After Betweenness and "New Women": Murata Sayaka's Konbini Ningen *as a Challenge to Japanese Ethics*

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The purpose of this article is to show how Murata Sayaka's symbolisms in her bestselling short story, The Convenience Store Woman, cast a great doubt on the foundation of contemporary Japanese ethics and Japanese feminism. The English translation tends to make it look like a quirky and humorous story about an ordinary Japanese woman in Tokyo, navigating through a psycho-existential complex of patriarchal social expectations. This western reception fails to capture the devastating existential blow that Murata brings to the establishment of modern Japanese philosophy. To show this point, this article will firstly revisit the "structures" of arguments, which Watsuji Tetsurō and Japanese women thinkers as Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō provided for theorizing their sense of what it means to be an "authentic" human being or a woman in twentieth-century Japan. Then we will examine how the arc of Murata's story takes up these conceptual frameworks and ultimately questions if they can indeed produce a reasonable sense of being a human or a woman in the present historical condition of living in the twentieth-first century Japan. The main goal of this dialogue between Japanese philosophy and literature is to show that Murata's literary work can undermine our confidence in the theoretical framework of philosophical arguments, which seem to sustain Watsuji's Rinrigaku and the works of Japanese women thinkers.

Key words: Japanese literature; Japanese women thinkers; Watsuji Tetsurō; Japanese Ethics; Murata Sayaka; Hiratsuka Raichō; Yosano Akiko; Noh

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1 Judging by the Covers: From the Loss of *Ningen* to the Loss of "New Woman"

Figure 1 Japanese Paperback Cover of the *Konbini Ningen*

Murata Sayaka's *Konbini Ningen* (コンビニ人間) is a short story about a thirty-six year old Japanese woman called Furukawa Keiko, who, since her childhood is unable to find any good reason to comply with the social expectations of contemporary Japan. But, at the age of eighteen, she finds her own "place" in society as a temporary, part-time worker in a convenience store. Here, she is able to play the role of a "normal," neurotypical human being with the help of her sister, Mami. After eighteen years of working at the same store, Keiko faces the societal expectation of either/or: either marry and find meaning through family life, or enter the relentless capitalist rat race and make a living as a "career woman." The story presents the protagonist as refusing to make this decision, instead searching in vain for an alternative way to live by continuing to work at the convenience store. In the midst of this existential crisis, Keiko encounters another alienated part-timer, Shiraha, who represents repressed and toxic masculinity of contemporary Japan. After he is fired from the convenience store for stalking a frequent customer, Keiko offers Shiraha food and shelter, and in exchange, proposes to fake a relationship so that she can give the illusion of choosing family life and continue working for the store. This strange relationship of convenience, however, does not provide Keiko with what she wants. On the contrary, it causes her to resign from her post and to look for a proper "full-time" job. On her way to the job interview, she steps into a convenience store and realizes her destiny as a glorious neither/nor, namely a part-time convenience store worker which enables her to be her authentic self. In what follows, I will interpret *Konbini Ningen* as the story of a woman refusing to play the role of "woman," declaring a new sense of being human (*ningen*), that is, to become a "perfect cog in the (capitalistic) machine."

The English translation of the story is embellished with the eye-catching appraisal from *The Vogue*: "As intoxicating as a Sake mojito." The cover designs of the English and Japanese editions cannot be any more different. The Japanese (Figure 1) shows a giant monolith with cracks and holes from which toxic smoke, balloons, plastic hoses, a red beverage can, green slime, toothpaste, skulls, and worker's legs are oozing out. We can feel the imminent explosion of global capitalism from this ugly box.[1] In contrast, the English version (Figure 2) is in bright pink, yellow and purple. The publisher in London apparently takes it upon themselves to assure global customers that the *Konbini Ningen* depicts life in Japan as it is imagined from the Anglo-European perspective. The problematic use of vague cultural references like a fish-shaped soy sauce dispenser, a picture of an Asian woman in a convenience store uniform, or a rice ball that decorated as an anime-like portrait of a *kawaii* girl confirm that this is not presented as a serious philosophical work but as a piece of exotic oriental(ist) entertainment.[2] The Japanese cover gives a sense of Akutagawa-prize seriousness, driving at a socio-philosophical critique of

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contemporary Japanese society while the English version makes me wonder if the publisher (and especially their reviewers) somehow mistook Murata Sayaka for Marie Kondō.

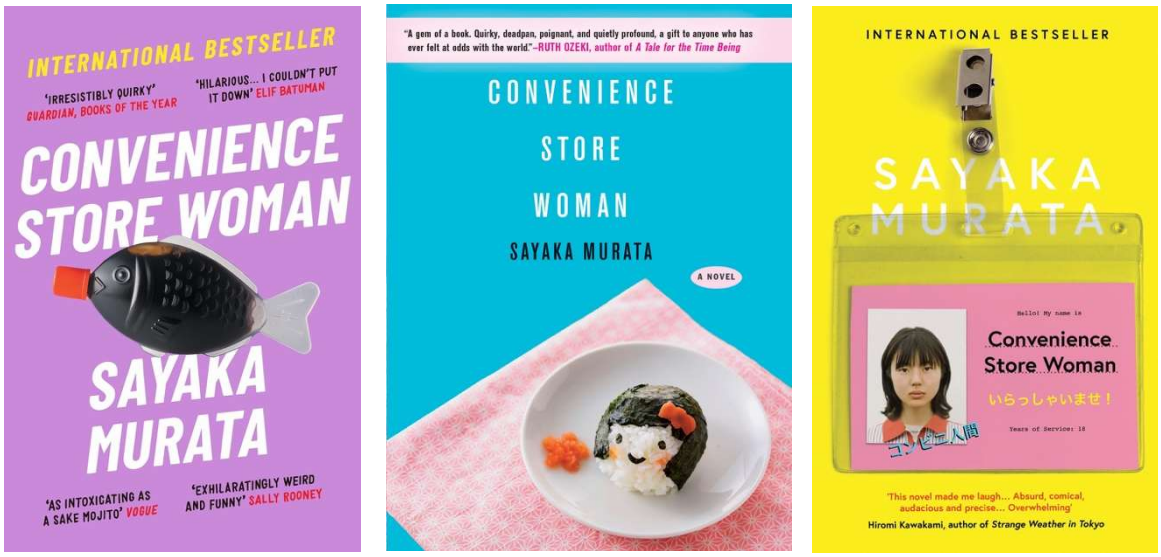

Figure 2 English Covers of the *Convenience Store Woman*

This (un)subtle cultural appropriation in their cover designs originates from the fact that the UK publisher probably did not understand the loss of meaning in the context of Japanese philosophy when translating the term *konbini ningen* to "Convenience Store Woman" (Jaseel and Gaur 2022: 8).[3] This results in a twofold philosophical problem. On the one hand, what falls out of the cover through this choice is Murata's critique of the notion of what it means to be human (i.e., *ningen*). As Ronald Saladin acutely points out, the English version of the title commits a reduction of non-binary inter-relationality (i.e., "betweenness") of being human (*ningen*) to the level of femininity or womanhood (*mesu* メス or *onna* 女 in the story's language) (Murata 2018: 125, 128).[4] On the other hand, by framing the protagonist, Keiko, as being a woman at the outset, Anglophone readers can easily lose sight of the inseparable connection and the dramatized conflict between being a human and being a woman in the story. The literary work repeatedly asks what it means for Keiko (or anyone else) to be a woman in Japanese society (mostly from the side of her interlocutors), but this question is never separated from her internal questioning of what constitutes her (or anyone else) as a "normal human being" (Murata 2018: 21)[5]. Because of that, we can easily miss how the groundlessness of the logic by which the self is deemed to be a person metastasizes the logic by which the self can ground its gendered order of subjectivity as woman.

The main purpose of this article, therefore, is to bring forth this missing twofold significance of Murata's symbolisms in her *Konbini ningen* and to show how it can quickly destroy our confidence in the previous formulations of what it means to be human (*ningen*) and to be a liberated woman (*atarashii onna* 新しい女) in the context of twentieth century Japanese philosophy. In a sense, representative thinkers such as Watsuji Tetsurō, Yosano Akiko, and

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Hiratsuka Raichō have already provided us with a robust conceptual framework to answer these questions. The story's plot also seems to completely follow the legacy of their existential thought. However, because of that, this story makes us wonder if there is something wrong with these philosophers' dialectical logic of liberation. If we are to insist that the logic is fine, then the character must be a counterfeit double of what it designates as an authentic self. But we are immediately pushed to face another problem. How can we distinguish the authentic sense of *ningen* (*shinshō no hito* 真正の人) and/or *atarashii onnna* from Keiko's rediscovery of herself as a *konbini ningen*?

Far from self-overcoming nihilism, Murata shows how Watsuji's *Rinrigaku* and Raichō's polyphonic femininity of the "sexed body" can be destabilized by an extraordinary ambiguity of contemporary emptiness. The dark recesses of meaninglessness, according to her text, do not require any grand narrative of the extraordinary absurd such as in Camus's *La Pest* or the murder of the innocent by a psychopathic propensity towards the unknown beyond good and evil in Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*. Contemporary Japanese nihilism is well lit with LEDs and readily available in the ordinary space of an everyday convenience store. An Ōekenzaburō Prize winner, Nakamura Fuminori, is absolutely right: this is Murata's "critical blow" (*kaishin no ichigeki*) to the conventional framework of ethics and the logic of women's liberation in twentieth century Japan.[6] In this article, we will examine this story's philosophical achievement that has been lost in its English translation.

Before exploring Murata's critique of Watsujian ethics and Japanese women thinkers, I recommend my readers to firstly read the short story for themselves. This will only take a couple of hours and drastically increase the visibility of the logic behind the arrangement of my points in this paper (especially the decisive ambiguity of my conclusion). This article will firstly revisit the "structures" of arguments, which Watsuji and Japanese women thinkers provided for theorizing their sense of what it means to be an "authentic" human being or a woman in twentieth-century Japan. Then we will examine how the arc of Murata's story takes up these conceptual frameworks and ultimately questions whether or not they can indeed produce a reasonable sense of being a human or a woman in the present historical condition of living in twentieth-first century Japan. Reading the story in advance will allow readers to recognize the intertwined character of the questions regarding *ningen* (human) and *onna* (woman) that Murata throws against these philosophers. Additionally, the main goal of this dialogue between Japanese philosophy and literature is not to define my sense of what it means to be an authentic human being in contemporary Japan or to reformulate existential authenticity of Japanese femininity in the present. But it is simply to show that Murata's literary work can undermine our confidence in the theoretical framework of philosophical arguments, which seem to sustain Watsuji's *Rinrigaku* and Japanese feminism. This is, in other words, a philosophical invitation to engage with Murata's poetics of indeterminacy *par excellence*: if we are to interpret the ideas of what it means to be human or woman from yesteryear in our present, can we still get to an authentic person/woman? I argue that this leading writer of our generation sheds some light on our existential ambiguity over and against the past authority of Japanese philosophy.

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2 The Logic of Self-Negation: Keiko as a Watsujian *Ningen*

Watsuji argues that Japanese ethics must dwell in the dialectical unity of individuality and totality. What constitutes an individual human being is not her determinate identity that she possesses on her own but a myriad of her interrelations with all the other beings, including her family members, socio-cultural relations, and inter-relational openness to nature (*fūdo*). The term, "totality" or the "world" in *Rinrigaku* cannot be a sum total of natural or artificial objects (Watsuji 1996: 18-9). Nor can it be a sublationary infinite that concretizes itself through instrumentalizing the negative moment of the individual as the finite other. Instead, Watsuji makes it clear that there is no determinate (or self-determining) totality that can exist in immanent reality as the end of all things. All that exists, therefore, is only constituted by the inter-relational network of finite individuals. This is what I take Watsuji to mean by "aidagara" or "betweenness."[7]

Watsuji also argues that the basis of the interrelation between individuality and totality is the practical concept of "emptiness" (Watsuji 1996: 23).[8] When the individuality negates itself, it manifests the ideality of *ningen* (that is to be human). The self becomes the inter-relational space in which it lives up to, and concretizes, the idea of what it means to be human. At the same time, the totality—since it is (self-)emptying—negates itself and allows diverse finite individuals to be for themselves in their continuous interrelation with each other. Because this "act interaction" serves as the basis for a single individual to abstract the notion of subjectivity as an *ego cogito* in a certain cultural context (and even to substitute it for the sum total of humanity through the process of "abstraction" (Watsuji 1996: 9) in modern philosophy), the metaphysics of morals is only one form of thinking about human nature. To understand what it means to live an ethical life in Japan, therefore, Watsuji argues that we must carry out the hermeneutics of the Japanese language as the intersubjective field in which its particular sense of being human is manifested. That is the only way, he claims, in which we can move away from the totalizing abstraction of humanity inherent in the western conception of "mankind."

This is perfectly in consonance with Murata's description of Keiko's identity as *konbini ningen*. The protagonist struggled to demonstrate her natural disposition to the ordinary betweenness of Japanese society in her childhood. She could not understand why her family members, schoolmates, teachers, and even a therapist impose on each other their views of normal personhood. Naturally, her disconnect from such irrational interrelations led her not to "do anything of her own accord, and either just mimicked what everyone else was doing, or simply followed instructions" (Murata 2018: 10). This negative, subservient emptiness of self goes through a drastic change when Keiko encounters a quasi-divine space in which she can transform herself into a part of said totality.

It is important to note here that the way that Murata portrays the space of existential transformation, which comes with the sensation of entering "another dimension," alludes to the Noh tradition (see Murata 2018: 13).[9] Noh is a traditional form of Japanese theatre, whose theoretical formulation dates to the works of Kan'ami and Zeami of the Kamakura period in the

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fourteenth century. It is the oldest form of performance theatre in the world that is still practiced today and consists of highly formalized dance performances and ritualistic singing, accompanied by masks and costumes that have been passed down among the families of professional actors for generations. Though it presents a drama of human emotions, it is performed in traditional Japanese that is not intelligible to most contemporary Japanese and its formalized performance is also often carried out in a religious site, such as a Shinto shrine or a Buddhist temple, thus implying its function as prayer or a gateway to the sacred, trans-worldly dimension of life. This can be best understood if we pay attention to how the Noh stage is set up and what type of symbolisms it delivers to its audience. This will also help us understand how Murata is using the same set of symbols to imply the possibility that Keiko might be going through a religious experience where she can be signaling a new type of human existence (*ningen sonzai*).

The Noh stage consists of three parts: a bridgeway, a square stage, and the audience. The first two where the actors play their parts are labelled as the sacred space while the audience literally resides in the worldly realm. Moreover, this division between the divine and the human becomes interchangeable. Since the sacred space is where gods, demons, spirits (and sometimes women) enter from the other world through the bridgeway and speak to the audience about their stories and emotions, the main stage also symbolizes "this world," thus serving as a reflection of the audience in the worldly realm. There is always an admixture of sacred and profane in this traditional theatre of Japan.

A standard Noh stage is also quite minimalistic like an empty store prior to its opening. Its background is often decorated with a simple painting of evergreens, which shows the timelessness of human experience in "this world" on stage. The result is that every Noh stage looks identical (just like every 7/11 or Smile Mart). Furthermore, a typical Noh play consists of two actors (in addition to the chorus and the director in the background). The main character, *shite*, wears a mask, representing the trans-human, spiritual beings, and always enters from the other world through the bridgeway, whereas the assisting character, *waki*, almost always represents a human (male). Unlike a *shite*, a *waki* never wears a mask. It is common knowledge that Noh masks and costumes are typically much older than the actors. Because of that, a mask can be so expressive that it reveals different emotions when seen from different angles. A *waki* on the other hand never moves his facial muscles when he sings his lines and often, to an audience, looks like he's wearing a mask. Once again, we encounter a strange intertwining of the divine and the human on the sacred stage.[10]

Keiko finds herself lost in the urban area of Tokyo after seeing the Noh play as "school course work" (Murata 2018: 12). As the sign of natural "lifeforce" (Thornbury 2020: 72)[11] disappears around her, she suddenly comes across a white building whose ground floor "looks like an aquarium" (Murata 2018: 13). This "as-yet-opened store" is a "transparent glass box of light" (Murata 2018: 19) that functions as an incubator of contemporary *ningen*, the stage in which Keiko is born and reborn as a functional member of contemporary Japanese society.

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What we observe in the next scene is a very Noh-like practice of absorbing the formality of behaviours as a convenience store worker. A group of diverse individuals are asked to repeat the same lines, practice some moves that are required for this job, and imagine themselves welcoming customers, running the cash registers, moving the products, assisting each other, etc., for the single purpose of letting customers chose and buy their products. This is exactly the way that Watsuji describes the process of learning (*manabu*) that remains faithful to the dialectical manifestation of *ningen*. To learn, according to Watsuji, means to imitate "act interrelation" of betweenness. This imitation, however, is different from mimicking—the passive resignation to the social norms and doing what one is told, as Keiko did in her youth.[12] Instead, the process of active imitation initiates individuals to enter into a series of inter- and trans-subjective interrelations such that they cultivate their ability to think for themselves in relation to their natural environment (Watsuji 1996: 29, also 19). Keiko, therefore, transforms herself through a repetition of practical movements and almost naturally enters into a dynamic interrelation with customers and co-workers. In this process of existential learning, she finally finds herself in the midst of all others in her society. She recollects how "it was the first time" when she learnt "how to accomplish a normal facial expression and manner of speech"(Murata 2018: 15). This is the process of her "rebirth" into her inter-relational existence in contemporary Japanese society.

The opening scene of the story as the end result of this learning process looks as though it were the "pure experience" of life as a convenience store worker (in a Nishidian sense). There is no separation between the store as the objective world existing apart from her as the subjective worker but a Nishidian sense of "pure experience" shows the subjective self as an expression of the objective world in their intimate and harmonious togetherness. Keiko, in this sense, is immersed in the sound of the store, responding to the movement of customers, and naturally interacting with them with the right verbal and bodily expressions. Her movement is both decisive, dynamic, and considerate while her formal self-negation allows her customers to determine themselves.[13] This looks as though she were inviting her customers as the *waki* to express their desires as the *shite* in the sacred space of a square stage. There is a determinable pattern of ritual betweenness that constitutes their existence as a worker-and-customer.[14]

Keiko's identity is also determined through her intermediation with all the others. Her body consists of free meals and water from the store. She interacts with the climate aspect of *fudō* in such a way that she articulates its meaning in the language of the commerce (Murata 2018: 23). The term, *fūdo*, is often translated as "climate" but is better understood as the cultural-specific betweenness or interrelation of humans and their natural surroundings. (This is also the reason why it is retranslated as "climate and culture.") When we talk about a *fūdo* of Scotland, for instance, we do not really talk about the meteorological analysis of the country's atmosphere but the ways in which the weather is lived by the people therein. This means when talking about Scottish *fūdo*, we do not only talk about their weather but also their food, clothes, and all the customs and tools that they have developed in response to it. The language of commerce means a quantifying description that we use in our exchange of commodities. We ask how much a product is and about how the percentage of the discount. This often goes beyond any culturological boundaries of the climate and culture (since the experience of buying a bottle of water in London is not much different from doing the same in Tokyo). In reference to the set of

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these seemingly contradictory ideas, Keiko reflects on the emptiness of her self-subsistent existence by saying that her self-identity is constituted by her interrelation with all the others:

> My present self is formed almost completely of the people around me. I am currently made up of 30 percent Mrs. Izumi, 30 percent Sugawara, 20 percent the manager, and the rest absorbed from past colleagues such as Sasaki, who left six months ago, and Okasaki, who was our supervisor until a year ago (Murata 2018: 25).

Keiko observes this intermediation of self through the other not only in herself but also in others, and further describes their existential condition of being-in-relation-with-the-other "mutual infection" (Murata 2018: 25-6). Her observation echoes Watsuji's insight: "Infecting each other like this is how we maintain ourselves as human (*ningen*) is what I think" (Murata 2018: 26). Certainly, there is something comical about describing *aidagara* as a pathological exchange of our behavioural patterns (especially if we are tempted to take Keiko's statements literally). Reducing the uniformity of the otherworldly in the traditional theatre is to the plastic "ubiquity of convenience stores [as] a defining element of Tokyo urban life" may also seem questionable (Thornbury 2020: 72). However, what is disturbing about this humorous allegory is that there is nothing in what Murata has presented through this short story that significantly deviates from the philosophical concept of betweenness in Watsuji.[15] The mixture of culturological language of betweenness and that of commerce here seems quite natural if that's the type of life Keiko lives in the city of Tokyo (as many of us actually do). The Watsujian hermeneutical method of depicting Japanese ethics must take this into account as an integral part of our human experience as modern betweenness. The subtle reference to the Noh tradition also seems to work in favour of an interpretation that Keiko perfects in her inter-relational act at her workplace and that her existence exhibits as an inter-expression of herself and others at least within the confines of her given reality.

3 An Anti-Watsujian "Mask of the Convenience Store Worker"

Watsuji's *Rinrigaku* in its English translation has some difficulty in dealing with the question of how we move from description to prescription in our hermeneutics of the Japanese language.[16] The linguistic investigation of a particular language is indeed an effective method to combat the totalizing abstraction of modern philosophy. It counters the universalizing morality of European philosophy that adopts the self-referential model of white, male self-consciousness. However, once we move away from the general characteristics of the western conception of humanity towards the five constancies (*gojō* 五常) of what makes us *ningen* in Chinese and Japanese philosophy (namely the relations between sovereign and subject, husband and wife, parent and child, eldest child and youngest, and friend and friend), we are still left with a set of certain normative claims that are arbitrarily defined within the culturally specific domain of philosophical thinking. If a language fails to fully accommodate a certain form of betweenness that is applicable to a marginalized group of people in society (e.g., women, homosexual, asexual,

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transgender, colonized populace, those who decided not to succeed in capitalist realism, etc.), how do we ethically choose the direction in which the language should change or evolve? How should we distinguish a new form of linguistic expression that we are to accommodate in our language from the ones that are to be "eliminated," "expunged," "fixed," or "cured" as a cause of confusion and misunderstanding? (Murata 2018: 11, 60, 69, 72, 81, 106, 131).[17]

Murata shows that the intersubjective narrative in Japanese society is both self-affirming and self-referential to the extent that one would prefer to see a failure of living up to a familiar standard of social expectations than to accept an abnormality that does not subscribe to any of it.[18] This means that Japanese society is a "forcibly normalized environment where foreign matter is immediately eliminated" and that the Japanese language is no longer functioning in line with the open dialectic of *ningen* that dates back to the beginning of time (Murata 2018: 60).[19] Naturally, its hermeneutics is not enough to combat our propensity to impose our fixed social norms on each other in the same manner as the European *cogito*.

Keiko is surrounded by women and men aged "thirty something"[20] in Tokyo, settling down with their partners, and they are always eager to talk about the right timing for having their first child. Her childhood friends immediately ask, "Have you married yet?" (Murata 2018: 35),[21] which seems to be the sole purpose of their socializing in the first place. They are too eager to make Keiko move on from her dead-end lifestyle of having no partner, no child, or no career. They are beginning to lose their patience about her made-up health issues, which supposedly give her an excuse to stay where she is: hence, they are beginning to suspect that Keiko is hiding her secret of abnormal sexuality (either being homosexual or asexual), which their social media has painted as a legitimate reason for not seeking to have a normal household in Japanese society. They cannot understand why Keiko is not interested in any of the sexualized betweenness that they can envision as normal life options in relation to their conception of the world/public (*seken* 世間).

Their partners also chime in with a shared social expectation that a woman of Keiko's age should *either* settle for a family life *or* have a successful career. This binary division of economic independence as masculinity and marital/familial dependence as femininity runs through the entire story as the "logic of the human race" (Murata 2018: 153). Without having either, Keiko must feel the pressure to comply with the social standard at least by having a partner (since, based on her CV, she has a much better chance in finding a partner who will bring financial stability to her household than achieving it by herself). The character that has no craving for attaining what makes us ordinary human beings (in Japan or elsewhere) refuses to play the language game of either/or. But her language of neither/nor too quickly makes her look like "some ghastly life form" (Murata 2018: 80), which remains other worldly to her audience in this world. (And the term "this world," at this point, includes both her interlocutors and Murata's readers.)

The self-referential art of "abstraction" that Watsuji diagnoses in modern European philosophy, thus, reappears within the confines of *modern* Japanese philosophy. The betweenness in Japanese language was shown as a way to "cure" (Murata 2018: 131) this problem, but the act of

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interrelation between individuals in any modernized contemporary society is clearly capable of setting up an intermediatory standard that is totalizing within a certain social structure. This betweenness imposes "prejudices" on its participants and in that sense, Keiko argues, "what makes us human (*ningen*) is our condescending attitude towards each other" (Murata 2018: 60).

However, just as the European *cogito* has supposedly lost its power to convince others to follow its topology as the only way of thinking about being, each type of betweenness within the bounds of a particular socio-linguistic community should not be able to claim its superiority over the other. Despite this, Keiko's exclusive focus on the singular betweenness in her historical reality shows how the ordinary language of what makes us human in Japanese society encourages the movement that diametrically opposes what Watsuji envisioned with the notion of *ningen*. Far from negating both individuality and totality to keep a space where each single individual is freely expressing and determining itself in relation to the other, we are constantly imposing our prioritized and fixed betweenness against each other while remaining incapable of explaining why one type of *aidagara* is better or more justifiable than others. The "mask of a convenience store worker," in this sense, reveals the fragile foundation of the harmonious interrelations that we thought we have access to through Watsuji's notion of betweenness.

4 A Watsujian Suspension of *Kombini ningen*

Keiko's determination to prioritize her worker-customer interrelation reveals that all types of betweenness have a touch of a "sociogenetic principle" (Wynter 2001: 31).[22] What makes her "mask of a convenience store worker" disturbing to readers is the lack of layers or a readily available abyss behind it. In response to the Swedish feminist thinker, Ellen Key's praise of motherhood, the Japanese poet and trailblazer of modern Japanese feminism, Yosano Akiko famously argued that one's identity is constituted by a constellation of various roles and that one cannot set one single role as being unconditioned compared to others:

> [Motherhood] was not an absolute event in my life. I am a mother, but I am also the wife of a man, a friend to my friends, a member of the global human race, and a Japanese subject. I am also a human being who engages in thinking, composes poetry, writes manuscripts, provides food and clothing, and carries out all sorts of mental and physical activities. I make it a point of concentrating wholeheartedly on whatever task I'm performing at any given moment for as long as time permits.
>
> I do not live by my maternal instincts alone. Even when I may appear to be exercising those instincts, I am conscious of the activities I am presently sacrificing; they continue to hover around me like countless stars revolving about the star on which my gaze is fixed for the moment. It would take a great number of words to name all the centres that occupy my life, motherhood, friendship, wife, work, art, country, world […] these centres are all

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> relative and numerous, coming and going continually. My life is one dynamic flux (Yosano 1985: 141).[23]

When working on a manuscript before the imminent deadline, Akiko cannot be anything but a poet, but when attending to her dozen children or aiding her financially destitute husband, she is a mother or a wife. She cannot wear the mask of a poet before her children or that of a mother before her husband. There is a constant need to move from one role to another and this compound of contradictory roles makes her both woman and human. This means that a self cannot exclusively live one type of *aidagara* and even if it tries to do this, it cannot help but feel its self-contradictory need to wear different types of masks in the course of its daily life. This thick network of diverse interrelations that have different gravitational centres makes one *ningen*.[24]

Without having children or establishing ourselves as successful writers like Yosano Akiko, we should be able to feel this constellation of betweenness as an ordinary individual. Imagine a convincing narrative of a student who pays her bills with a part-time job in the UK. What makes our description of her character believable is that she is more than a student and irreducible to her social status as a part-time worker. When she goes to her accommodation, she is a housemate. When she goes home, she is a daughter to her parents and a sister to her siblings. She is a niece to her uncles, an aunt to her nephews, and granddaughter to her grandparents. She is a friend to some of them and an enemy (if not a stranger) to others. In the intimate space of her interrelation to some of these others, she confides her feelings that her part-time work is going great or that it is not doing justice to her sense of who she is. There is a need to move from one *aidagara* to another, and she can always feel that when she spends too much time on one betweenness, she is neglecting the others. Her inherent inability to attend to all of what constitutes her person is particularly felt when some of these diverse interrelations are closely related with each other, thereby asking her to choose one over the other.[25]

Keiko does not feel this tension in recognizing herself as a composite of different betweenness. She is only a sum total of those who come to work at the store and picking up a part of their composite interrelations. Her "pantomiming" (Sorrentino 2020: 253) of each character does not cause any tension or contradiction inside her, but they are all neatly packaged and separately stored just like the commodities at the convenient store. As P. Jaseel and Rashmi Gaur articulate, "As she was *playing* a person rather than being a real one with experience and emotions, Keiko would never open herself up to others to share her thoughts and fears, and consequently, she never made close friends, nor did she have any relationships" (Jaseel and Gaur 2022: 4).

In relation to her parents, she does not feel the need to go home during the holiday season. Nor does she understand the reason why she should visit her own nephew rather than any other children. What is worse is that she does not understand how her small relative is more important than a random pet (and most readers should wonder why she glances at the knife, which was used to cut a piece of cake, when her sister is soothing her crying son) (Murata 2018: 57).[26] There is no tension or reciprocal relation between her "shapeshifting" *aidagara* as a part-time worker or as a family member (Nicolae 2018: 49-54). She does not feel the plethora of conflicts that

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parenthood can bring to a human being. Her singular existential focus on her social role as a "perfect cog of the world" (Murata 2018: 4, 20, 21) escapes the complex web of dynamic betweennesses that we call *ningen*.

Watsuji could also argue that *konbini ningen* is an oxymoron precisely because its betweenness evades any robust inter-relationality that involves the natural environment and aesthetic culture (*fūdo*). The seasonal change is not directly observable inside the commercial aquarium that is "polished free of fingerprints" (Murata 2018: 4, also 160). Keiko can only make an inference to the seasonal transition through the products that appeal to customers' awareness of the change in the natural world (although this is even dubious since "mango pudding" cannot precisely be an appropriate *kigo* 季語 in Tokyo in May). She indeed pays attention to the weather forecast (Murata 2018: 23), but once again, she is not cultivating her sensitivity to natural beauty as it is expected in the notion of *fūdo* (which helps us make the distinction between a dead little "blue bird" and *yakitori* or chicken BBQ), but this awareness of the eternal climate is instrumental for checking which products would most likely be in high demand on that day. The air-conditioning system inside the store is set to create the perfect temperature very much like the main infrastructure in the *Brave New World*.[27] The difference between the day and the night is talked about only in terms of "shifts" or "rush hours": hence, the bright 24/7 retail facility "never changes" to a perspective of the normal residents in the surrounding community (Murata 2018: 52).[28]

It is also important to note here that Keiko has no sensitivity to taste. In addition to the fact that she cannot make any distinction between the blue bird and chicken, all she eats is tasteless (like "dog food") or has strange flavours (e.g., chocolate melon soda) that did not appeal to the desire of the public (*seken*). "She does not see the point of drinking any liquid that has taste" and only "feeds" Shiraha as though he were a domesticated "animal"; and all this is for the sole purpose of maintaining the appearance of a genuine relationship (Murata 2018: 88, 109-10). Preparing a meal to break bread literally indicates "companionship." Eating a bowl of rice from the same pot also constitutes an intimate betweenness that is more than a stranger and less than a family in many parts of Asia (Pavone 2023: 143-44).[29]

Keiko also feeds herself to keep working for the convenience store that provides her with pre-packaged food. She certainly does not understand that when we eat food, there is something more than just ingesting nutrients for sustaining life. Each culinary tradition, for instance, shows its sensitivity to what is available in its specific region. It also exhibits our human relation to the dynamism of the natural environment. For instance, sushi is traditionally served as a preservative food in summer (by using vinegar) while some warm noodles, such as *Tsukimi udon*, are served in the Fall in Japan.[30] Thus, a culinary tradition generally shows its awareness of seasons; and appreciating it naturally has some element of betweenness. As Murata demonstrates in "A Magnificent Spread," "eating something is a matter of trusting the world that produced it." It is subscribing to a certain set of food choices that involves accepting the worldview that embraces it as a legitimate way of sustaining communal life (Murata 2022: 40).[31] Preparing and serving a meal to the self or the other is not a reduction of food into mere

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nutrients (and eventually to excrement) but a practical interaction of individuals that consists of their intimate connection with their cultural tradition and shared natural environment.

When the self is removed from the nature in which its language has been formed to express itself, it is no longer engaging with the inter-expression of *ningen* in its intimate connection with *fūdo*. It fails to serve as a space for the natural world to express itself and, in turn, it fails to express itself fully in relation to the natural climate or seasonal changes of the world where it lives. This shows in Keiko's approach to food and language. She only consumes prepacked food removed from *fūdo* and instrumentalizes it as a means for her life as a convenience store worker. All the food products are wrapped in an excessive layer of plastic and neatly displayed in commercial reality. In exactly the same way, Keiko's borrowed betweenness displays a composite of neatly separate linguistic expressions (until she faces at the end the irreconcilable gap between her life as a convenience store worker and the social expectation of a normal person). There is always an interdependence of the human and the natural in the very act of eating food or communicating with each other about ourselves through language as Watsuji constantly argues. In this reading, Keiko's continuous distance from *fūdo* brews great concern for the fact that she does not demonstrate any robust sense of *ningen* in her peculiar lifeworld.

Murata is clearly presenting Keiko here with a disturbing ambiguity. On the one hand, Keiko does look like the perfect exemplar of contemporary human being (new *ningen*) in the Watsujian sense. If Japanese *rinrigaku* is about paying attention to the social interaction of individuals and their relations to their surroundings, then she signifies the grammar of our interaction in most urbanized areas of Japan. The convenience store has been such an integral part of what it means for us to live as Japanese today. But then, on the other, her reconstructed relation to the natural environment in our modernity (which only pretends to correspond with Watsuji's traditional understanding of Japanese nature) seems to present her as greatly deviating from the sense of what it means to be *ningen*. As we will see later, this ambiguity not only highlights the inherent ambiguity in Watsuji's distinction between description and prescription in the process of establishing his ethical concepts as betweenness, but also moves us to see our own reflection in Keiko's decision to become a new type of human being in her given psycho-existential complex of modern Japan. If *fūdo* is a culturological description of the ways in which we interact with our surroundings, the convenience store is also a form of this and no matter how trans-cultural or trans-natural it may be, we should be able to warrant a type of human existence that could emerge from it. This swing between Keiko as an exemplar and a simultaneous failure of *ningen,* will remain with us as the story pushes us to think of her liberation as a convenience store worker.

5 The Logic of Self-Affirmation through Self-Negation: Keiko as a New Woman

Keiko's primary concern seems to be more about what it means for her to be a "normal person" (*ningen*) than anything else. However, she is constantly alienated by the social expectations of what it means for her to be a woman throughout the story. Watsuji does not explicitly deal with

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the gendered order of subjectivity in *Rinrigaku*: hence, to give a proper response to this question, we must consult the works of Japanese women thinkers such as Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō.[32]

We have seen that Keiko seems to follow (although superficially) the dialectical pattern of *ningen* as an intermediation of individuality and totality. This logic of betweenness based on the notion of emptiness gives an existential movement of "self-affirmation through self-negation." The same logic runs through the idea of "two-fold self-possession" (Kitagawa 2011: 1132)[33] in Japanese women's philosophy of "polyphonic femininity" or "self-awareness." The structural similarity between these thinkers simply anticipates that the concept of a "convenience store woman" is a critique of Japanese women thinkers' ethics as much as it is of Watsuji's *Rinrigaku*. To prove this point, we will look at how Japanese women thinkers established their views on their liberation as authentic women in Japan.

Hiratsuka Raichō argues that the historical condition of Japanese women is metastasized with the binary/androcentric division of gender roles especially since the westernization/modernization of Japanese society in the Meiji period. Women are allowed to participate in education under the progressive narrative of modernization and enlightenment.[34] But they are not educated to cultivate their own self-consciousness. Instead of aiding their process of becoming independent thinkers (in the manner of Watsujian learning), their education was based on the fabricated conservative value of becoming a "good wife and wise mother" (*ryōsaikenbo*).[35] The more educated they are in this unequal, oppressive structure, the more subservient and docile they become towards the society of Japanese men.

Raichō's method of liberation takes a two-fold step. First, a woman must meditate on her existential condition, that is, to take a "step back" from the social expectations and all the prejudices that influence her self-(mis-)understanding (Yusa and Kalmanson 2019: 618).[36] The androcentric modern European society is structurally set up in such a way that the oppressed cannot learn to cultivate their self-consciousness. Since Japanese westernization/modernization was modelled after this integrationist and colonial structure, Japanese women were destined to cultivate their "double consciousness" in relation to colonized Japanese men. To break away from this prison of intellectual and socio-political-economic oppression, their consciousness needed to be deconstructed through the process of self-negation and only then, each woman could come to recognize her genius as a true person (*shinshō no hito*) (Hiratsuka 1987: 9).

Japanese women's method of achieving this two-fold self-possession was to reclaim their original genius as writers (Yosano 1985: 60). Yosano's sensational debut as a poet showed her talent to express her feelings as they are, and her elegant literary style bedazzled the literary world dominated by male writers at that time in Japan. Raichō's project to publish the first literary journal, *Seitō*, which was edited and published by women for women, also marked an advent of a communal space where Japanese women could express their thoughts and feelings about women's problems as their own. The poems of Raichō and Yosano dedicated to the inaugural volume of this journal show their unquestionable solidarity in this project that aimed at the self-determination of Japanese women.

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There are some subtle differences in the ways that they conceived of the liberation of Japanese women, which became explicit when they discussed the "state protection of single mothers" in the late 1910s. Yosano primarily argues that the binary division between man and woman is dwelling on these lower distinctions. The whole purpose of education is to rise above these external differences and arrive at the higher, internal standpoint of unifying humanity (Yosano 1985: 137). This is where, she argues, true equality between man and woman is realized. She also argues for the economic independence of woman. This means that any (arranged) marriage for the sake of financial stability, which ignores the feelings of women and exacerbates their "parasitic dependence on [the society of] men" (Yusa 2011: 1115)[37] should be abolished. Without securing financial equality between men and women, moreover, we will not structurally break free from the hierarchical distinction between them. The state protection of single mothers, in this sense, will continue aiding the self-subsistence of patriarchy which subdivides humanity into the baser categories of masculinity and femininity.

Hiratsuka Raichō does agree with Yosano to some extent. She thinks that we must break away from the misconception of womanhood as being subservient to the society of men. This is indeed in line with Akiko's criticism that the notion of femininity is misconceived in the society of man. Raichō's earlier reflection on the nature of "an authentic person" through her experience of Buddhist self-awareness (*kenshō*) also articulates the same self-reflective point.[38] However, Raichō comes to criticize Akiko's position by saying that the whole narrative of rising above the division between man and woman to the standpoint of humanity is derived from the European discourse (of integrationist humanism or of colonial feminism). She argues that this totalizing conception of humanity, which Watsuji calls "abstraction" in *Rinrigaku*, is derived from the European understanding of *man*kind (Hiratsuka 1987: 18-19, 155). This is hardly appropriate for the self-understanding of Japanese women in their specific historical and existential conditions. Because of this, Raichō articulates how the act of self-negation is not only to deconstruct the given social norms that misrepresent Japanese women, but also to creatively reconstruct them in such a way that they reflect the original image of their "polyphonic femininity" in the present. As she comes to the standpoint of self-negation, in other words, a woman should be able to reclaim her existence as an authentic self. This self is not constrained to a singular social role as a mother, a wife, a sister, a writer, an artist, or a poet. Nor does it abide by the sociogenetic binary of men–women in the constructed tradition of Confucian patriarchy. Rather, it forges its own path to define what it means for the self to be a Japanese woman in its own terms and this is the traditional picture of woman in the history of Japan. It is not confined to a single role by the societal expectation of what it should be; instead this self can take up multiple roles while defining them in its own terms. Naturally, the sense of being a woman must be pluralistic and this is what Raichō means by the concept of "liberated, new woman" (*atarashii onna*) (Hiratsuka 1987: 41).

To prove this point, Hiratsuka discusses the concept of the "sexed body" and shows the way to reclaim the notion of motherhood. In the context of the modern femininity in its binary opposition to masculinity (i.e., femininity 1.0), being a mother is directly in line with the androcentric principle of "good wife and wise mother." However, once a woman practices her

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self-negation, which is to let go of her misconstrued self-image based on social prejudices (that is, to achieve "no-self"), she can come to be aware of herself as a mother, thus repossessing her specific existential condition to be her authentic sense of herself. In this liberated sense, femininity does not subscribe to the toxic narrative of *ryōsai kenbo* but to a revolutionary sense of polyphonic, unconstrained femininity as a sexed body. In this case, Raichō argues, a mother is seen as an intermediary of nature and human society, or the betweenness of *ningen* and *fūdo*, rather than a subservient role for the continuation of the modernized society of men (Hiratsuka 1987: 96-7, 156). In that renewed sense of femininity 2.0 (*atarashii onna*), Hiratsuka echoes Ellen Key's idea that "motherhood" is "the highest and most sacred role of women as a sexed body" (Yusa 2011: 1123) while maintaining that this claim does not contradict with her continuous criticism of femininity 1.0.

This means that the liberated sense of self, according to Raichō's framework of thinking, does not have to be a mother or possibly even a woman. If a male or a transgender person goes through the same process of reclaiming their selfhood through self-negation, they can claim their given existential condition as the most sacred role in a given human society. If this is the case, then Keiko should be able to say that she is an *atarashii onna* under the global capitalism of twentieth century Japan or a new *ningen* that reclaims its authentic existence as a convenience store worker. She does not single-handedly achieve economic independence as Akiko encourages the new generation of women in the previous century to do. But she has an internal drive to achieve the non-binary internal perspective that transcends the social expectations that are forced upon a "woman" at her age. She at least self-consciously refrains from unreflectively choosing a conceded economic liberation through marriage like many others. This refusal to comply with the prefixed social expectations of how she should behave as a woman in Japan seems to allow Keiko to forge a new way of being *ningen* in Tokyo. Through her self-negation, she re-affirms herself at the end of the story as an embodiment of Covenience Store-*fūdo* where she can not only anticipate what the store wants, but also be at home with *her* own sense of self.

By facing her inability to maintain the compromise between her desire to become nothing but the part-time *konbini* worker and the communal expectations to serve as a (re)productive member of society, she chooses to let go of what it means for her to be a convenience store woman as it is perceived by society. However, at the end, she reclaims this as her authentic sense of self and restores her existential authenticity in a renewed sense of *konbini ningen*. This seems to be completely consistent with Raichō's logic of new woman. This movement is also accompanied by her escape from the toxic self-centredness of repressed masculinity, Shiraha, at the end of the story. It is important to note here that Shiraha holds a deranged worldview of hypermasculinity with a complete unawareness of his performative contradiction. Since ancient times—namely, the *jōmon* period corresponding to 14,000-300 BCE in Japanese history when the archipelagos consisted of hunter-gatherer communities—he argues, women always existed for reproduction and men were in race against each other to provide sustenance to the continuation of their communal existence. He claims to be a victim of this unjust system of "village mentality" but shows his willingness to become the perpetrator if the opportunity rises. Ironically, he becomes a parasite to Keiko when she offers him food and shelter and even pushes her to look for the full-time job. Her final liberation from this pitiful incel certainly looks

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acceptable from Yosano's perspective. Even if she may not exactly look like an exemplar of Watsujian *ningen*, Keiko seems to be a heroic harbinger of a new type of *ningen* that attempts to embody the Japanese women thinkers' logic of "self-affirmation through self-negation."

6 No Longer Japanese Woman but only *Konbini Ningen*: Murata's Challenge to Japanese Feminist Ethics

There is an interesting ancillary criticism that Hiratsuka Raichō and Yamakawa Kikue make in relation to Yosano Akiko's argument that women should secure their economic independence before their marriage.[39] Given the sociopolitical and economic structure in the early twentieth century Japan, they both argued that nobody, or few would be able to marry if they were to wait for their financial independence: hence, Akiko's principle was deemed impractical and if it were taken seriously, the country would consequently cease to exist (Hiratsuka 1987: 108, 111, 129-30).[40] Neither Yamakawa nor Raichō builds up their argument to ground this *reductio* critique. Nor is it entirely clear if Yosano was willing to embrace the statistical probability of the imminent population decline (which is ironically happening today in Japan) for the sake of Japanese women's economic freedom. What is interesting about the notion of femininity 2.0 is that it does end up justifying the status quo of Japanese women who did not achieve their socio-economic autonomy through their given civil status as (not-)married. This point surprisingly becomes of paramount importance when examining how *Konbini Ningen* poses a fundamental question to the logic of Japanese women thinkers.

Murata's challenge to the Japanese "feminist" ethics becomes evident once we interpret Keiko's two sisters as representing Raichō's and Akiko's perspectives on Japanese women. Keiko's biological sister, Mami, is a married woman and a mother of a small child. She understands Keiko more than anyone in her family and provides her with white lies to protect her individual freedom from social norms. When Keiko confides to her on the phone, however, that a strange man, Shiraha, is staying at her apartment, the formidable speed of the response proves her true "pre-historic" perspective of what it means to be an "ordinary person" (Murata 2018: 98). Without asking why he is there or if her sister was safe, she immediately bursts into joy and reveals her pent-up expectation that Keiko might be planning on marrying the unknown man whom she has never even met in person. This is exactly when Keiko realizes that her sister is far from understanding her desire to be who she is and that the unwritten rule of *ningen* has been consistently the same since the *jōmon* period.[41] To be an unmarried part-time worker for the rest of her life is not normal, but to be in a dysfunctional relationship with a stranger with the tacit faith in the conventional betweenness of marriage and motherhood is.

The interaction of sisters at Keiko's apartment also symbolizes the direct conflict between their perspectives. When Mami discovers that Keiko has her so-called "boyfriend" (as a useful parasite for their social camouflage) in her bathtub, she finally comes to the rude awakening that there is something really wrong with Keiko. Once again, the younger sister prefers to see her

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older sister as failing to live up to her expectations of what it means for anyone to be woman—namely, to be romantically married to someone for their shared (un-)happiness or to be a single mother (after failing in her relationship)—rather than choosing not to participate in this idea of womanhood. There is a grotesque comfort in her anger towards Shiraha's made-up infidelity, which proves that she cannot stomach Keiko's self-awareness as a convenience store woman.

Shiraha's sister-in-law represents Akiko's principle of economic independence. She flies from the northern frontier, Hokkaido, to pay his unpaid bill, and to remind her imbecile brother-in-law that he is not welcome at their home unless he regains his economic integrity. She is disgusted with the fact that Keiko does not provide any prospect in terms of her career, and that they continue to live together without being able to maintain any sense of financial security in the foreseeable future. When Keiko asks the sister-in-law if she thinks that they should marry and reproduce children for the sake of humanity (as her own biological sister does), the distant relative quickly spits out her viewpoint:

> "Give me a break! How do you think a store worker and unemployed good-for-nothing are going to be able to raise children? Please don't even consider it. You'll be doing us all a favor by not leaving your genes behind. That's the best contribution to the human race you could make." …
> "Keep those rotten genes to yourself for the course of your lifetime and take them to heaven with you when you die without leaving even a trace of them here on earth. Seriously" (Murata 2018: 153).

The world is a better place if the two economic failures drop out of existence with no trace of their betweenness. The only way for Keiko to win her respect, in this case, is to join the rat race of capitalism and subsequently to win her equality with other economically successful men. Yosano does not pursue the line of argument that economic independence is most important for the authentic personhood of Japanese women. However, Raichō's (and Yamakawa's) critique is that if we follow her idea that humanity (*ningen*) is higher than the lower division of masculinity and femininity and that to achieve this unifying equality between men and women is to achieve their equal rights and economic independence, we do have to face this conclusion that Shiraha and Keiko should contribute to what Raluca Nicolae elegantly refers to as "humanity's slow suicide of humanity" (Nicolae 2018: 49).[42]

Keiko's conversation with her two sisters symbolizes her direct confrontation with the "village mentality" that endorses *either* a career *or* a marriage, thus diagnosing a conceptual implication of the previous philosophy of "new woman." Needless to say, Keiko's response to these options demonstrates a great degree of scepticism towards the existentialism of Japanese women thinkers. If the two-fold self-possession in Hiratsuka Raichō's *atarashii onna* comes back to square one, that is, to be a married woman and/or mother, how can we really tell its difference from the subservient motherhood of femininity 1.0? Raichō's argument is that once a woman battles against social prejudices and rises above them to stare directly at her own existence, whatever position she occupies in her society should be the place in which she can achieve an authentic sense of self. Given that Keiko follows the same logic, her reclamation of herself as a

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store worker at the end of her narrative seems to present a contemporary version of "new woman." After all, she is no longer a mere "cog in the machine" but a living testimony that is both "listening to" and "speaking the voice of the convenience store" (Murata 2018: 156, 159-60). She is no longer a passive part time worker but a full-time inter-expression of the convenience store (as a part-time worker), "channelling its revelations from on high" (Murata 2018: 160). Barbara E. Thornbury is right, "This is beyond what the store's manual can communicate. […] The convenience store gives Keiko a sense of place within what is otherwise for her Tokyo's placelessness" (Thornbury 2020: 73).[43]

Why then does this apparent consonance between Murata's *konbini ningen* as a convenience store woman and Hiratsuka's *atarashii onna* disturb us? The answer to this question has something to do with Hiratsuka's claim regarding the sacred status of motherhood. It disturbs those who fight against the archaic notion of *ryōsai kenbo*.[44] It looks as though it is an elaborate scheme to make us accept our status quo as the alienated members of our society. In the same way, we are concerned with Murata's equation of this authentic self with Keiko's realization of her self as an active agent of capitalistic realism. As we feel concern over Raichō's claim on motherhood (along with Mami), we are leaning towards Keiko's rebellion against it. But this quickly moves her (and us) in the direction of the "wife from hell": the path towards the necessity of securing our financial independence through a successful career. I seriously doubt that there is a single academic philosopher in the UK and Europe who associates the diabolical mantra of "employability" with authentic self-realization.

Keiko certainly exemplifies a failure in relation to Yosano's principle of economic independence under her notion of what woman should be. This then brings us back to Hiratsuka's and Yamakawa's counterargument that Akiko's notion of equality between men and women (as humanity) is derivative of the economic success of the androcentric (western) society. Avoiding the rat race of capitalism leads Keiko to reject the demands of the repressed and toxic Japanese masculinity (Shiraha) in the end. At least in this concluding scene, we should be able to find some comfort.[45] Keiko represents hope in the bleak epidemic of global capitalism in modern Japanese society (not unlike Camus's Joseph Grand who survives the plague without any trace of intellectual or economic virtue in Oran). However, this rebellion against Akiko's perspective does not prove that Hiratsuka's self-affirmation through double negation is a legitimate move. What Keiko achieves is the reduction of all normalizing principles to equal groundlessness. Japanese society, in this sense, is suddenly "beset by monsters reflecting a community unable to recognize itself in the image projected by the mirror" (Sorrentino 2020: 252). In response to Shiraha's monstrous anthropology of "earn or procreate," Keiko explains her philosophy of self-awareness:

> You're right about society being in the Stone Age (*jōmon* period). Anyone not needed in the village is persecuted and shunned. Ultimately, it's not different from a convenience store. Anyone the store doesn't need has their shifts reduced or is fired (Murata 2018: 92).[46]

Thus, what we see in the disturbing conclusion of this short story are the distorted faces of ourselves as nihility. What Keiko reveals through her self-reflection as a convenience store

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worker, or what the store reflects back to the audience in this world, is that there is essentially no difference between pathological inclination towards (re-)claiming motherhood as a sacred calling (Raichō), achieving financial independence as a career woman (Yosano), or actively enslaving the self to the lowest rung of the proletariat (Murata). Keiko's ultimate freedom from Akiko's notion of humanity as well as from Hiratsuka's sexed body, as a living manifestation of the convenience store, leaves us in complete aporia in this way. We are not comfortable with the terrible implication of either/or in Hiratsuka's and Yosano's rendering of what women should be (*á la* Keiko), but we are far from feeling comfortable in embracing Keiko's superhuman resolution of neither/nor. What we are left with at the end of this play is the "the animal me, the convenience store worker," that is without a doubt a "grotesque" spirit of "no longer human (*ningen*)" (Murata 2018: 162).

7 Concluding Possibilities with No Resolution: The Convenience Store Worker as A Challenge to Modern Japanese Ethics

Is Keiko a post-human spirit that reclaims her asexual or queerly sexual self to be lauded as the latest version of Hiraktsuka's authentic person? Is Keiko the goddess that comes to present herself on the sacred stage of Japanese history, a liberated woman from all the social norms? Or is she the spirit of *hannya* (般若) that can only be born out of the hyper capitalism of the twentieth first century's "precarious Japan"? Is she the princess Mononoke of *ningen* with new truncated *fūdo* in our contemporary world? When we ask this either/or against Murata Sayaka's *Konbini Ningen* in the context of *Rinrigaku*, we are left with three possible readings of the story's ending: (1) a circular ending that comes back to the beginning with the pure experience of working at the convenience store; (2) a rise of a new woman who overcomes any social norms, thus deserving to be revered as a postmodern non-binary hero(ine) at the dawn of our new era; or (3) the darkness of Akutagawa's "Rashōmon" where the protagonist's final standpoint advocates the complete death of humanity.

If we take the first interpretation, we are stuck with a weak Keiko remaining incapable of liberating herself from social expectations. Like Gilgamesh, she ends where she started and the tyranny of uncontrolled desires to totalize one's world view over against the other subsists endlessly.[47] The question of whether or not Keiko is achieving self-awareness or having a religious experience where "reality is realizing itself through self" (in Nishida's and Nishitani's sense) remains unanswered. Although this is certainly a possible ending, this only delays the need to face the fundamental question of what it means to be *ningen* in Japanese ethics (including the liberation of modern Japanese women) that we have discussed in this paper.

The second interpretation takes a hermeneutical step that Keiko indeed frees herself from various social norms, and further finds her freedom and authentic sense of self in the most mundane and ordinary experience of subsisting as a part-time worker in Japan. Once again, there are many signs in the story that seem to support this interpretation. Many critics have been

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persuaded by this image. She achieves the ideal of *ningen* in her light box of *konbini* and her process of reclaiming her authenticity also follows the liberatory logic of "new woman." This might be the reason why Murata describes Keiko as being much stronger than herself (who actually worked for a convenience store for eighteen years before becoming a successful writer).

Murata's depiction of Keiko, however, is filled with other signs that suggest the third option as a strong possibility. Keiko only has a look of following the dialectical logic of *ningen* through her self-negation. Her character's layer of betweenness is not very dynamic. By showing the groundlessness of all social prejudices against her as a woman in her mid-thirties, she successfully deconstructs the narratives that expect her to be a "normal human being," that is, to be either a (un-)married mother or financially successful, independent woman. By turning her existence into a question, however, she refuses this either/or and comes back to herself as neither/nor. She is neither human (*ningen*) nor woman (*onna* or *mesu*) in the previous context of Japanese ethics but a new type of *ningen*. What this ending does is to show how a contemporary adaptation of the dialectic of Watsujian *betweenness* and of *atarashii onna* can deflate their credibility, thus leaving us with "a mixed breed of human, machine, and animal" (Kitagawa 2011: 1135) that no longer resembles what we have known in Japanese as human or woman.

Since the advent of "new woman" in the 1910s onwards or Watsuji's articulation of *ningen* in 1930-40s, the rampant urbanisation of Japan in the rest of the twentieth century has caused an extreme removal of self from the historical depiction of *fūdo*. In the most isolated, that is to say, most transcultural and supranatural space of the convenience store, placeless betweenness for modern Japanese people is radically transformed.[48] It is no longer embodying a space in which we can interact with each other in our intimate proximity to the natural environment. With no awareness of seasonal changes outside our artificial space, the language that we speak as the urban and capitalistic self is truncated from the original intersubjectivity emersed in the sociocultural-and-natural milieu of any traditional *fūdo*'s.

Under this world-historical condition, can we still practice self-affirmation through self-negation in Japan? Can we still pursue the philosophy of self-awareness that Japanese women thinkers have achieved in any other modernized states? If the answer is in the affirmative, we should be able to claim that *konbini ningen* too is a new and legitimate way of self-awareness, a legitimate realization of reality in and through ourselves in the present. Murata's Keiko, however, makes us take a "step back" from embracing this happy ending. Behind her mask of the convenience store worker, we see a glimpse of the absolute abyss that comes and goes in urban capitalism. When we stare at its artificial smile long enough, we can "catch sight of ourselves in the emptiness of the story that we've just come out of" (Murata 2018: 163).[49] Finally, our confidence in the previous formulation of Japanese ethics—that is, our faith in ourselves as *ningen* through the works of Watsuji, Yosano, or Raichō—can turn into a question mark.

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[1] This is Keneuiji Teppei's "Tower." For a concise and salient reflection on this artwork in the context of interpreting this story, see Saladin (2022: 116). Ronald Saladin, "Androids for the Stone Age? Individuality, Space, and Gender in Murata Sayaka's Convenience Store Women," *U.S-Japan Woman's Journal*, 66 (2022): 98-119.

[2] Alzate and Yoshio (2022) give an excellent critical analysis of the homogenization effect that this over-used expression, *kawaii*, achieves in Japanese. For this point in reference to Murata's earlier story *Vanishing World,* see Alzate and Yoshio (2022: 480). Juliana Buriticá Alzate and Hitomi Yoshio, "Reimagining the Past, Present, and the Future of Reproductive Bodies in Contemporary Japanese Women's Fiction: Mieko Kawakami's *Breasts and Eggs* and Sayaka Murata's *Vanishing World*" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Reproductive Justice and Literature*, ed. Beth Widmaier Capo and Laura Lzzari (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022), 465-88.

[3] Jaseel and Rashmi Gaur rightly point out that this decision on the title was not made by the author or the translator but by the publisher (Jaseel and Gaur 2022: 8). See Jaseel and Rashmi Gaur, "Precarity and Performativity in Post-Fordist Japanese Workplace: A Reading of Sayaka Murata's Convenience Store," *Rupkatha Journal* 14, no. 1 (2022): 1-11. Their article cites Murata's conversation with the translator. This can be found under: "Convenience Store Woman: Meet Author Sayaka Murata" (URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Eag3-URh2I; last accessed on July 18, 2025).

[4] Murata Sayaka, *Convenience Store Woman*, trans., Ginny Tapley Takemori (London: Granta, 2018). My references to the original terms are from the electronic version of Murata Sayaka, コンビニ人間 (Konbini ningen) (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 2016). It is important to note that the story uses the terms "onna" (女), "kanojo" (彼女), "mesu," and "yome" (嫁) which can be roughly translated as "women," "her" or "girlfriend," "female (of human species)" and "wife" respectively. They are all spoken from interlocutors' perspectives rather than Keiko's. For Saladin's analysis, see Saladin (2022: 104).

[5] This reductive translation from *ningen* to woman is indeed a good example of what the story is trying to show us about any human society. We always try to intersubjectively appropriate what is real in accord with myriads of our groundless social standards. There is strong evidence that Murata is much more interested in the question of what makes us "human" rather than "woman" with a caveat that they cannot be separated from each other in her view.

[6] This article does not deal with contemporary feminism that is developed after the 1970s. For an excellent reflection on Murata's engagement with feminist questions in her earlier work (which lays the foundation for the "gender free category of a human being" in the *Konbini Ningen*), see Specchio (2018: 95-102, 105-07). Anna Specchio, "Eutopizing the Dystopia. Gender Roles, Motherhood and Reproduction in Murata Sayaka's SATSUJIN SHUSSAN," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 1 (2018): 94-108.

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[7] For an overview of Watsuji's concept of aidagara, see Kyle M. J. Shuttleworth, "Watsuji Tetsurō's Confucian Bonds: From Totalitarianism to New Confucianism," in *Handbook of Confucianism in Modern Japan*, ed. Shaun O'Dwyer (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 140-52; and "Virtues and Ethics in Watsuji Tetsurō's Rinrigaku,' *Asian Philosophy* 30, no. 1 (2020): 57-64. The first article shows how the Confucian theory of five constancies constitutes Watsuji's understanding of "aidagara" as a kind of dynamic social roles that constitute our experience of being human (*ningen*). The second gives an exegesis of human relations that Watsuji refers to for defining aidagara in concrete terms. I recommend readers to read these articles if they are not familiar with the concept of aidagara or betweenness in Watsuji.

[8] The best description of this emptiness, contracted in modern subjectivity, can be found in Gianluca Sorrentino's elegant description of Keiko's life as being "preposterous and targeted to nothing" (Sorrentino 2020: 253). See, Gianluca Sorrentino, "Furukura Keiko: Konbini-Woman or Heroin of a Monstrified Japan? The Thousand Truths," *Kervan: International Journal of Afro-Asiatic Studies* 24, no. 1 (2020): 251-58.

[9] For a comparison of the convenience store to the Noh stage from a perspective of literary criticism, see Satō Yasutomo (2016: 179). Satō Yasutomo, "Suisō toshite no konbini: 'Konbini ningen' ron" (Convenience Store as an Aquarium: A Theory of Convenience Store Human), *Gunzō* 71, (2016): 175-83. Saladin's concise reflection on this analogy is to be found in Saladin (2022: 112). For a brilliant interpretation of Shiraha, see also Satō (2016: 182) and Saladin (2022: 114).

[10] Saladin observes that "Murata's novels envision a fictional world distinct from non-fictional Japan and its social structures. However, the dynamics of the convenience store in the *Convenience Store Women* that rule the fictitious society portrayed in the novels are fundamentally the same ones that rule contemporary Japanese society" (Saladin 2022: 100). This point is symbolically explained in this intertwining of the sacred/holy/trans-worldly and the worldly/mundane/normal "this world." There is an intricate reflection that maintains both strange difference and profound sameness between Murata's fictional world and readers' non-fictional "this world."

[11] Barbara E. Thornbury, "The Thirty-Something 'Tokyo Daughters' of Kawakami Hiromi's *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, Shibasaki Tomoka's *Spring Garden*, and Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store Woman*," *U.S.-Japan Women's Journal* 57 (2020): 57-77.

[12] She follows behavioural patterns that are considered to be appropriate by others but demonstrates no understanding of what they actually mean. This type of education would require students to memorize information and regurgitate it on the text. This only encourages the separation of the knower from the content of its knowledge. Garcia Chambers acutely points out that at this point, Keiko is no longer "a passive appreciator or 'sitting duck' but rather a keen participant-observer" (Chambers 2023: 50). Garcia Chambers, "Aesthetic Engagement and Soundscape: A Case of Convenience Store Woman, a Contemporary Japanese Story," *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* 1 (2023): 36-54.

[13] In this sense, Thornbury argues that "convenience stores are not grim repositories. They aim to delight their customers—and the best workers in the stores, like Keiko, know how this is accomplished" (Thornbury 2022: 72). In the same way, Chambers also argues that "the situation of a convenience store is indeed potentially ripe for the appreciative experience and not merely a place providing employment and everyday goods and services." Hence, for Keiko, "working at a convenience store as being both quantitatively and qualitatively sufficient: it provides not only a means of earning her living but also making a life" (Chambers 2023: 50).

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[14] This is also the way in which she claims at the end of the story that "she could hear the store's voice telling her what it wanted, and how it wanted to be" (Murata 2018: 160). Note also that this relation of waki and shite is bounced off to the relationship between the story and the readers. The story is devised as a stage in which we see an interaction of human beings which reflects our interrelating to ways of being in the world (betweenness).

[15] Murata is showing that betweenness in Watsuji (dialectical interrelation of parts and whole or the process of learning to become human through inter-relationality) is like getting an infection. Think for instance about reading this article as an academic. We certainly did not learn to do this by ourselves but by having a conversation with other academics, by reading/writing scholarly articles, and by speaking in the manner that looks for definition and clarity. This is how we learn to become an academic *ningen*. Murata's character basically shows that if this inter-relationality, that amounts to a specific social role (i.e., an academic in this case) is all there is to Watsuji's sense of being human, or if this is an aspect of *aidagara* as the way to become human through interaction or mimetic learning, then it's basically like infecting each other with good/bad habits. An academic virus with its drive towards a fixed definition and logical exactitude can prevent us from enjoying this comical comparison, driving us instead to treat it as a theoretical point of departure from Watsuji. I suggest not to treat this literary symbolism with our scholarly propensity towards theoretical thinking but as a way to rethink our reading of Watsuji (and literary texts) in academia.

[16] I do not think this critical stance to Watsujian ethics is valid if we look at Watsuji's oeuvre. If we pay attention to the theoretical foundation of *Rinrigaku* and the massive volumes on the intellectual history of Japanese ethics, we can see how Watsuji is making an inference from the descriptive towards the prescriptive. However, if we read the English translation of *Rinrigaku* alone, this is certainly the case.

[17] As Saladin points out, Keiko's is often described as being "out of step with the norms and values of the society she lives in" and that "mainstream societal norms and values seem completely incomprehensible to her" (Saladin 2022: 101). It is not that she has no understanding of any social norms. In fact, she understands how these norms function, and it is inaccurate to say that she does not understand any of them. What evades her comprehension, however, is the problem of why one betweenness is prioritized over the other, while all of them seem to have the same structure that is groundless in and of itself.

[18] For this interpretation of the scene, see Nicolae (2018: 54). See: Raluca Nicolae, "The Modern Shape-shifter Maiden in Sayaka Murata's Convenience Store Woman," *Dialogos* 35 (2018): 41-55. Although Saladin skips a few steps in his argument, he is absolutely right in saying that the convenience store in the story symbolizes the metaphysical space of cogito ergo sum." See Saladin (2022: 112); Murata (2018: 133).

[19] Shiraha is the one who reads the history of Japan and repeatedly talks about the fact that by reading back to the jōmon period (which is problematically translated as the Stone Age), he cannot find any other logic than the totalizing logic of a village mentality.

[20] This is Thornbury's elegant phrase in her comparative study of "Tokyo Daughters" from Kawakami Hiromi's *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, Shibasaki Tomoka's *Spring Garden*, and Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*. The scope of this article is limited to their relationship as unmarried adult daughters to their parents in the urban setting of Tokyo (Thornbury 2020: 58-9). This specific betweenness, however, is relatively thinner in the case of Keiko (unless it is reframed as her relation to the notion of motherhood): hence, unfortunately, the relationship between Keiko and her parents through her sister's "made up excuses" for working at the convenience store"

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does not give us much for understanding the great challenges that Murata's character poses in the context of Japanese philosophy.

[21] Thornbury makes a reference to Lynne Y. Nakano's study that pays attention to reality of being a woman of later 30s in Japan (Thornbury 2020: 61). Nakano's survey concludes that "a handful of women past their mid-thirties [in Tokyo] continued to hope for a future that included marriage and family as their primary source of meaning in life. Most women in this age group, however, realized that they did not want to or could not follow conventions to marry as expected by their parents, colleagues, and bosses" (Thornbury 2020: 174). This is quite different from what is dramatized in the story. See also Nakano's full study in "Single Women in Marriage and Employment Markets in Japan," *Capturing Contemporary Japan: Differentiation and Uncertainty*, ed. Satsuki Kawano, Glenda S. Roberts, and Susan Orpett Long (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 163-82.

[22] Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black,' " in *National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America*, ed. Antonio Gomez-Moriana and Mercedes Duran-Cogan (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30-66.

[23] This is Yusa Michiko's translation in her overview of the section entitled "Japanese Women Thinkers" in the *Sourcebook*. See, Yusa Michiko, "Women Philosophers: Overview," *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook,* ed. James W. Heisig, John C. Maraldo, and Thomas P. Kasulis (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 1115-26.

[24] Hiratsuka (1987: 42). See also Yosano (1985: 142-43).

[25] For example, it is easy to quit a job for a sick mother, but hard for her to abandon a child. We do prioritize some betweenness over others and yet it is not easy to have a fixed hierarchy.

[26] Thornbury realizes that there is something strange about this scene. Despite her interpretation, it portrays Keiko as overcoming her nihilism at the end of the story (Thornbury 2020: 74).

[27] Interestingly, Murata's description of the convenience store is quite different from what we experience as such in Japan. Their temperatures are often set very much too warm during the winter and too cold during the summer. There is a radical difference between inside and outside the store in Japanese climate. I am not entirely sure if Murata is dramatizing the neutrality of the space with her description of the set temperature. The basic feel of entering every Kombini is that it is the opposite of how we feel outside, but this story does not deal with the binary of the artificial store and the natural environment. Rather, by setting the store in an extremely urban setting, Murata is depicting it as a space that transcends nature.

[28] Raichō's reflection on the negative effect of urbanization (and the positive effect of living in rural Japan), see Hiratsuka (1987: 194).

[29] Pavone (2023) gives an excellent analysis of Keiko's lack of interest in food and how this "unhappy meal" is perceived in the context of the philosophy of body with a special focus on the notion of "immunity." See Chiara Pavone, "Spoiled Meals: Immunitary and Metabolic Imaginaries in Kawakami Mieko's 'Dreams of Love, etc.' and Murata Sayaka's Convenience Store Woman," *Literature After Fukushima: From Marginalised Voices to Nuclear Futurity*, ed. Linda Flores and Barbara Ceilhorn, (London: Routledge, 2023), 143-60.

[30] Tsukimi means to see and admire the beauty of the moon. This is a typical practice during autumn in Japan. The bowl usually has a drop of an egg that looks like a moon: hence, tsukimi udon, tsukimi soba, or even tsukimi burger at MacDonalds has an unscrambled egg in the dish.

[31] Murata Sayaka, "A Magnificent Spread," *Life Ceremony* (London: Granta, 2022).

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[32] For the connection between Watsujian ethics and Japanese feminism, see Shuttleworth (2020: 147-48).

[33] Kitagawa Sakiko, "A Women's Philosophy of Awareness," *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook,* ed. James W. Heisig, John C. Maraldo, and Thomas P. Kasulis (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 1126-136. For Raichō's process of self-negation, see Yusa and Kalmanson (2019: 615-16). They also give a very clear explanation of self-possession as a threefold dialectical process. For this point, see also Yusa and Kalmanson (2019: 619–21). Yusa Michiko and Leah Kalmanson, "Raichō: Zen and the Female Body in the Development of Japanese Feminist Philosophy." *Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy*, ed. Bret W. Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 613-30.

[34] See also Yosano (1985: 57-8).

[35] For the historical background of this idea in relation to the story, see Nicolae (2018: 44). In the larger feminist context of reproductive justice in Japan, see Alzate and Yoshio (2022: 465-66). For Raichō's critique of the feminine virtue (created by the society of men), see Hiratsuka (1987: 30, 155). Yosano echoes Raichō and other Japanese women thinkers regarding this point: see Yosano (1985: 46, 57, 147).

[36] This is the reason why Raichō always practiced meditations "when she found herself in a tight spot." See Yusa and Kalmanson (2019: 618).

[37] See also Yosano (1985: 207).

[38] For the young Hiratsuka, the man–woman division is the lower rung of human existence, and the point of self-awareness is to rise above these distinctions to arrive at the higher standpoint of non-discrimination.

[39] This argument takes place in the context of their famous discussion on the state protection of single mothers.

[40] Hiratsuka Raichō (1987: 108, 111, 129-30). Yosano gives a summary of the critiques made against her emphasis on the importance of women's economic independence in her "My Response to Ms. Hiratsuka, Ms. Yamakawa, and Ms. Yamada." See Yosano (1985: 219-36). For Yamakawa's critique, see Yosano (1985: 227-28).

[41] The English translation of this term is given as "Stone Age" which gives the impression that Shiraha is giving a grand universal argument for the legitimacy of inherent patriarchy of human civilisation (as we would expect from hypermasculine influencers that we observe in Europe and North America) but he is only referring to the history of Japan. Murata, in other words, is presenting him as a very localized and incredibly repressed version of toxic Japanese masculinity or a type of incel that is specific to the Japanese context in this story.

[42] See also Hiratsuka (1987: 131, 155, 170-71).

[43] In addition to her earlier statement that the ubiquitous "convenience store is not a grim repository," notice how Thornbury sees it as a safe space for Keiko to determine her authentic sense of self. Chambers follows this positive interpretation of the ending by applying Arnold Berleant's social aesthetics to the soundscape of the convenience store. She argues that "Keiko's experience of the store's soundscape unites, melts into continuities, and reaches a climax: occasioning joy, pleasures, meaning, beauty, wonder, and vulnerability" and that it is "fortuitously redeeming" (Chambers 2023: 51). This is diametrically opposed to Jaseel and Rashmi Gaur's interpretation that it is a "precarious space of crisis" (in Judith Butler's sense) and a monstrous "microcosm for the capitalist world after globalisation." Keiko symbolizes the "vulnerable working class in capitalist societies," which is "commodified and reduced to their functions" (Jaseel and Gaur 2022: 3). This is exactly how Shiraha responds to Keiko's transformation and many readers too cannot completely disagree with him.

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[44] Yosano argues that this emphasis on motherhood in Raichō (Ellen Key as well as Keiko's sister) endorses precisely the misogynistic structure of *ryōsai kenbo*. See Yosano (1985: 147).

[45] It is remarkable how Jaseel and Rashmi Gaur suddenly shift their critical opinion of Keiko as a servile animal to the "precarity" of part-time working condition in "modern [Japanese] life under capitalism" to "something delicately optimistic about [her] dark yet rebellious ending" (Jaseel and Gaur 2022: 7). They even go so far as to say, "Keiko's sheer satisfaction at her defiant act of breaking away from the scheming clutches of Shiraha and bidding farewell to societies' expectations of her for a nobler, altruistic cause inspire a different look at the ending" (Jaseel and Gaur 2022: 7). However, I do not see how these critics of global capitalism can possibly escape this contradiction. How could they accept her as who she is (as nothing but a part-time convenience store worker) while criticizing the overarching structure of capitalist realism that she embraces at the end of the story? Her individual resistance does not criticize the precarity caused by global capitalism. Then, far from a happy ending of a "deadpan comedy," they must wonder if Keiko's final transformation is a monstrous consequence of what they have criticized as post-Fordist global economy. I am aware that this statement is in direct contradiction with what I have said in the previous notes. But this contradiction must be embraced as the function of this story.

[46] This is the very moment in which Keiko, at least intellectually, reveals her individual facelessness and, in turn, the "placelessness" of the world.

[47] There is an interesting parallel between the relation of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and that of Keiko and Shiraha. Like Enkidu, the term, Shiraha, traditionally means a "sacrifice chosen by the divine" in Japanese. Keiko does come to realize who she is through her mutually beneficial living arrangement with Shiraha almost in the same way that Gilgamesh comes to realize his courage and mortality through his friendship with Enkidu (which does not rid him of his self-centeredness). Neither story gives us a determinate answer about the meaning of life but ends with an indeterminate *exitus reditus* through recurring suffering.

[48] Thornbury argues that Tokyo is "placeless," and that the convenience store gives Keiko a place to be who she is. Jaseel and Gaur argue that the convenience store is a microcosm of post-Fordist "placelessness." Then, naturally, there is no way for us to distinguish placelessness of Tokyo from any convenience store in Japan. Thus, we end up with no space that we can call *basho* or *aida* at the end of this story.

[49] See also Alzate and Yoshio (2022: 481). They also detect how Murata's "ambiguous and problematic ending leaves readers to question their own value systems by witnessing the full transformation of [the protagonist]." The major difference between "Vanishing World" and *Konbini ningen*, however, is that "a deconstructive analysis of the rhetoric of choice within the framework of reproductive justice" still leave the possibility of the world in which such a free reproductive choice is possible and meaningful; whereas the ending of the *Konbini ningen* deconstructs the entire logic of ethical decisions that make us human beings. Unlike the former, the latter tends to deconstruct not only feminist, but also (post-)humanist dreams.

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