings. This is where hyper-reality giving them a false sense of attainment, attracting them to delve further in to a world where they find their desire being met. We will be following the journal article *The Loss of Longing in the Age of Curated Reality* by Christopher Yates, and tie in the concept with that of convenience store to explain how one theory complements the other.

Yates explains, “longing wants something different from what desire wants—and not just in the sphere of fashion or romantic love. *Desire* is the particularizing and possessive agenda of self-creation—the self in the mode of a performance aesthetic” (41). In the article, he presents fashion as an example while describing both of these senses. Then again, we might think that desires are one’s own but Yates differ to that and adds, “... it

tends to be cultivated in us and places us at a distance from the true experience of longing. Desire has become longing's counterfeit" (42).

As we can identify the common compulsion to buying items doesn't always meet their actual necessities. People seek to find relevance in a social standing. They sometimes consume products that can portray them as someone having a strong standing in the society. This can be either willingly or they can do so by remaining unaware of their choices. Which means that their purchases are based on their desire to belong, which in reality is not absolutely necessary. Yet to meet their demands to become a "truer self" in the society's judgmental eyes, they escape to hyper-reality to find products that makes sense to them in a utopian world. As per Edward Bernays psychological observation,

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country. We are governed, our minds are molded, our tastes formed, and our ideas suggested, largely by men we have never heard of.... It is they who pull the wires that control the public mind, who harness old social forces and contrive new ways to bind and guide the world. (qtd. in Yates 42)

Yates explains that promotional contents can become the "invisible government" directing human needs and have them chase Aristotle's "good life", without having to worry about the financial aspect, solely depending on the artificial stimulation that drives our thinking process. Choices and issues that solves themselves.

Speaking of consumerism, it is evident how a certain brand image can affect the purchasing process of a consumer at the convenience store. Whenever they are at a *konbini* such as 7Eleven, Family Mart, Lawson, etc. They would select items that have been able to connect to their “truer self” prioritizes brand images. Their behaviour is influenced in this zone where images are more real than the reality itself. Their perception of themselves in the social hierarchy propagates them to purchase brands that elevates their image in the society.

Wanting to feel more real, I think Loy would agree, is not the problem. Rather, it's the illusion of “making” this be so—securing it on our terms and giving it the bottom line sheen of goods and services. We are just so good at making things. Why not the self? Why not the world? Why not the fundamental truth of both, wrought in the self's aspirational image? It's almost irresistible. (Yates 44)

On the contrary, these spaces are where human emotions are diverted giving them a sense of liberty and flexibility as a *Ohitorisama*, insinuating that they avoid engagement with real people in the actual reality. Yates mentions, “The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard saw these dilemmas coming. He flagged a deeper feature of ourselves that is all too “integrated” by the many illusions that affirm our desire to live in the land of possibility and skirt the edges of a constraining actuality” (44). He further asserts,

The problem was the primacy of “reflection”—in the sense of both being obsessed with one's image and being complacent in one's thinking. What's dangerous about reflection is that it accelerates an inverse relation between scope and intensity, where the carousel of desires bends us so far outward that “inwardness is lost.” The

tendency is inevitable in some ways, maybe even necessary; we need to experience being out of sync in order to imagine being in sync with something priceless. (44)

Lastly, in the context of *konbini* beside desire there is longing that Yates mentions. It is of importance to keep constantly catering to the consumer's desire and longing. Influencing them to purchase products that focuses of the lacking of their need that is genuine. Establishes a balance in the consumers' emotions. Yates goes on explaining,

One doesn't have to subscribe to Plato's ladder of ascent or gift of the gods to appreciate his point that the realm of selfish desire is the futile and corrupting alternative to more genuine longing. And one doesn't have to be a philosopher to see how longing can open up a different logic of meaning in our contemporary aesthetic stage. What is needed is a redirection of our personal and social imaginations back to the place where longing marks our first and best efforts to know ourselves and the world. (48)

Now, among these literatures mentioned above, it is evident that they significantly mention the concept of consumerism. Aside from how the society is managing these notions of consumer culture another change that is taking place, is the alteration of reality with simulated images. These literary exegesis leaves a scope to explore the after effects of consumerism in an individual that takes away their individuality and creates a submissive individual to fuel the hyper-real world. This dissertation, will make efforts to encourage individuality through the analysis of the primary text, *Convenience Store Woman* authored by Sayaka Murata.

This chapter may be concluded with a wonderful quote from Yates, “We would not search for truth at all if it were something that did not concern us” (48). Consequently, *konbini* is a place that evokes relevance of the products in convenience store to our desire, we only seek what makes us important in eyes of the society, and we selfishly look for affirmation from others, in this short span of life.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The methodology maintained for this paper is qualitative research. Through the French philosopher and sociologist, Jean Baudrillard's essay titled "Simulacra and Simulations" and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, this chapter will explore hyper-reality and consumerism in the selected novel *Convenience Store Woman*. The woman in the novel will be carefully looked upon whose "meaningful existence" get blocked because of the social phenomenon of consumerism and the hyper-real world.

3.1 *Simulacra and Simulations* by Jean Baudrillard

Jean Baudrillard wrote about the theoretical concepts of "simulacrum" and "hyper-reality" that much influenced literary theory and philosophy, specifically in the United States of America and these still pervade through popular culture. With time Marxism failed to hold his interest when structuralism and semiology intrigued him. He incorporated all these in his theory. He understood that the system of sign needed deciphering for we consume these signs frequently. These signs had to be socially examined as they are present in our consumption structure and leisure. Eventually, he admits that signs and simulacra create hyper-reality and the consumers are submerged in this hyper-real world.

The term "simulacrum" is fake replica of something and Plato is responsible in coining the term for it. Baudrillard's theory of culture and media depends upon the concept of simulacrum after 1970s. The postmodern culture is dictated by movies, televisions, news media and the internet. According to Baudrillard, in this specific culture, true and fake copy

of anything has been dismantled. Now everything that remains are simulations of the reality. It is nothing less than the 'real' they stand for.

We are buying what we are desire for. There's a common phrase stating, "We are, what we buy". But the dilemma is whether this desire we call ours is originally created in ourselves by us. Then again it is simply not the commodities but also ideologies that gets included in our consuming habit. Our subscription taste and spree of purchase are governed by the signs. Another image gets created in every other moment. Subtly but surely societal control takes on the scene through mass consumption. Therefore it is the system that guides your choice and desires and happens to us involuntarily. Then we are responsible to decide the simulation we want to entertain. Baudrillard, in his work *The Consumer Society* argues, "A true analysis of the social logic of consumption would focus not on the individual appropriation of the use-value of goods and services, but rather on the production and manipulation of social signifiers" (Baudrillard 7).

In Baudrillard's essay, *Simulacra and Simulations*, he mentions an example where an individual is sick and the other individual feigns his sickness. By this analogy he tries to explain that feigning the symptoms of sickness makes one performing simulation. Then he proceeds to representation, clarifying, "Such is simulation, insofar as it is opposed to representation. Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is Utopian, it is a fundamental axiom)" (Baudrillard 6). He further mentions,

Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the Utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb

simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum. Such would be the successive phases of the image: it is the reflection of a profound reality; it masks and denatures a profound reality; it masks the absence of a profound reality; it has no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum. (6)

Furthermore, the consumption of goods and ideas are generating identities all around among individuals. Baudrillard believes that the identity of the people now are not ever static. Rather it is constantly going through change. Every now and then they are faced with simulations and signs. Gradually these generating identities are a portion of grand narratives scripted by images, media and writers. Meanwhile, in his essay *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard describes in regard to being a child inside the Disneyland while in the real world the adults are unable to be a child. He argues,

The imaginary of Disneyland is neither true nor false, it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp. Whence the debility of this imaginary, its infantile degeneration. This world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the “real” world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere - that it is that of the adults themselves who come here to act the child in order to foster illusions as to their real childishness. (Baudrillard 13)

Therefore, the space of Disneyland invokes childishness in the truest form of emotion confirming this space being a part of simulation. So, Disneyland is a hyper-real space that projects hyper-reality. Through this sign of Disneyland the created image of America is a

simulation. It hides other realities of the country. It is then addressed as a hyper-real phenomenon.

3.2 *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord

Guy Debord (1931–1994) is a prophetic critic who critiques the consumer culture that is driven by images. He writes about this in his famous work *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*) (1967). “Spectacle” is the term Debord uses to explore expression that is driven by capitalist phenomenon. This section includes a brief discussion on *The Society of the Spectacle* to give an overview of the consumer theory, which is used to analyse the novel *Convenience Store Woman* in the next chapter.

Guy Debord illustrates a society that is being navigated by images and representations in *The Society of the Spectacle*. He resided in a timeline where culture is about materialism, media and advertising. A society where the people were mere observers and a devoted participant in the capitalist world. Disconnected from their own self. Debord portrayed a society in which individuals were only observers rather than engaged participants in a marketed world, living apart from their own lives. A life that needed to be enquired about the originality of its existence.

Nowadays, our endless consumption navigates our experience of life. Experience, food, emotion, relationship, identity etc. performs as a product. They have spread their dominance over the lives of the individuals of the capitalist society. Debord observes that modern society of capitalism or commodities dictate people. Not the economics. Thus, through commodities people are performing their lives. It is more of how people are willing to relate to each other. According to Debord, Marx’s idea of alienation is relatable here. He

points out about the estrangement from what people produce and estrangement from one another including themselves. Thus this indicates that people now connect through images instead of interacting between each other. Debord affirms,

The world at once present and absent that the spectacle holds up to view is the world of the commodity dominating all living experience. The world of the commodity is thus shown for what it is, because its development is identical to people's estrangement from each other and from everything they produce. (14)

In Addition, Debord notices 'true desires' are shaped by the capitalist system in the consumer society. Eventually, reality is distorted through the logic of consumption. Every lie appears as another real. He argues,

The pseudo-needs imposed by modern consumerism cannot be contrasted with any genuine needs or desires that are not themselves also shaped by this society and its history. Commodity abundance represents a total break in the organic development of social needs. Its mechanical accumulation unleashes an unlimited artificiality which overpowers any living desires. The cumulative power of this autonomous artificiality ends up by falsifying all social life. (28)

Moreover, the alienation, that Hegel explains, is different from what Debord discusses. The producers of the latest capitalist world are unwillingly pushed towards alienating themselves. Here the process of alienation is rather the self-estrangement of the producers that Debord mentions. Therefore, isolating oneself is this alienation's trait. "In total contrast, the current form of alienation is imposed on the producers of an estranged present" (Debord 86).

In Debord's observation there are two kinds of alienation. He explains the contrast between them, social alienation and living alienation. Social alienation is becoming oneself across the passage of time. Then again, people changes into consumer or producer in the context of living alienation. He writes,

In this spatial alienation, the society that radically separates the subject from the activity it steals from him is in reality separating him from his own time. This potentially surmountable social alienation is what has prevented and paralyzed the possibilities and risks of a living alienation within time. (Debord 86)

On the contrary, there are social space that gives an opportunity to the products, brands and consumer experience to exist all together so that they can be consumed. These are free spaces. In Debord's point of view, the need to standardize commodity is achieved if the way of consuming is unchanging, constant and predictable. The aim here is to portray an unchanging surrounding. For the products are to appear constant and deliver similar experience. People are more likely to prioritize familiarity. Ultimately, consumption habit achieves stabilization. "The free space of commodities is constantly being modified and rebuilt in order to become ever more identical to itself, to get as close as possible to motionless monotony" (Debord 90).

Consequently, people are no longer in authority of their own lives. They are conditioned by a system that mandates about their want, behavior and even how they see about themselves. Then when these people feel detached from themselves, they search for validation from outside. Therefore, imitating others through conformity and consumption, they feel compelled. "The consumer's compulsion to imitate is a truly infantile need, conditioned by all the aspects of his fundamental dispossession" (Debord 117).

Chapter 4

Analysis

Convenience Store Woman (2016), authored by Sayaka Murata, captures the essence of Keiko Furukura, a divergent protagonist, and her life, working at Smile Mart, a convenience store or *konbini* in local terms, situated in Tokyo. The book explores a woman's life who finds sanctuary in the convenience store and offers an interesting blend of norms and societal expectations.

4.1 *Convenience Store Woman*: Summarized

“Everyone was crying for the poor dead bird as they went around murdering flowers, plucking their stalks, exclaiming, “What lovely flowers! Little Mr. Budgie will definitely be pleased. They looked so bizarre I thought they must all be out of their minds” (Murata 10). This is one of earlier memories of the protagonist Keiko Furukura. In her recollection of her childhood Furukura expresses excitement to find a dead bird for *yakitori*, a Japanese dish where the meat is grilled in skewers. Her mother was shocked at her suggestion of eating the dead bird. Later, everyone present there, decides to bury the bird instead because that was the right decision in everybody's eyes. While growing up she started to realise that her flow of thought differed from others; she kept herself reserved and interacted with people rarely. Outside the Hiiromachi Station, a newly set up convenience store was the Smile Mart. Furukura started to work there right at the age of 18 that was also when she got admission in to her university. There she worked for 18 long years of her life. Furukura expresses, “It was the first time anyone had ever taught me how to accomplish a normal facial expression and manner of speech” (Murata 15). Furukura enjoys working at the

convenience store. At the convenience store she is guided exactly how to speak using fixed phrases, to deal with the customers. Adding scripted gestures in the mix creates a directed performance that she finds easy to navigate through. The organized and controlled environment made her feel at ease to work. Giving her a sense of functional part of the store. Unlike the outside world, this place thus gave her the feeling of belongingness. “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 18).

Furukura has been working at the same convenience store for 18 long years. At the age of 36, Furukura being single and working at the same place, in the same position creates an unusual image of her in the society as a whole. Even then she cherishes the homogenous concept of being a regular worker at the convenience store.

In the novel we find many other characters who works at the store with her. Furukura is mostly a blend of them. The convenience store and Furukura was constant over the past eighteen years, since she joined as a staff. So along the way she handpicks other workers’ traits and intonation in speech to paint a store worker version of herself; that blends in the eyes of the society. In the novel, along with Mrs. Izumi and the store manager, there are few part timers. Furukura often follows Mrs. Izumi’s fashion and Sugawara’s speech pattern to sound cheerful and uphold an image of a woman in her 30’s, like Mrs. Izumi. Another character she tries to imitate, is the store manager who is a diligent worker at the store. Then again, Sasaki and Okasaki is there as well in this mix.

On the other hand, consuming the products available at the convenience store makes Furukura a part of it. “When I think that my body is entirely made up of food from

this store, I feel like I'm as much a part of the store as the magazine racks or the coffee machine" (Murata 19).

In Furukura's social circle there is friend named Miho. She tries to maintain relationship with Miho by visiting her, whom she befriended at the alumni reunion. During the weekends she visits her now and then. She goes to a gathering on Miho's invitation and there meets Yukari and Satsuki, friends and women her age. They discuss about how Furukura's fashion style and speech has changed since the last time they met her. At one point the conversation ends up on Furukura's sexuality when they asks her about her marriage as she is still single. Working at the same position for so long brings up her physical condition as well.

As the story proceeds, the character named Shiraha comes in. He is a resentful character who is unable to fit in the society. His overall look was very unimpressive, with sunken eyes and dubious expression. Shiraha with his clumsy worker appearance annoys everyone at the convenience store by his action and opinions. When asked by Furukura, about his purpose to work at the store, he answers that he is working there for 'marriage hunting'. That he is disappointed that nobody seems to fit his standards. According to his opinion, the female beings are best suited to work as a convenience store worker. He constantly rants about how this society still lives in the Stone Age; and that modern society is nothing but a fantasy. He mentions, "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" (Murata 48). Later, Shiraha gets fired as a store worker for stalking customers and cloning their phones unethically.

Therefore, it seems that in a stimulated world of the convenience store, Furukura lives by the rules and regulations of that space. She creates a self that blends well with the convenience store. Whereas, she faces a hard time performing her role of a 36 year old Japanese woman, in the real world. On the other hand, in both the settings Shiraha faces difficulty to conform. His handling of both settings seems to clash with societal norms of traditional behaviour, particularly in regards to gender roles. After Shiraha is laid off, Furukura notices him loitering around the store. Later that evening through the discussion with Shiraha about the unchanged Stone Age, she realises that to some extent he indeed is right. So, she takes him to her apartment. They start to live together giving them an image which ends up being more acceptable for their age in the society. The world seem convinced of them being a normal couple living their life, even though Shiraha was living off Furukura, and was staying in the apartment separately. Despite both of them being in a better situation comparatively, Shiraha frequently confronts her with facts that primarily come across as rudeness and insults.

Furukura's family, coworkers, and Shiraha's family are reassured that they are acting normally; despite their difficulties because they were adhering to the standards for "normal people" which is also the case in this instance. When her friends learn that Furukura is living with a man, she suddenly feels like she is a part of their group.

As the narrative progresses, Mami, Furukura's sister and Shiraha's sister-in-law, pays them a visit. They believed that it was a beginning for them to return to the normal world, even though they were not relieved. Furukura was at a point doubting her decision back and forth when Shiraha comments, "As long as I am here, society will be satisfied. For you it's a good deal all around" (Murata 73).

“All too quickly, as if the eighteen years of my employment had been just an illusion, my last day at the convenience store arrived” (Murata 94). To quit being a convenience store worker after 18 years, was not an easy task for Furukura. Then after one month she gathered her courage and attempts to sit for an interview. On her way to the interview Furukura learns that she was fated to work as a convenience store worker, right when Shiraha and Furukura passes a convenience store. She enters the store and reorganises shelves and products as though it as second nature to her; and instructs the store worker as if she never left the convenience store. When Shiraha tries to stop her from acting as a store worker as she was, Furukura differs, “No, I can’t go with you. Think of me as an animal, a convenience store animal. I can’t betray my instinct” (Murata 107).

So at the end of the novel, we come to know that Furukura leaves her job at the convenience store and applies for a different line of work. The day she gets called in for the interview she passes by a convenience store and thus realises that she cannot work anywhere except the convenience store. To her surprise Furukura simply, sleeps, eats and breathes convenience store.

From the postmodern perspective, Furukura creates a false persona to support herself in her day-to-day activities while living off of and purchasing goods. Both in the convenience store that is a simulated world and the simulated ‘real’ world. Shiraha, on the other hand, does none. He simply goes on by doing whatever will make his life easier. Even if that means he has to live off Furukura while portraying an image that is socially accepted. So, he half-heartedly accepts the image of a man that is accepted by the society.

4.2 Designing Identity through Hyper-reality

The concept of identity is vast. In this context of the paper we shall examine identity from a postmodern perspective. In this situation a person's identity is constructed, ambiguous and fluid. Identity can be both personal and social. Socially recognised labels can help someone project an image that will pave them an access to specific opportunities and advantages in the society. Be it on a local setting or international. An individual is categorized by their social identity and placed in particular communities that helps them to feel like they belong. Conversely, there is the individual's identity. This identity is more self-centered. It depends more on the individual and his or her taste in food, clothing, speech patterns, concepts, and a lot more in the world of postmodern society.

Postmodernism entered Japanese culture, literature and architecture, art and ideas as a result of Japan's relationship with the West. "Japan's path to postmodernity is linked to three fundamental moments in its history. The first occurs in the Meiji Restoration Era, the second at its insertion into the Axis bloc between Germany and Italy, as well as at a third time at the end of the Second World War. Each of these moments involves a direct relationship with the West in different ways" (Jaimes et al. 89).

Convenience Store Woman is published in the 21st century. The story is about Keiko Furukura, a 36 year old woman, who works at a convenience store, Smile Mart. Located near Hiiromachi Station. Furukura came from a normal and loving family. When Furukura and her younger sibling, Mami, were young, they lived in a suburban residential area with their parents. Furukura mentions that everyone noticed she was quite strange from childhood. During nursery school, there was an incident where she wanted to eat a dead

bird as yakitori, as her father preferred, and everyone was shocked. Then again, in another incident when she was in primary school, a fight broke out between two boys of her age. Soon it became a chaotic situation as both of them needed to be stopped. When everyone thought of calling for the teacher, Furukura brought a spade from the tool shed and hit one of them. He was badly injured. Everybody tried to stop her by calling out her name as she went for the other boy. Later, her mother had to come and apologise for Furukura's action. "Seeing her bowing to the teachers, apologising over and over, her face strangely serious, I finally realised that maybe I shouldn't have done what I did, but I still couldn't understand why" (Murata 11).

Around that time, another similar incident took place when Furukura yanked her teacher's skirt and knickers down**, ** for her teacher in the class was being hysterical. The students were crying and telling her to stop. The teacher was shocked and went quiet, bursting into tears. Furukura explains, "...that I'd once seen on TV how a grown-up woman who was all worked up went quiet after someone took her clothes off" (Murata 11). Again, her mother was called in for the second time. So Furukura decided, "I'd never meant to make them sad or have to keep apologising for things I did, so I decided to keep my mouth shut as best I could outside the 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 12). As she grew older, she began to understand that her behaviour was becoming a problem. She became closer to her younger sister by sharing her sweets. Meanwhile, her parents were concerned, thinking that she might need to consult a therapist. Though she received enough love and care from her parents, the therapist thought the problem was

because of her parents. She mostly spent her time by herself during her university days as well.

The majority of Furukura's character development happened in her early years. She stopped expressing herself after realising that her behaviour was not always deemed normal. Her family thought that she needed to be cured for her own good.

“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 18). At the age of 18, Furukura started to work at a specific convenience store that she accidentally stumbled upon one day. Through thorough demonstrations, along with other workers, she began working there. Everyone at the store had to wear a uniform and act out real-life scenarios. Various frequently used phrases that needed to be spoken were practised. When the time came to face real customers, Furukura neatly handled her first customer and was praised for her performance. Smile Mart was 18 years old in 2016, as it had started operations in 1998. Furukura was 36 years old by 2016, but her convenience store worker self was 18. “I'm now thirty-six years old, and the convenience-store-worker-me is eighteen. None of the other workers who did their training with me are here anymore, and we're now on our eighth manager. Not a single product on sale in the store at that time is left. But I'm still here” (Murata 18). Therefore, another of her identities is that of a convenience store worker, who is 18 years old.

Here, we see that, right after wearing the store worker uniform, Furukura takes on the image of a store worker. It seems more important to her than being Furukura. This specific image is, to her, more real than her 'self'. This image of a store worker is just a simulation, but to her it is more real than the 'real' itself. According to Baudrillard, “To

simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have" (Baudrillard 3). As a convenience store worker, Furukura finds her place. Her sense of belonging is lacking when she is simply Furukura. This is why, as a convenience store worker, she feels more in sync with herself.

Furthermore, at the age of 36, Furukura is criticised by her friends for not being married. Her friends, who are of her age, are married and have offspring as well. Now, her status of being unmarried, single, and a virgin can be seen as an identity that resides in the normal world. In the story, when she visits Miho, during their discussion, Furukura faces questions about her marriage and virginity from her friends. Satsuki, one of her friends, asks, "Like, have you ever dated anyone? Come to think of it, I've never heard you talk about that sort of thing" (Murata 28). Furukura answers in the negative. As she has never been with a man, her friends get the impression that she is asexual. They even assume that she might be gay. Just one piece of information gives rise to others assuming different images of Furukura. She compares, "It was the same as when I'd hit that boy with a shovel at school. All the adults had jumped to the unfounded conclusion that I must be an abused child and blamed my family. That way they could understand why I'd done such a terrible thing and therefore have peace of mind. So they'd all pressed me to admit my family situation was to blame for what I'd done" (Murata 29). It seemed as though they had to categorize her identity to put her in a certain box.

That is the reason Furukura seems more comfortable in her simulated skin as a convenience store worker. In the convenience store, wearing the store worker uniform, she prefers her homogenous persona. This persona hides her from her personal flaws, which remain prominent in the eyes of society. Her hard work gets noticed by her colleagues here and keeps her relaxed. Inside the convenience store, Furukura masks her outside self as she

mirrors certain details of her colleagues with subtlety. Thus, this gives her a new real image of her own. Therefore, the Furukura inside the convenience store is her hyper-real self. “Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum” (Baudrillard 6). What she does is select certain fashion styles, work ethics, and speech patterns from her colleagues, integrating those traits into herself. This makes her store worker-self more authentic, more ‘real’. In Baudrillard’s theory, this is the simulacrum he mentions, for it is an example of hyper-reality that Furukura resides in.

Knowing that she is a well-functioning tool assures Furukura about herself. This part of her identity reassures her of her being. Validates her hard work and dedication.

In a short-staffed convenience store, a store worker can sometimes be highly appreciated just by existing, by virtue of not rocking the boat. I’m not particularly brilliant compared to Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara, but I’m second to none in terms of never being late or taking days off. I just come in every day without fail, and because of that I’m accepted as a well-functioning part of the store. (Murata 32-33)

Furukura’s hyper-real self adds value to her reason to live. Her reality lies in this version of herself; unlike her social self, who is asexual, unmarried and stuck at the same job.

In contrast to Furukura’s character, there is Shiraha. This character is relatively divergent from the other characters in the story. In one way or another, every character in the novel somewhat conforms to society, including Furukura. Inside the convenience store, she follows the rules and regulations. Shiraha, on the other hand, proves himself to be an

outlier both inside and outside the convenience store. So, what moulds his identity? The first impression of him is not a very pleasant one. Furukura reckons,

The door opened quietly, and a tall man, almost six feet and lanky like a wire coat hanger, came in, his head drooping. He looked as though he were made of wire, and his glasses were like silver twined around his face. He was wearing a white shirt and black trousers as dictated by the store rules, but he was too skinny and the shirt didn't fit him, so that while his wrists were exposed, the fabric was unnaturally puckered around his stomach. I covered my shock at his skin-and-bone appearance by quickly lowering my head in greeting. (Murata 33)

In the store, he comes off as a clumsy worker. Shiraha insults the manager behind his back and complains about his work, saying it is suited for women. "Once the manager and Mrs Izumi had left the back room, Shiraha tutted. When I glanced over at him, he spat, 'Huh. He sure does talk big for a lowly convenience store manager'" (Murata 46). When Furukura asks about his purpose in working in the store, he answers by saying, "marriage hunting." Shiraha wants to erase his identity as an 'outsider'—a label society has given him. He realises that being married will remove this tag from him, making him more acceptable in a social setting, thus creating an identity that masks his inabilities. Shiraha often rants about modern society and its uncanny similarities to the Stone Age period, when people were cast out for not being useful to the village.

And so I realized. 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. (Murata 61)

Originally, Shiraha does not want to reveal his real self, that is unmarried, unemployed and unable to commit to the roles expected by his family; and society. He wants to craft an image that makes his life convenient in the real world. He remarks,

That's why I want to get married and be able to live without them bothering me all the time," Shiraha said. "I need someone with money. I have an idea for an online business. I don't want anyone copying my idea so I won't go into details, but ideally I want someone who can invest in it. My idea will definitely be a success, and when it is nobody will be able to moan at me anymore. (Murata 60)

Also, in the convenience store Mrs. Izumi identifies him as pervert for stalking and cloning customers' phone unethically. On the other hand, the manager agrees saying, "The guy was weird from the start. He got the phone number for a girl working the night shift from the store's contact data and started calling her, and then hung around in the back room so he could suggest going home together. He even tried to chat up Mrs. Izumi, who's married" (Murata 50).

Thus, Shiraha's character has a bitter viewpoint regarding a society that treats him as an outcast, isolated outside the social circle. He says, "Anyway, nothing's changed since the Stone Age. It's just that nobody realises that. In the final analysis, we're all animals," he said, going off on a tangent. "If you ask me, this is a dysfunctional society. And since it's defective, I'm treated unfairly" (Murata 59).

Inside the simulated world of the convenience store, this is how Shiraha behaves. Apart from this, even in the real world, his existence is barely acknowledged by society. There, he lives in hiding. He shared an apartment, but being unable to pay the rent forced him to roam around incognito. He no longer has a place to live as he does not have money to pay for the shared apartment. Unemployment also earns him a bad reputation among his family members.

Therefore, to cover up his distasteful real personality, Shiraha gives in to society and conform in the idea of marriage. Thus a hyper-real self of Shiraha enters society. Meanwhile, he enters the convenience that is a source of simulation, to stay on the lookout for his desired mask. In the world of well curated depiction of the 'real' society Shiraha dares to show his personality, which gets him fired from the convenience store. In the convenience store's hyper-real space his true self gets exposed that differs from projected image.

Eventually, the instance of generating desire sources from spaces like the real society and the simulation that occurs inside the convenience store. In the minds of human in the context of their identity. Who they are? And what is their intentions? They want to belong somewhere, find existence of their own kind. To quench the thirst of belonging people gets attracted to such desires. To finally satisfy that thirst they sculpt their image according to their requirements. This provides them power and the taste of acceptance in the so called society. Ultimately, it designs their identity through numerous images they receive from different varieties of media. In recent times, the source of these images are the advertisements, social media and the influencers. People try to bring these images to

life through themselves. Creates a magical mix and voila! The birth of a new ‘real’ that is more authentic than the original image of themselves.

4.3 The Convenience Store is a Hyper-real Space

A space is defined as a piece of land or the location of the place. Space cannot be called place, unless space holds a valuable meaning to it. Spaces have their own reflections. Japan’s way of using spaces masterfully, has skyrocketed their real-estate valuation.

Jean Baudrillard’s hyper-reality explains the concepts of hyper-real space. In the essay by Baudrillard titled *Simulacra and Simulation* refers to hyper-real space through the description about maps and territories. He talks about places that are real or more authentic than the original place. Thus, these spaces are constructed and controlled to appear with original ambience. Eventually, the hyper-real space becomes unrecognizable through the signs, simulation and representations.

The story of Murata, Hiiromachi Station, although being a place of fiction, establishes the story in Tokyo. In regard to the Hiiromachi Station, the famous crossing in Shibuya is a space that endorses overstimulation and hyper-reality by projecting various promotions and advertisement screens and huge billboards. These non-spaces create a private-public, which can explain our regular definition of urban space. While waiting to cross this section, everyone present there gets acknowledged. They experience an exceptional phenomenon in place and time. Hence, the concept of hyper-reality influences different aspects of modern life. Before reality, representation and simulation stand in line and replace it. For example, general opinion and public behaviour towards real life

occurrences or information is influenced by idealized stories and visual stimuli that are frequently used in advertising through media.

Consecutively, in Japan the convenience stores are a reflection of the society, where reality is carefully re-constructed based on artificial elements. Authenticity fades as reality is overshadowed by feigned production. Furukura works at the Smile Mart convenience store that is located near the Hiiromachi Station in Tokyo. Furukura comes across the store one a certain day, when they were hiring part-time workers. She applies for it. Along with others, she attended training sessions in the store. Through this training they were asked to follow the manual that mentioned exactly how they should communicate with customers, using specific phrases, prescribed facial expressions, as well as the correct method of bowing. The detailed instruction provided, helped Furukura to adapt to the place in a very short time and embrace the comfort of working at the store. Once the training was over, it was time for the store to open its doors to the customers. Furukura states, “The mountain of food and confectionery that was so perfectly displayed it looked artificial, soon crumbled under their hands. The store had looked almost fake, but now under their touch it was being vividly transformed” (Murata 16).

The portrayal of Smile Mart in the story we see is a frictionless, idealized version of everyday life. Right from the very beginning, it is evident that the training that Furukura and her fellow workers receive is a simulation of their expected behaviour for customer service. It is clear through the phrase like “Irasshaimasse” which tend to act as a tool to control the atmosphere in the convenience store when a customer enters the store to purchase. The store workers are trained to be intuitive so that they can understand that even when a customer is at the till for paying the bill, they might get some additional items from

the counter as they wait. This uninterrupted process ensures customer satisfaction along with smooth transactions. The final exchange with the cashier at the till wraps up the purchasing experience of consumers with satisfaction. It mostly leaves the consumers with a sense of being special and taken care of. Furukura says, “My ears and eyes are important sensors to catch their every move and desire” (Murata 7). Then again, the store workers also maintain keeping the convenience store neat and organise the items on the shelves with precision. The items on the hot food cabinet are also arranged meticulously and replenished in alignment with the sales pattern along with new items. Thus, the items in the counter cabinet is kept very methodically with certain strategy on mind.

On hot days sandwiches sell briskly, whereas on cold days rice balls, meat dumplings, and buns are more popular. The sale of food from the counter cabinets also varies according to the temperature. In our branch, croquettes sell well on cold days. Today there also happened to be a sales promotion running on them, so we should make a lot of them, I noted to myself. (Murata 20)

Each element was chosen strategically and displayed to encourage an environment that has been formed to make believe its reality; is truer than the real itself.

Inside the convenience store the products on the shelves are considered as signs according to Baudrillard. They were seemingly more different than what they should be. One such item is the *onigiri*, a creation of the Japanese convenience store itself. In *Rice Ball Rivalries: Japanese Convenience Stores and The Appetite of Late Capitalism* Whitelaw states, “Perhaps no retail industry relies on the *onigiri* more than Japan’s convenience store. For konbini (the Japanese contraction for “convenience store”), the rice ball plays an important role in redefining convenience and establishing chain distinction”

(131). *Onigiri* is a triangular shaped rice ball that is wrapped with a thin layer of crispy seaweed having different fillings within the wrap. Japanese people hold the *Onigiri* in very high regard. Japanese culture significantly honours *onigiri* as a part of their culture. Convenience stores' popularity is based on the availability of *onigiri* on their shelves. A mother's love and care is idealised through the warmth that holds *onigiri*. Yet the version of *onigiri* available on the shelves of Japanese convenience stores is essentially made in factories without any human touch. Hence a deceptive sense of care and admiration is formulated by a freshly packed *onigiri*. It separates the production process from the labour used to produce the product. "Bento box" and Sakura theme snacks hold the same ideology during the spring. The authenticity of such items is influenced by feigned emotions inside the convenience stores. Inside the convenience store, these freshly packed items and their arrangements make the experience of purchasing a hyper-real one. That appears as much more authentic than homemade food.

The first customer Furukura attended at Smile Mart, was an elderly lady. She reminisce the moment as,

The first at the cash register was the same little old lady who had been the first through the door. I stood at the till, mentally running through the manual as she put her basket containing a choux crème, a sandwich, and several rice balls down on the counter. (Murata 16)

The elderly woman enquired about the opening time of the store, as her purchased items were being scanned and packaged. Furukura answers, "From now on we shall be open twenty-four hours, seven days a week, year-round. Please come and shop here at your

convenience” (Murata 17). The old lady was delighted to know this information of the store being open 24/7, mentioning how convenient it was for her. She also lets her know that the store will have two shifts.

This specific feature of the store influences consumers’ behaviour where their demands are met instantaneously. The store meeting consumers’ need at any given time, any day throughout the year. While the labour remains hidden, time cease to exist. Indeed, it is a matter of convenience. The Smile Mart ran its operations smoothly even at night with fewer staff members. At times Furukura is asked to assist with the workload whenever there was shortage of staff, and she willingly offers her labour, no questions asked. Furukura, even during her holidays would prioritise working at the convenience store rather than enjoying time with her family. Hence, the store operated throughout the year, without any pause. In consumers’ minds formulate an idea of an everlasting shopping haven, making the convenience store exceptional from other the social structures. The way the convenience store lets people to experience the fulfillment of consumption feels more original than the actual life itself.

In the novel, there is an instance where a suited man walks into the convenience store and begins to discipline the consumers. The employees at the store were surprised. The staffs assumed that he was from their head corporate office. When it was made known to them that he was not, the higher management, who was present at the store, dealt with the situation. Thus, the image of a controlled and stable atmosphere of the store was maintained. In the novel, Furukura reflects, “A convenience store is a forcibly normalized environment where foreign matter is immediately eliminated. The threatening atmosphere

that had briefly permeated the store was swept away, and the customers again concentrated on buying their coffee and pastries as if nothing had happened” (Murata 43).

Similarly, when Shiraha, a new recruit, joins the establishment, he creates a disruption to the harmonious nature of the store. He is not serious about the job, makes unusual remarks about Stone Age and unfairly criticises other employees. He also follows the customers and acquires their phone number for personal gains, damaging the smooth experience of the customers within the hyper-real atmosphere of the convenience store. Such behaviour makes him an unusual addition to the store as well as unpopular amongst other employees. Similar to the incident explained previously, Shiraha is relieved of his duties, thus maintaining harmony of the store. “A convenience store is a forcibly normalized environment, so the likes of you are fixed right away I thought as I watched him taking his time getting changed. But I didn’t say it out loud” (Murata 49).

In addition, the positioning and the design of the convenience store, the entrance bell sound as customers come in and head out of the store, the bright lighting with a maintained temperature create an expected purchasing routine for the consumer. The end goal is that within the store consumers will behave efficiently, and in return, the store provides equally perfect service. In the end, it forms a cycle which stimulates reality, forming a hyper-real space for consumers.

Analysing the story further, we can see how the protagonist, Keiko Furukura is affected by the particular hyper-real phenomenon. Initially, when Furukura starts working at the Smile Mart, as mentioned previously, receives a training through simulation. She quickly adjusts to it. According to her, the homogenous employee uniform evolves them

into a completely different being. Thus, Furukura finds a place within the ecosystem of convenience store. She argues,

It was fun to see all kinds of people—from university students and guys who played in bands to job-hoppers, housewives, and kids studying for their high school diploma at night school—don the same uniform and transform into the homogenous being known as a convenience store worker. Once the day’s training was over, everyone removed their uniforms and reverted to their original state. It was like changing costumes to become a different creature. (Murata 15)

As a result, this specific hyper-real space helps her maintain a structure within herself and have an identity as part of the highly controlled model of social organization.

Furukura, being a part-time employee, single at the age of 36, is like an outsider in the eyes of the alleged practical society. By the so-called social standards, she has not achieved any goals and requires curing from her ambitionless life. As opposed to the life she finds inside the convenience store, where her actions, appearance and communicational expertise motivate consumers to make purchases, without being judged. Yet when Shiraha whose alien nature had caused a disruption in the harmony was let go, every employee was reassured. It is when Furukura wonders, “... if I ever became a foreign subject, I’d no doubt be eliminated in much the same way” (Murata 51). Even then when everyone at the store comes to know that Furukura is living with Shiraha, they become happy for her. This clearly portrays the pretentious act of being non-judgmental. This explains further about the way the hyper-real world operates. All elements in the convenience store create a façade

to cover up the generalized idea of the social stakeholders. This imitation of an eccentric world protects Furukura from not being an outsider.

In addition, Furukura finds a place within the boundaries of the convenience store to work on herself and improve, which is in fact another simulation. Furukura follows the way her colleagues spoke as well as follows how Mrs. Izumi maintained her image. She notices the different speech patterns of different employees within the store and reproduces them in his own way. She observes with interest and care that there is different speech patterns of different employees within the store. Also, reproduces them in her own way. She is also inspired by Mrs. Izumi's fashion sense which Furukura identifies as woman in her 30s. Even though Furukura imitates Mrs. Izumi's dressing style, she always modifies the appearance to suite herself. Hence we see Furukura, initiating herself as a part of the hyper-reality, where her appearance is more real than her original inspiration.

People would notice if I copied her exactly, though, so what I do is read blogs by people who wear the same clothes she does and go for the other brands of clothes and kinds of shawls they talk about buying. Mrs. Izumi's clothes, accessories, and hairstyles always strike me as the model of what a woman in her thirties should be wearing. (Murata 22)

Furukura bonds with her colleagues through the imitation process, all the while engaging with the consumers using the scripted dialogues, which reminds me of how Guy Debord in his book *The Society of The Spectacle* pens,

In the spectacle, a part of the world represents itself to the world and is superior to it. The spectacle is simply the common language of this separation. Spectators are

linked solely by their one-way relationship to the very center that keeps them isolated from each other. The spectacle thus reunites the separated, but it reunites them only in their separateness. (Debord 10)

Moreover, in a convenience store human engagement and communication is staged and driven by images. Adhering to company guidelines convenience store staffs pretend to be efficient and friendly with guided smiling and prepared speeches. These interactions are pretenses to mold and to maintain the image of impeccable service, but not forming any real connections. Hence, in this context the convenience store reflects the society of the spectacle within the space of hyper-reality. Yet it is in this imaginary space people communicate with each other through their roles, guise and influenced choice of brands.

Furukura in the real world is overshadowed by her role as a store worker, conforming to the space in hyper-reality. She does follow the same method of memorized interacting methods as a store worker in the real world as well. She learns a specific set of answers to questions from her younger sister to deal with her friends' questions about her personal as well as work life. Even after that she is criticised. In the hyper-real world she finds her truer self where she is believed to be normal. Yet in the outside world even her mask cannot hide the real individuality completely. Yet in the outside world even her mask cannot hide the real individuality completely. At a barbeque party hosted by Miho, a friend of hers, called Satsuki, asks her if she was ever in love. She already knows how to answer this question. Furukura's mentions, "You can just give a vague answer to a personal question, and they'll come to their own conclusions", she'd told me. Well, I messed that one up, I thought to myself" (Murata 28-29).). Even though she knew the answer, her response yet came out negatively. It immediately got her friends to assume her sexuality;

this caused her regret. In this manner it shows how she hides her authenticity in the real world that is her acquired knowledge. She only conforms to her hyper-real version.

Meanwhile, the hyper-real world provides Furukura with a sense of satisfaction. Therefore, on one weekend, at the gathering of her friends', she contemplates, "The normal world has no room for exceptions and always quietly eliminates foreign objects. Anyone who is lacking is disposed of" (Murata 56). She finally understands why her family wanted to fix her so earnestly. Furukura seeks refuge in the comfort of the convenience store atmosphere to escape from the chaos she handles in the real world. This portrays how comfortable she is with the sounds of the convenience store. It brings peace to her mind from all the interactions she had at the party. She gets back to the store and starts her shift while finding assurance in being productive. She states, "Maybe I'm working because I want to be a useful tool" (Murata 57). That is how Furukura finds peace in her captivity within the convenience store.

Returning to hyper-reality of the convenience store, it is clear that this space is a hyper real cycle. In this simulated loop, consumers enter the convenience store, act within in the arranged atmosphere, consume goods, find satisfaction and return for more.

4.4 Societal Expectation Mirrors Consumerism

The significance social norms in Japanese society is valued and very strictly maintained. These norms are instilled from a young age. The children at the schools get to learn group mentality and harmony, their importance and those being the core of societal norms. Maintaining hierarchy in the senior/ junior context at different levels of social life is a given for them; while they are also taught to work as unit in the work place given the hierarchy.

Similarly, group mentality judge persons who act individually. Just like Furukura. For her society's expectation is to perform like a woman in her 30s. Marriage is a normal box that woman of her age must tick by then. Rather, she is targeted and turned into a subject of judgment for being otherwise. Also, the social ladder needs to be climbed by the individual in regard to career. Here as well, Furukura gets criticised for staying at a part time job for 18 years, which is unlikely for woman her age.

The promotion of various services and products on social and economic platforms and expanding their reach in large quantities is the heart of consumerism. In the field of economic structure, if one consumes services and goods for the sole purpose of gain then that is consumerism. Then again, if the consumption happens through various ideologies and knowledge in regard to the social structure, that indicates another form of consumerism; which is the case in the context of this novel.

This part of the paper shall look over the consumerism that happens in the societal structure of the novel titled *Convenience Store Woman*. The main character, Furukura is an outcast. During the early stages of her childhood, it was evident that her reaction and behaviour towards the society was unlike other children at her school. In one of her recollection of her childhood, she mentions an incident where she makes an attempt to calm the teacher; for the teacher was acting hysterical. "So in order to shut her up I ran over and yanked her skirt and knickers down. She was so shocked she burst into tears, but at least she became quiet" (Murata 11). She learned it from the TV. That was the reasoning to her such action. "The teacher from the next class came running in and asked me what had happened, so I explained that I'd once seen on TV how a grown-up woman who was all worked up went quiet after someone took her clothes off" (Murata 11). In this case, social

consumption occurs when Furukura takes on the idea she saw on TV and decides to act like that. To her this seemed like the solution and so she imitates. Then again, she did not think it through about the consequence. So this is an example of consumerism among many in the novel. It is an instance of how information gets consumed in the social context. Then again, the incident mentioned earlier where Furukura wants to grill the dead bird can also fall under this type of consumerism. Dead animals are indeed barbequed for consumption as food. That is an information she picks up in the correct manner. The fact that it is a vague information and also depends on the specific situation and settings means she fails to interpret that nuisance. So, when she mentions to grill that dead bird, it surprises everyone. Furukura often found herself in situations of this sort. Therefore, her mother had to apologise, bowing to the teachers more than once. This remained in her memory and affected her deeply. She refrained herself from unnecessary talks and actions. She mostly remained silent and interacted with people only when it was necessary. These are the reasons her parents became worried for her and were eager to ‘cure’ her.

Even if Furukura enters her 30s, she remains unmarried. Works as a part timer at the age of 36. Been a store worker at the same convenience store for 18 years. These are the specific reasons behind labelling her as foreign object in the eye of society. She meets major criteria for that label in the ‘real’ world. True that she tries to blend in and accept some portions of the social norm. For instance, Furukura makes effort to join in the gatherings with her friends during the weekends, which proves her practice of social consumption. Mainly consuming the idea of harmoniously interacting with a community. For her, ensuring she performs like this once in a while is not something that comes in naturally. She has to consciously perform, unlike ‘normal’ people who are effortless in this

regard. Furukura does this for the tag of being called 'normal'. To portray a social image of normalcy in her life. One weekend, when she attends a gathering with her friends, she gets called asexual as she did not date any men throughout her 36 years of life. Aside from that, she was also thought to be homosexual if not asexual. In the plot of the story, Furukura makes appearances in two gatherings. During one, she is encouraged to create a profile on an online marriage site. While others try to convince her on using the site, she is instructed to click a picture for the profile; that had to be likeable to the male users on the site. A good curated photograph can increase her possibility of being chosen. This is basically a case of spectacle that Debord mentions. Curating images for other eyes that hide the real.

Meanwhile, it can be said that the arrangements Furukura's friends make once in a while during the weekends are part of painting a harmonious picture for society to see. Another form of spectacle, to be exact, in the midst of a hectic, busy life. Even the friendship that is seen among the attendees of the gathering, is part of the whole spectacle. The exchange of information here is the heart of it. Barely anybody among them is authentically concerned about each other. So, the so called ideal image of friendship is nothing but a show for the sake of the spectacle.

It is Debord who talks about the concept of spectacle. According to him it is somewhat of an accessory that helps people maintain the status quo while encouraging acceptance and refraining people to form real connections. Due to the presence of spectacle, many underlying divisions and ugly wrong doings in society get to hide their existence underneath it. Therefore, to experience the genuineness of human experiences and keep away the effect of representations it has become important to intentionally make attempts to see beyond the spectacle.

Additionally, the character of Shiraha seems not to give in to accepting the social norms. He does not even make partial efforts, to half-heartedly maintain them. So, masking his personality is none of his concern. Rather, he refuses to affirm to the societal ideas that are on basic level, along with practising the regulations inside the convenience store. Shiraha's very first appearance was an unimpressive one to the whole staff at the convenience store. He kept on slacking in his working hours, which earns him the tag of being an irresponsible store worker. On the other hand, he gets a sense of satisfaction by acknowledging the store workers as inferior. Thus, due to societal expectations, Shiraha is deemed being an outcast in the real world just as he is inside the convenience store.

Next, Shiraha is a man in his 30s, who is unmarried and lacks a proper career. Such man can hardly get by daily life without being judged by the society. Despite of this, he does not give in to the game of creating spectacle. Nevertheless, for his advantage, he shows interest in consuming the idea of marriage. As a result, he searches for his 'wife' in various unorthodox and socially unpopular ways that the society does not approve. Ranting about the society being stuck in the Stone Age is what keeps him going. He believes that the truth behind modern society needs to be uncovered. In his perspective,

They're all after snaring a guy who works at the same company and won't even look at me. 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. We might go on about equality of the sexes, but—. (Murata 48)

As per the society's expectations, Furukura and Shiraha makes effort to hide their non-acceptable individuality. They both take part in the societal consumerism just to blend in. They perform the bare minimum. It is an illusion they seek while purchasing the ideas that the society of the real world approves.

Debord observes, "The real consumer has become a consumer of illusions. The commodity is this materialized illusion and the spectacle is its general expression" (Debord 19). The cycle of indulging in the spectacle is a cruel one without any doubt. This vicious cycle has spread into the real world. Whereas, in the world of the convenience store it is an unchangeable aspect. This does not even leave out any other workplace either. To commit to the spectacle requires constant consumption which results in being accepted by particular group of people. In Debord's point of view, the effect of consumerism results in estrangement from one another. Also does not spare their own desires from the consequence. Meanwhile, the need that Furukura feels to affirm having significant other in her life, is a concept that is made up by the society. To her, it seems like a false need. It distracts her from owning her individuality in a consumerist atmosphere. On the contrary, in Shiraha's case, he gains an image for himself. An identity that will confirm that he is not an anomaly.

4.5 Humans Functioning as Commodity

The character projected through Keiko Furukura by Murata is directed by social expectations and societal consumerism. The novel *Convenience Store Woman* entertains the concept of people appearing as a commodity in such space like the convenience store. While critiquing on the exact concept by Furukura being a "perfect convenience store

worker”. Therefore, there is scope for further examination on Guy Debord’s concept of consumerism and spectacle in *The Society of the Spectacle* through the role of Furukura.

In the novel, Furukura becomes an efficient convenience store worker, which makes her a proper commodity. She performs accordingly to the store’s needs. She is trained to showcase the scripted manual of the convenience store as a store worker with precision. Though she hides her individuality in this space, she maintains a harmony with the store’s environment. Furukura’s immersion in this particular space allows her to alleviate the charm of this hyper-real space. Then again, in the real world, to some extent, she refrains herself to display her individuality.

There is a moment in the story where she explains what she eats in an ordinary day. Thus the saying, “you are what you eat” is somewhat well suited in Furukura’s case. She says,

For breakfast I eat convenience store bread, for lunch I eat convenience store rice balls with something from the hot-food cabinet, and after work I’m often so tired I just buy something from the store and take it home for dinner. I drink about half the bottle of water while I’m at work, then put it in my ecobag and take it home with me to finish at night. When I think that my body is entirely made up of food from this store, I feel like I’m as much a part of the store as the magazine racks or the coffee machine (Murata 19-20).

In this sense of her behaving as a commodity, it is her rate of productivity and utility that adds significance to her existence. Her efficiency does not go unnoticed as a part of the hyper-real space. Although her intelligence and emotions stay hidden.

Throughout the novel, Furukura claims she has “become the convenience store” quite a few times. Her claim resonates with Debord’s theory that, idea is mediated through the logic to consumption. Her “normalcy” is judged through relationships, employment and appearances. That is when she submits to the spectacle. She reflects, “When morning comes, once again I’m a convenience store worker, a cog in society. This is the only way I can be a normal person” (Murata 19).

Nonetheless, the character of Furukura and Shiraha both play a role where they find themselves being each other’s commodities in the eyes of the society; to get acquainted with normalcy and barely follow others. It starts when Shiraha gets laid off and after few days he gets noticed by Furukura. He was sneaking around the convenience store. That evening they both end up talking and Furukura ponders on his perspective about the society. He asserts, “If you ask me, this is a dysfunctional society. And since it’s defective, I’m treated unfairly” (Murata 59). On this, Furukura ponders, “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 59).

However, Shiraha seeks marriage for his own gain. He wants to achieve success through marriage. He mentions,

That’s why I want to get married and be able to live without them bothering me all the time,” Shiraha said. “I need someone with money. I have an idea for an online business. I don’t want anyone copying my idea so I won’t go into details, but ideally I want someone who can invest in it. My idea will definitely be a success, and when it is nobody will be able to moan at me anymore. (Murata 60-61)

While Shiraha was ranting all these, at some point he mocks Furukura. He points out that she is a woman in her 30s and has not live up to the modern society's expectation. Furukura remains unaffected even when his words seem disrespectful. The uncanny aspect of his perspective is, his words are not totally wrong and Furukura agrees to that in a silent manner. This is how Shiraha is. The character at first might appear galling but repetition of his thoughts convinces Furukura.

Later that night, she suggests him on living together, for he was looking for a marriage that is just for his convenience. While stating the significance of this arrangement, she explains how this contrasts the Stone Age from the convenience store. She reckons,

To stay in a convenience store, you have to become a store worker. That's simple enough, you just wear a uniform and do as the manual says. And before you say anything, it was the same in Stone Age society, too. As long as you wear the skin of what's considered an ordinary person and follow the manual, you won't be driven out of the village or treated as a burden. (Murata 63)

Likewise she adds, "In other words, you play the part of the fictitious creature called 'an ordinary person' that everyone has in them. Just like everyone in the convenience store is playing the part of the fictitious creature called 'a store worker'" (Murata 63-64).

Moreover, she skillfully consumes the idea of marriage, which earns her an image that she explains by comparing the reality of the society to the hyper-real convenience store. Also, in the convenience store it is the people who act as a commodity for the store. Not to mention, people playing the role of commodity in this regard. Eventually, to Furukura, Shiraha is a mere commodity so that she could take on the image of a 'normal person'.

Nevertheless, not only Furukura but Shiraha also gets to create his desired spectacle out of himself, as a result of this living together arrangement. Thus, from his standpoint, she is a commodity for his hyper-real self which hides his ‘defective’ social image. Hence, the outcome of being commodity for each other makes their image a lot more refined that satisfies the society to some extent. In the beginning of their living arrangement, it was Furukura’s sister who comes to know that she is living with a man. Mami, Furukura’s sister feels ecstatic to the new and relieved that at last her older sister is getting to know the ropes of society. Her excitement makes her visit Furukura. Even though Mami comes to know that Shiraha is unemployed, she is not bothered. For she cares that her elder sister is finally ‘cured’. To Mami’s excitement, she tells off Shiraha as if he has become family. Furukura ponders,

So that was it: now that she thinks he’s “one of us” she can lecture him. She’s far happier thinking her sister is normal, even if she has a lot of problems, than she is having an abnormal sister for whom everything is fine. For her, normality—however messy—is far more comprehensible. (Murata 89)

After that, Shiraha gets tracked by his sister-in-law. He went missing as he could not pay his room rent for the shared apartment. Alongside, he was unable to pay the money that he owed to his family. So she finds him and visits. Upon her visit, she notices Furukura, which makes her act a bit leniently towards him,

“I suppose just the fact you have a partner is something of an improvement,” she [the sister-in-law] said rather reluctantly. “Anyway, I don’t want to overstay my welcome, so I’ll be going now.” She stood up. “I’ll tell your mother about today’s

events, including how much money we've lent you, so don't think you're going to get away with it, all right?" (Murata 93)

Correspondingly, Furukura's friend sees her under different light after they learn that she is living with Shiraha. Also, the change in their attitudes are evident as she states, "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 76). Her colleagues at the convenience store, were also thrilled to learn about them. They did not oppose anything even when they knew Shiraha previously. As if all the judgment were never there in the first place. They even invited them both for drinks.

Likewise, all the characters in the novel including Shiraha and Furukura, can be counted as commodities in societal context. They illustrate the image of a united and harmonious society. Therefore, in Debord's point of view, they are all a spectacle. Shiraha reflects,

When you're a man, it's all 'go to work' and 'get married. And once you're married, then it's 'earn more' and 'have children'! You're a slave to the village. Society orders you to work your whole life. Even my testicles are the property of the village! Just by having no sexual experience they treat you as though you're wasting your semen. (Murata 73)

There is no doubt that Furukura repels social norm. Then again, her assimilation to the concept of marriage forces her individuality to stay buried. Ultimately, she performs her role of a commodity for the greater image of the society.

4.6 Consumerist Simulation through Language

In the age of consumer capital society, the language of the people also stimulates simulation. The language holds so much power. Even after that it subtly influence the modern consumerist culture. The interactions through language has ended up being a carefully thought-out communication. Apparently, this makes language lack its personalisation, standards and turns the process into a transaction.

Similarly, to ensure societal conformity, language can be used like a product in a convenience store. Though this shall steal away the individualistic personality from the language. Murata, in her novel, does not forget to critically analyse verbal interactions for their commercialization aspect. She effortlessly displays that through Keiko Furukura. Thus, language fails to perform to express oneself. Instead, for the sake of commercialised social structure, it becomes a transport to simulate ‘normalcy’.

Furukura asserts, “There are times when I feel like it’s too much bother, knowing I have to work the next day. But it’s the only connection I have to the world outside the convenience store and a precious opportunity to mingle with “normal” women my age, so I usually accept her invitations” (Murata 25). Specifically, on the weekends, she makes efforts to be noticed as an accepted member of the society by attending the gatherings, her friends arrange. Through mimicking certain behaviours, she tries to blend in. Hence, the pre-learned script to common queries comes in handy for her. Furukura’s younger sister helps her in this matter. These speeches shape a balanced image to survive as an unmarried 36 years old woman in the society. Then again, it also takes away her freedom to express her unique existence. On one of the gatherings of Furukura’s friends, she accidentally goes

off her scripted answer. So, she had to tackle unwanted assumption from them. For instance, Satsuki asks Furukura about her experience in love and a negative response was all that she needed to face unwanted assumptions. Not to forget the common query about her career, to which she automatically answers, “No, no. It’s just because I’m not strong. That’s all! (Murata 29). To her, language is not an act of expression, rather strongly agrees that is an ingredient that helps her to excel in the ‘real’ world. Furukura perceives language as any other product in the aisles of the convenience store. Picking the right words to answer will grant her identity of an ordinary person.

People are assessed to examine their social utility. Then according to the societal utility, their conversations, life choices and designations are managed. So people are similar to products. The language during the interaction among Furukura’s friends indicate that they are obsessed about status and their rate of productivity. Emotional concerns among them are not of much significance. Language, for them, is a means, to maintain social decorum.

In the novel, Furukura argues, “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 15). Language inside the convenience store works as part of consumerist culture as well. Inside the store walls, Furukura’s greetings and jargons are determined by the manuals of the store. Behavioural rules also fall under this manual. She wants to portray a certain image of herself in the convenience store. “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 22-23). Even in case of speech she gets influenced

by certain colleagues as she has an image in mind that she wants to portray. Furukura confirms, “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 21). Even her change in speech pattern gets noticed by her friends. She adds, “My speech is especially infected by everyone around me and is currently a mix of that of Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara” (Murata 21).

Utility replaces the authenticity of language while the depth of the language disappears. Phrases like “Yes, madam. Right away, Madam”, “*Irasshaimasse*”, “Thank you very much!” deliver functionality and fulfill transactional purposes. Similarly, it can be said in case of the convenience store pledge and its continuous repetition. The language then loses its emotional aspect but in the consumer’s point of view, which experience might differ.

Meanwhile, Shiraha’s speech pattern is completely opposite of Furukura. Throughout the novel, he speaks up his thoughts and expresses his frustration and stress about the society. Sometimes, it sounded like he was trying to humiliate other characters or the society in general. As a result, those words gave him an image of a perversely rude and sexist person. Nevertheless, his words had individuality that the other characters barely had.

Furthermore, Shiraha’s speech seems inconsistent from the standpoint of consumerist simulation. This is the reason his character is labelled with negative connotations by the society.

The author, Murata, of *Convenience Store Woman* portrays language as commodified and performance-based. She shows instances, in the capitalist society, where language can dictate appearances and maintain societal norms. Alongside, she showcases Shiraha's speech to contrast Furukura. Hence, language plays a significant part in making the identity of the person acceptable rather than expressing emotions.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Keiko Furukura, the protagonist, is a prime example of the effects of hyper-reality, showing how synthetic identities are frequently prized more highly than genuine individuality in a consumer-driven society.

This dissertation suggests that it is important for us to have knowledge of the hyper-real in this fast-paced capitalist society. It is better to understand the media theory as, in recent world we are submerged in digital information and images. This creates an effect on our consumer behavior and economy as well. At one hand, the knowledge lets us read the population and pull them toward certain direction, a certain ideology, a certain trend. On the other hand, from the consumer's point of view, awareness about simulated identities can make one think twice about the 'reality' and stir towards healthy consumer behavior.

In my point of view, throughout the whole novel, Furukura's family and friends wanted to 'cure' or fix her. As if she is ill or broken at the first place. She barely understands the social cues. Rather than explaining why certain things are inappropriate, she is referred to a therapist. Furukura did not like the fact that her unusual behavior resulted with her mother apologizing. So, when the time came in the convenience store she felt quiet relieved, as there she is explained how to interact with the customers. Mimicking became her thing while she coped in the society and that is how she started to conform to her role in the hyper-real space. She voluntarily participated in it and learned to give in to the society at one point by purchasing the idea of living together with Shiraha. In society's eyes, thus her curated identity adds value and considered normal. Furukura presented herself as a

commodity in the hyper-real society by consuming the idea of marriage by living under the same roof; which turns out to be a simulation of a married couple. The fact of not really being married and sexually involved with Shiraha is pure simulacra in Baudrillard's point of view. Later, she proves her being a commodity when she lets her family and friends observe the new made up identity on display; while surrendering to the hyper-reality outside the convenience store.

Albeit, it can be said that the hyper-reality in our society is so dense it is not much of a concern; as nobody is opposing it and there is no 'harm' in it. Yes, no such visible harm. For that is what makes it frighteningly dangerous, as it demonstrates mental harm. It disconnects one from oneself and gives birth to more anxiety and alienation. Therefore, this research points out that we are just a bigger version of the products displayed inside an enormous convenience store called the world. We recreate ourselves according to the world's/ society's convenience. For the convenience of the society.

In the hyper-real world, the media and society give us a feign notion of choice. Saying we are individuals with diverse preferences and world view. That is just another white lie that masks upon their intentions. They provide us with limited options while influencing us with literal influencers and determine our traits. Hence, the knowledge of the hyper-real world can make us careful in what we choose and how deep we should dive, before we lose connection to the reality of life.

Let us end the paper on the note that it is still questionable to purchase some brands that has scandals around it in recent times. It labels one with a glare if not a name because it becomes a part of identifying self with the corresponding side. As a result, subscribing to the products that certain society opposes may create a misconception when one just

prefers the product not the brand. With this in mind it is safe to say that the real world is full of simulations generating hyper-reality while promoting spectacles.

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