

The Infrastructuralization of the Human in the Artificial Intelligence Era: Literary Ethics, Anticipatory Infrastructure, and the Transformation of Keiko in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*

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Abstract This paper reads Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman* not simply as a critique of social conformity or precarious labor, but as a literary text that invites sustained reflection upon how the human subject is ethically and affectively reorganized within what may be termed anticipatory infrastructure. Drawing on Nie Zhenzhao's framework of ethical literary criticism in conjunction with Sarah Pink's theorization of AI-anticipatory infrastructure, the paper argues that the transformation undergone by Keiko Furukura constitutes not a literal mechanization, but a gradual AI-ification, a process accomplished through scripting, classification, sensory synchronization, and infrastructural belonging. The childhood scenes establish Keiko's constitutive misalignment with tacit social ethics, while the convenience store functions as a narrow yet explicitly codified moral order in which ambiguity is reduced. The store's soundscape, manualized labor, and classificatory logic governing its operations train Keiko toward a mode of anticipatory responsiveness, and the scene of confrontation with Shiraha, subsequently reveals that this alignment extends beyond the pragmatic into the ontological. By placing literary ethics, infrastructure studies, and existing Murata in productive dialogue, the paper contends that the novel's unsettling force resides in its compulsion to recognize that the very system which diminishes the subject may simultaneously serve as that subject's condition of protection. Ultimately, *Convenience Store Woman* anticipates a condition in which relief from social invisibility and the reduction of human life occur not in succession but in concert—a condition that becomes increasingly thinkable as human beings grow ever more readable,

classifiable, and operationally tractable.

Keywords AI-ification; ethical literary criticism; anticipatory infrastructure; Sayaka Murata; *Convenience Store Woman*(*Konbini Ningen*)

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Introduction

This paper proposes to read Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*(*Konbini Ningen*) not merely as a critique of social conformity or precarious labor, but as a literary inquiry into how the human subject is ethically and affectively reorganized within anticipatory infrastructure. Prior scholarship has already established a substantial critical foundation for such a reading. Hong Yun-Pyo interprets the convenience store as a condensed sign of neoliberal polarization (215-239), while Yu Jae-jin interprets Keiko as a figure who discloses the exhaustion of the modern autonomous self (243-258). Lee Sang-hyuk, in turn, situates Murata's fiction within the vertigo of performative subjectivity (201-232), and Jeehyung Lee shows how the novel's ethics emerge through disgust, uncanny identity, and bodily-material entanglement of the convenience-store human (199-235). Linda M. Flores and Garcia Chambers further illuminate the store as a heterotopian and acoustic environment in which space, sound, and sensuous reciprocity shape Keiko's mode of being (Flores 710-727; Chambers 36-54). Building on these pre-discussions while shifting the emphasis, this paper argues that the novel stages the gradual AI-ification of a human subject: a process accomplished not through the insertion of machinery into the body, but through repetition, scripting, optimization, and ethical simplification.

At the center of this paper stand two theoretical orientations. The first is Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism, which understands literature as a mode of ethical expression and holds that characters must be read within the ethical environments that shape their choices, relations, and forms of life¹. The second is Sarah Pink's theorization of AI and the futures turn, which conceives of AI as an

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," 383-398; Nie Zhenzhao. *Criticism of Literary Ethics*.

anticipatory infrastructure that organizes methods, expectations, and orientations toward possible futures (1-20). Read in conjunction, these two frameworks reveal the convenience store to be something more than a mere workplace but as a system for training futurity: a space that simultaneously furnishes Keiko with a stable ethical order and prepares her for a life compatible with the operations of machines. The novel's central question therefore no longer rests with Keiko appears socially aberrant. It becomes, rather, a question about what kind of world most readily rewards a being who has grown ever readable, classifiable, and operational, and what is lost in the process of becoming that being.

Plot Overview and Ethical Reading of the Novel

Before turning to the paper's more substantive theoretical arguments, it is necessary to provide a brief account of the narrative structure of Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*. The novel centers on Keiko Furukura, a thirty-six-year-old single woman who has worked part-time at the same convenience store since she was eighteen. From the perspective of her family, peers, and society at large, Keiko's life appears to fall outside the normative trajectory expected of adulthood. Lacking a husband, children, and a conventional full-time career, she is repeatedly regarded as an incomplete being, someone not yet fully realized in social terms. Yet the narrative makes clear from the outset that Keiko herself does not primarily experience her life through the categories imposed by others. What matters to Keiko is not the prescribed sequence of social achievement, but rather the degree to which a given environment offers her a sense of intelligibility, rhythm, and a viable mode of being.

The novel's narrative unfolds around the tension between social expectation and ontological belonging. Keiko has long sustained herself through the meticulous observation of others, borrowing their expressions and mannerisms, mimicking socially permissible forms of behavior. When she encounters Shiraha, another peripheral figure within the convenience store — the narrative appears, momentarily, to shift toward the familiar arc of correction and reintegration. It seems, perhaps, that cohabitation, or at least the outward form of domestic normalcy, might offer Keiko a pathway back to society's norm. Murata, however, swiftly subverts this expectation. Keiko's life with Shiraha does not lead her toward ordinary social fulfillment. Rather, it renders all the more sharply apparent that social normalcy is, for her, nothing more than a script — one that can only ever be performed externally and provisionally. By the novel's close, she does not recover into normative adulthood. Instead, she returns to the convenience store with renewed certainty, reaffirming her conviction that it is within that structured environment that she can

exist most consistently. In this sense, the narrative traces not a movement from deviance to normality, but a process of gradually clarifying which world Keiko is able to continue inhabiting.

This narrative arc becomes fully intelligible only when due attention is paid to the childhood scenes positioned at the novel's opening. These moments are not incidental vignettes inserted for eccentric effect. Rather they function as the ethical point of entry into the work. They reveal that Keiko's later gravitation toward the convenience store is not accidental but rooted in an earlier confrontation with the implicit moral expectations of everyday life. Murata presents young Keiko in the following way:

I was a child that people found a bit strange.

For example, when I was in kindergarten, a small bird—likely a pet—was found dead in the park. It was a beautiful blue bird with its neck twisted and eyes closed. The other children cried as they gathered around it.

“What should we do...?” one girl said.

Immediately, I picked up the bird and brought it to my mother, who was chatting on a bench nearby.

“What is it, Keiko? Oh, a little bird... I wonder where it flew from... Poor thing. Shall we make a grave for it?”

My mother gently stroked my head and spoke kindly. But I replied, “Let's eat it.”

“Dad likes grilled chicken, so let's cook this and eat it tonight.”

Thinking she hadn't heard me, I repeated it clearly. My mother recoiled in horror. The other mothers stared, eyes, noses, and mouths wide open. Their faces looked so funny I almost laughed. But as they all stared at my hand, I thought, “Ah, one bird isn't enough.”

“Should I go get more?” (*Convenience Store Woman* 12)

What makes this scene significant lies in the fact that Keiko's response is not random, confused, or cognitively inconsistent. Quite the contrary, it follows a rigorously coherent internal logic: if it is dead, it may be cooked; if it may be cooked, it may therefore be eaten. The discomfort generated by this moment does not arise from absence of reason, but from an absence of shared ethical mediation. The other children experience the bird as an object of compassion, loss, and collective sadness. Keiko encounters it as an object available for practical use. The gap between these responses cannot be reduced to a difference in intelligence. Rather, it suggests a difference at the level of moral orientation, affective

engagement, and a sense of ethical proportion.

It is precisely at this juncture that Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism provides a productive supplementary framework. Nie defines ethical literary criticism as a method that "approaches literary works and their authors from the perspective of ethics" and emphasizes the need to examine "the ethical values in a given work with reference to a particular historical context" (Nie, "Towards" 84). He further argues that the aim of such criticism is "to uncover ethical factors" and "the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works," thereby illuminating "the characters and their actions from an ethical perspective" (Nie, "Towards" 84).

Viewed through this framework, what makes Keiko's response to the dead bird significant is not merely its peculiarity, but the way it reveals a misalignment between individual cognition and a collectively shared ethical environment. The adults are not disturbed simply because she says the wrong thing; rather, they react because the event has already been structured within a shared ethical context—one organized around pity, mourning, and communal recognition. Keiko's response exposes her inability to interpret that ethical environment. In this sense, the scene dramatizes precisely what Nie identifies as literature's function: the exposure of ethical factors shaping human action and the differentiation of responses within a common moral situation. Murata repeats this pattern in a second childhood scene: brief, yet one that is perhaps more direct in terms of action:

Things like this happened often.

When I had just entered elementary school, two boys got into a physical fight during gym class.

"Someone get a teacher!"

"Somebody stop them!"

As screams rose around me, I thought, "Ah, we're supposed to stop them."

I opened the equipment box nearby, pulled out a shovel, and ran toward the boys, hitting one on the head.

Everyone screamed. The boy clutched his head and fell to the ground.
(*Convenience Store Woman* 14)

Here, too, the issue does not lie in Keiko's inability to process language. She understands the command "stop them" and responds with decisiveness and efficiency. Yet this is precisely where the problem arises. She does not apprehend the utterance as socially embedded appeal, regulated by moral convention, but processes it

as a direct operational instruction. An ordinary speaker would understand such a cry within a field of implicit ethical assumptions: that one should intervene, but proportionately; that violence must be stopped, but not by means of greater violence; that one ought to seek help, mediate, or call for an adult. Keiko bypasses this entire process of ethical mediation. She hears the command, recognizes the task, and executes the most immediate solution available. In other words, the issue is not irrationally, but ethical dissonance.

Here again, Nie's framework offers a productive account. If ethical literary criticism attends to the ways in which literary texts illuminate the moral environment and the pressures they place upon human conduct, these scenes reveal that Keiko's fundamental difficulty lies not in cognition as such, but in ethical choice and proportionality. As Nie writes, ethical literary criticism "seeks to illuminate issues concerning the events, the characters and their actions from an ethical perspective, and to make an ethical judgment about them accordingly" (Nie, "Towards" 84). What Murata's novel brings into view is a protagonist who is capable of thinking, responding, and acting improvisationally—yet who cannot voluntarily enter into the implicit ethical attunement that constitutes ordinary social life. Her difference is therefore not merely psychological. It is also a difference in the capacity to translate perception into socially proportioned response.

The particular importance of these childhood episodes lies in how they preclude any reading Keiko's later life in the convenience store as merely economic or incidental. The novel carefully prepares the ground for understanding that Keiko has long been in collision with environments that demand real-time ethical interpretation. Open-ended social situations require the reading of register, context, feeling, hierarchy, and unspoken expectation. In such situations, Keiko's failure, however, does not stem from passivity. Rather, it arises because the range of possible meanings is too wide, and the correct ethical calibration too unstable. What she lacks is not energy or intelligence, but a reliable participation in the implicit moral codes that others take for granted.

It is for this reason that the convenience store's subsequent hold over Keiko becomes narratively legible even prior to any theoretical elaboration. What makes the convenience store significant is that it promises a world in which correct conduct no longer depends on an endless process of intuitive interpretation. Instead, it offers procedures, formulas, fixed phrases, routines, and externally legible standards. At this stage, there is no need to elevate the convenience store into a fully articulated theoretical concept. It is enough to recognize that the plot has already prepared it as a space of relative ethical stability. For a subject like Keiko, whose early life is

marked by repeated friction with the demands of spontaneous moral judgment, such a space presents itself not merely as convenient, but as ontologically necessary.

When read together, the plot overview and the childhood scenes bring the ethical foundation of the novel into sharper focus. Keiko's later adaptation cannot be understood simply as social conformity or economic necessity. Rather, it is rooted in a prolonged history of ethical misalignment and a compensatory reliance on externally available models of behavior. Murata's opening does more than introduce an eccentric protagonist. It establishes the ethical conditions under which Keiko's subsequent attachment to the convenience store becomes both intelligible and disturbing. The following section will build on this foundation by examining more closely how the convenience store, as a structured environment, reorganizes action, attention, and subjectivity.

The Convenience Store as Sensory Anticipatory Infrastructure

If the earlier childhood episodes establish Keiko's estrangement from the tacit ethical codes of ordinary social life, the convenience store presents an altogether different order. It is not a world organized by moral ambiguity, but one in which ambiguity is reduced, perception is trained, and responses is progressively pre-structured. In this sense, the convenience store does not merely offer Keiko employment; it provides an environment that replaces the burden of ethical improvisation with patterned sensory cues and operational rhythms. Murata renders this with vividness through a sustained attention to sound. Instead of presenting the convenience store first as a social institution or a site for labor, she presents it as an immersive acoustic world, one that reaches Keiko not through abstract concepts but through repetition, timing, and the body. At this precise point, the novel suggests that human subjectivity can be reorganized by infrastructural conditions even prior to the explicit emergence technological apparatus. Earlier studies of *Convenience Store Woman* have already emphasized labor, social recognition, gender, and the sensory or auditory atmosphere of the store, and those discussions provide an important foundation for the present reading¹. However, the soundscape of the convenience store becomes even more revealing when it is read through the combined lenses of anticipatory infrastructure and ethical literary criticism. Bringing together Pink's account of artificial intelligence as anticipatory infrastructure oriented toward possible futures (1-20), Larkin's emphasis on the sensory life of infrastructure (327-343), and Nie's attention to the ethical conditions that shape human response, the

1 See Linda M. Flores, pp. 710-727; Garcia Chambers, pp. 36-54; Yun-Pyo Hong, pp. 215-239; Jae-jin Yu, pp. 243-258.

convenience store begins to appear not simply as a workplace, but as a training environment that reformats conduct at the threshold of perception and action¹.

Murata writes:

The convenience store is filled with sound. The chime that rings when customers enter, the idol's voice from the in-store broadcast advertising new products, the calls of the staff, and the sound of scanning barcodes. The sound of items being placed in baskets, the crinkling of bread bags, and the clicking of heels walking around the store. All of these mix together and become 'the sound of the convenience store,' constantly touching my eardrums.

When a bottle from the shelf is sold, I lift my face at the small rolling sound—kararara—as another bottle slides forward from the back. Because many customers pick up cold drinks last before heading to the register, my body reacts automatically to that sound. When I confirm that the woman holding mineral water is still browsing desserts and not yet heading to the register, I return my gaze to my hands. (*Convenience Store Woman* 7)

The importance of this scene lies in how it marks decisive transition from ethical interpretation to sensory synchronization. The convenience store is no longer a site in which Keiko performs labor; it becomes an environment that continuously calibrates her attention, distributes significance, and structures the timing of her bodily responses. Every sound in the passage is both descriptive and directive. The chimes, the broadcast, the scanners, the rustle of packaging, and the rhythm of footsteps do not simply produce atmosphere. They function as signals. Keiko is not an observer who interprets first and then decides. She is already operating within the logic. Her auditory perception is tuned to detect tiny infrastructural changes, such as the rolling replacement of a single plastic bottle, and her body is prepared to respond before reflective thought fully intervenes. The phrase "my body reacts automatically" emerges as one of the most consequential formulations in the novel. It signals the moment at which the subject begins to move from ethical deliberation toward procedural responsiveness. In literary terms, Murata is not simply portraying a diligent worker. She is depicting a body that has become increasingly legible to infrastructure and increasingly governed by its cues.

The significance of this scene becomes even clearer when read alongside Sarah Pink's discussion of artificial intelligence and the futures turn. Pink argues

1 See Nie, Zhenzhao, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism," pp. 83-101; Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," pp. 383-398.

that artificial intelligence should be understood not only as a technology for solving present problems, but also as an “anticipatory infrastructure” (3) that organizes methods, expectations, and orientations toward possible futures. In her formulation, anticipatory infrastructures do not passively support life in the present; rather, it actively prepares subjects in advance, aligning them with mores of action that will later be required, imagined, or rewarded. Pink further describes artificial intelligence as an “anticipatory infrastructure for speculative imaginaries” (12) and elsewhere as a medium that opens “new sites for discussion, dialogue, and contestation concerning possible futures” (16). Although Murata’s novel predates contemporary generative AI discourse, Pink’s model is strikingly apt for interpreting it. The convenience store is anticipatory not because it predicts the future in any spectacular science-fiction sense, but because it prepares Keiko to inhabit a world in which readiness, repeatability, sensitivity to signals, and immediate operational alignment are paramount. The store trains her how to anticipate demand, how to register patterns before they crystalize into commands, and how to minimize the interval between stimulus and response. By the time any given action is consciously formulated, her body is already in motion. In this respect, Keiko is not simply disciplined by the store; she is preconditioned by it. The store teaches her how to anticipate demand, how to sense patterns before they become commands, and how to minimize the interval between stimulus and response. Pink’s argument therefore allows us to see that Murata’s convenience store is not only a workplace but a future-training system.

Brian Larkin’s account of infrastructure deepens this reading further. Larkin emphasizes that infrastructure is not merely a technical system of circulation but also something that “generates the ambient environment of everyday life” (328). He further argues that infrastructures “exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning” and must be analyzed as “concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles” (329). This insight is particularly resonant here, because Keiko’s relation to the convenience store is not exhausted by labor discipline or economic necessity. She experiences the store as a total environment. Sound is one of the mediators through which infrastructure is rendered intimate. The convenience store does not simply instruct her what to do; it produces a world in which action feels natural, continuous, and almost bodily inevitable. The description that sound persistently brushes against the eardrum is crucial in this regard. The infrastructure is not intermittent; it endures like a background condition. It does not issue a command and then withdraw. It remains present as a field of low-level cues that organize perception over time. In this sense, Murata captures something essential about

infrastructural life: its power lies not only in visible systems or explicit rules, but in the daily repetitions through which human subjects gradually come to feel at ease within a particular form of regulation.

Chambers's analysis of the novel's auditory aesthetic sharpens this point even further. Chambers argues that the store's soundscape produces sensuous social qualities such as acceptance, sensuousness, and reciprocity, and that Keiko's attachment to the store cannot be understood apart from this social-auditory (36-54). This observation forecloses any reduction of the store's sounds to mere mechanical background. The acoustic world of the convenience store is not only disciplinary; it is affectively inhabitable. It offers Keiko a form of belonging that ordinary social interaction has repeatedly withheld from her — though it is belonging of a highly particular kind. It is not generated through open-ended ethical exchange, but through patterned recognition within a tightly regulated environment. In this sense, the convenience store teaches Keiko to hear it in such a way that it simultaneously constructs a structure through which it can hear her. It is partly this reciprocity that renders the environment felt as stability rather than constraint. At the same time, however, that very pattern, its rhythmic, its repeatability, reorganizes human responsiveness into an increasingly narrower channel. What Keiko gains is a fit between body and system; what is reduced is the space for hesitation, ambiguity, and non-programmatic affect.

It is here that Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism proves useful once more, functioning not as the primary theoretical engine, but as a clarifying frame. Nie maintains that literature reveals the ethical environments through which human beings act, choose, and are judged, and that ethical criticism should attend to the conditions under which moral response becomes possible or foreclosed¹. Read in this light, the soundscape Murata constructs is not ethically neutral. It matters because it changes the very conditions under which Keiko responds to the world. By substituting the unstable surplus of everyday social life into legible signals, the convenience store reduces the need for spontaneous ethical interpretation. Keiko no longer must infer what response is expected amid the entanglements of tone, gesture, and affect. The environment has already encoded answers into rhythm, repetition, and sequence. In this respect, the store does not abolish ethics. Rather, it compresses ethics into usefulness, timing, accuracy, and smooth circulation. What emerges is not an absence of order, but a diminished order — one in which ethical

1 See Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," pp. 383-398; Nie Zhenzhao, *Criticism of Literary Ethics*; Nie, Zhenzhao, "Towards an Ethical Literary Criticism," pp. 83-101.

complexity has been translated into operational clarity.

This point also clarifies why the convenience store provides Keiko with such a profound sense of relief. In the childhood episodes discussed earlier, she fails not because of her incapacity to think, but from an inability to reliably read the implicit ethical surplus demanded by ordinary social situations. The convenience store, however, reduces this surplus. It substitutes the unstable ambiguity of human affect with a dense but legible signal network: sound, procedure, and repetition render the world readable. The convenience store, in effect, resolves the problem of ethical opacity by translating it into operational clarity. What might appear, from the outside, as constraint is experienced by her as shelter. Yet the shelter is ethically far from simple. What appears as comfort is also a form of reduction. The convenience store enables Keiko to act effectively, but only by narrowing the range within which she must interpreted, feel, and engage in moral negotiated. Here Murata's novel converges with the concerns of both Pink and Nie: Environments oriented toward the future derive enabling force from the reduction of uncertainty; yet it is precisely through this reduction also risks reformatting the human subject into a mode centered on pre-structured responsiveness.

This scene must not, therefore, be treated as mere atmosphere or background description. It is one of the novel's most incisive stagings of gradual "AI-ification" of the human. Keiko does not become machine-like through literal insertion of technology, nor in any crude sense does she become a robot. Instead, she is trained into a mode of being in which sensory input optimizes response without delay of interpretation. The passage from hearing to acting becomes increasingly frictionless. Her body becomes predictive, signal-responsive, and system-compatible. It is precisely for this reason that the convenience store must be understood as an anticipatory infrastructure in the fullest sense. It does not simply manage the present. It cultivates the kind of human who can inhabit a future governed by readiness, efficiency, and operational legibility. In this respect, Murata's novel suggests that age of artificial intelligence need not arrive solely through the spectacular emergence of grand new machines; it may equally emerge through mundane environments that quietly train humans to live as constituent components of a system that continuously processes them — without their ever fully registering the transformation.

AI-ification as Scripted Life and Its Ethical Trajectories: Language, Classification, the Store

The novel's anticipation of AI age subjectivity becomes most legible when we

read together its concern with scripts, classification, bodily adaptation, and ethical survival. Keiko is not a character who sustains herself through the expression of some authentic inner self. Rather, she maintains her social existence by replicating and recombining the linguistic patterns, gestures, and affective responses of those around her. She listens to her colleagues' ways of speaking, retains appropriate tones, and learns responsive formulas to predictable questions. For Keiko, social life does not arrive as spontaneous belonging, but as a form of executable codes. Her identity begins to operate more as a sequence of procedures. Murata's novel does not merely satirize social conformity. It offers a deeper literary exploration of how a human subject may come to inhabit life through protocols. The process is not abrupt but gradual—and is precisely this gradualness that renders it so unsettlingly intelligible.

This is why language assumes a decisive importance in the novel. For Keiko, speech is less a medium of spontaneous self-expression than an instrument of calibration. She studies the tone, phrasing, and rhythm of other women, and memorizes acceptable responses designed to minimize friction. Outside the convenience store, the explanations her sister prepares on her behalf serve as templates that enable her to pass through social interaction without disruption. What reaches Keiko, then, is not simply society, but a society that represents itself in the form of repeatable commands. Social life appears as a matter of formatted input and appropriate output. In this respect, the novel anticipates a world in which human beings do not become literally robotic but gradually proceduralize themselves to meet machinic expectations—not through sudden transformation, but through an incremental self-formatting, so quiet it barely registers as transformation at all.

It is here that Bowker and Star's account of classification systems proves pertinent. They argue that classification systems do not neutrally record reality; rather, they organize experience and shape what can appear as socially intelligible subjects. As they note, "To classify is human" (Bowker and Star 1) and such classificatory practices permeate everyday life. They further emphasize that "each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another" (Bowker and Star 5). The convenience store manual performs precisely this function. It prescribes correct ways of greeting, appropriate timing, the proper smile, the orientation of the body, the modulation of affect, and the sequencing of actions. It does not simply instruct efficient labor practices; it first constitutes an admissible worker's body. Keiko's success within the store is therefore not the realization of an authentic individuality, but the product of successful classification. She becomes socially manageable because she is operationally legible. The manual translates

uncertainty into rules and ambiguity into form. It reduces interpretive excess and rewards procedural conformity.

Yet to read this purely as oppression is insufficient. What makes Keiko such a compelling literary figure is precisely that she actively desires this structure. The manual does not only confine her; it relieves her. In ordinary social life, she cannot reliably infer the hidden pressures embedded in everyday in language: the normative demands surrounding career, marriage, reproduction, normality, and adulthood. A question such as ‘Why are you still working at a convenience store?’ is not a simple request for information; it functions in effect as a pressure—why have you not yet moved into the script of a socially recognizable adulthood? Because Keiko cannot stably decode these implicit demands, everyday life constitutes for her a space of chronic ethical instability. The convenience store, by contrast, reduces that instability. Within it, she is not required endlessly infer how warm, how empathetic, how normal she must appear at any given moment. The answer is already codified.

At this juncture, ethical literary criticism offers an important supplementary line of analysis. The value of Nie Jinzhao's framework lies not in its displacement of other theoretical approaches, but in its reminder that literary characters must be interpreted within the ethical environment that organizes the forms of their choices, conflicts, and adaptations. For Nie, literature repeatedly stages the tensions that arise when ethical order, ethical identity, and lived desire fail to coincide. Keiko's case exemplifies such tension. It the kind of difficulty that arises when the world's rules feel overwhelming, hard to comprehend, or even hostile to her. Her difficulty is not simply a matter of psychological oddity. It is an ethical difficulty of inhabiting a world whose dominant codes remain obscure, excessive, or hostile to her. It is narrow, procedural, and repetitive, yet simultaneously remarkably explicit and reassuring. Keiko's attachment to it reveals how strongly a subject may be drawn toward systems that simplify ethical life, even at the cost of self-diminishment. This ethical alignment becomes most explicit in the confrontation scene with Shiraha. The passage deserves sustained attention:

Shiraha dragged me onto the road and yelled at me.

“I can hear the voice of the convenience store.”

Shiraha's eyes filled with horror as he heard my words. The pale, thin skin on his face wrinkled as if it had been crushed.

But I didn't back down.

“The voice of the convenience store is flowing through my body and won't stop. I was born to hear this voice.”

“I’ve realized—I am more than just a human being. I am a convenience store worker. Even if

I am human, even if I die of hunger because I have nothing to eat, I can’t escape it. Every cell in my body exists for the convenience store.” (...)

“You’re insane. The world won’t forgive a creature like that. It goes against the rules of the village!”(...)

“I can’t go with you. I am an animal called a convenience store worker. To betray that instinct—that’s not allowed!” (*Convenience Store Woman* 158-59)

This utterance is not simply an eccentric outburst. It is the novel’s most concentrated statement of infrastructural identity. Keiko does not say that she enjoys working at the convenience store, or that she happens to be skilled at it. She says something more radical. The category of “convenience store worker” has become the fundamental form organizing her existence. “Human” no longer functions as the unconditional superordinate category. Instead, it is displaced by an infrastructural role. Keiko feels the voice of the convenience store flowing through her body and declares that every cell of her being exists for the convenience store. This is the language of total alignment. The body is no longer employed by the system; it is reimagined through the it.

What is significant is that this alignment is not presented as mere passive submission. Keiko speaks with force, insistence, even conviction. There is, alongside loss, a kind of exhilaration. The scene is ethically difficult because it cannot be dismissed as a language of pure victimhood. The convenience store provides Keiko what the wider social repeatedly withheld. Namely: legibility, rhythm, and temporary exemption from relentless moral shame. Outside the convenience store, she is judged as delayed, deficient, strange. Inside it, she becomes functional, necessary, and precise. Murata’s critique is therefore more unsettling than a simple critique of labor discipline. The very structure that diminishes Keiko’s simultaneously also protects her. The same system that reduces her to function simultaneously shields her from interpretive violence.

At this point, Sarah Pink’s concept of anticipatory infrastructure becomes highly productive. Pink argues that AI can function as an anticipatory infrastructure through which institutions and researchers “imagine possible futures and possible foresight solutions.” (3) Read in this light, the convenience store is not only a site of labor but a future-training apparatus. It teaches Keiko which body is sustainable, which speech articulates without friction, and which identities remain operational under pressure. It habituates her into a mode of existence that anticipates AI-age

life: responsive, formatted, efficient, classifiable, and increasingly detached from the interpretive surplus of human relationality. Her transformation is therefore not retrospective diagnosis but a forward-oriented rehearsal.

The contrast with Shiraha makes the ethical direction of this transformation even sharper. On the surface, Shiraha appears far more directly resistant to social norms than Keiko. He refuses labor, derides social institutions, and openly displays contempt for norms of reproduction and economic participation. Yet his supposed resistance is fundamentally compromised. He remains perpetually occupied with the very structures he claims to despise: marriage, hierarchy, social legitimacy, and patriarchal recognition. His resentment remains tethered to the village logic he denounces. Keiko, by contrast, relinquishes the fantasy of external sovereignty and chooses infrastructural belonging. Where Shiraha exhibits resentful non-conformity, Keiko exhibits adaptive operationalization. Murata romanticize neither strategy. One collapses into bitterness; the other into function.

Shiraha's cry, "The world won't forgive a creature like that. It goes against the rules of the village!" is especially revealing. The word 'village' condenses the novel's social order into a quasi-tribal moral regime. What Shiraha articulates in horror is not merely personal disgust, but the social law that defines what constitutes an intelligible being. Keiko becomes terrifying to him because she can no longer be read through recognizable categories — woman, partner, ordinary social deviant. She identifies instead with an infrastructural species: "an animal called a convenience store worker." This phrase constitutes one of the novel's most striking acts of reclassification. What is at stake here is not the human/animal distinction, but the emergence of a new operational creature, one organized not by nature but by labor-system instinct.

Here, Nie's framework can be deployed with precision and restraint. Nie argues that literature frequently stages ethical identity not as a stable possession but as something formed, tested, and transformed through conflict. Keiko's final declaration should therefore be read as an ethical self-definition produced under pressure. She does not simply confess dependence; she is naming the order to which she belongs. Yet Murata leaves that naming ambivalent. The order Keiko embraces is clear, but that clarity is only possible at the cost of narrowing the scope of life. Her identity achieves stability only by becoming partial. She finds a place but relinquishes the breadth of interpretation in exchange. It is this very tension—between livability and reduction, shelter and diminishment—that renders the ethically acute.

Other strands of scholarship on *Convenience Store Woman* further extend

this interpretation. Studies that emphasize precarity, gender performance, social polarization, or the crisis of the modern self are all relevant because they remind us that Keiko's transformation occurs under historically specific pressures¹. She does not turn to the convenience store in a social vacuum. In a world where labor, family, and gendered adulthood monopolize the pathways to recognition, the convenience store emerges as an alternative institution precisely because other routes are hostile or violently inhospitable. AI-ification is therefore not a private psychological quirk, but a structured survival strategy in response to social exclusion.

At the same time, the novel refuses to end as a simple diagnosis. Keiko's declaration has the force of submission and, simultaneously, the force of decision. She refuses Shiraha's route. Yet she does not refuse the village by inventing a liberated sovereign self outside all structure. Rather, she refuses it by choosing the structure in which she can live. This is why the novel remains, to the end, unsettling. There is no utopian outside here. The available forms of life are already infrastructural. Human beings must inhabit something. Murata's achievement lies in extending the question beyond whether systems dominate us, but why some systems become more bearable than ordinary humanity.

Thus, the novel's vision of AI-ification should be understood not as an event which machines replace humans, but as the gradual reconfiguration of human life into mechanically compatible patterns of language, classification, responsiveness, and self-understanding. Keiko does not become artificial-intelligence-like by ceasing to be human; rather, she becomes artificial-intelligence-like because her humanity is reorganized around operational fitness. Murata's novel ultimately anticipates a future in which scripts are not external device that assists the self, but the very medium through which the self survives. It is precisely this anticipatory convergence of ethical relief, infrastructural discipline (Adey et al. 1-17), and procedural identity that *Convenience Store Woman* becomes the urgent work it is today.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Convenience Store Woman* must be read not merely as a critique of social conformity or precarious labor, but as a literary exploration of how human subjectivity is ethically reorganized within anticipatory infrastructures. When Nie Jinzhao's literary ethical criticism and Sarah Pink's concept of anticipatory infrastructure are brought together, Keiko's transformation becomes legible not as pathological deviance or simple satire, but as a gradual AI-ification accomplished

1 See Yun-Pyo Hong, pp. 215-239; Jae-jin Yu, pp. 243-258; Linda M. Flores, pp. 710-727.

through scripting, classification, sensory synchronization, and infrastructural belonging.

The novel presents Keiko as a figure ethically misaligned with everyday social norms. The childhood scenes demonstrate that her behavior does not arise from cruelty, but from an inability to intuitively apprehend shared ethical codes. This ethical dissonance, as Nie's framework helps clarify, is not simply individual abnormality but a mismatch between ethical subject and ethical environment. The convenience store then appears as an alternative ethical order. It provides explicit rules, repeatable scripts, and stable evaluative criteria. In doing so, it reduces ambiguity and offers Keiko a livable structure. Her attachment to the store thus emerges not from blind conformity but from the search for ethical intelligibility.

At the same time, the store functions as an anticipatory infrastructure. As Pink suggests, infrastructures orient subjects toward future possibilities and reorganize everyday conduct. The convenience store in Murata's novel trains Keiko into procedural responsiveness, sensory attunement, and operational identity. Her speech becomes scripted, her body synchronizes with rhythms of the store, and her sense of self stabilizes within a classificatory order. This transformation is not technological but infrastructural. Keiko does not become a machine; she becomes a human being increasingly compatible with systems of mechanical coordination.

The confrontation with Shiraha most clearly reveals this process. Keiko's declaration—"every cell in my body exists for the convenience store" (*Convenience Store Woman* 159)—marks the moment when an infrastructural role supersedes abstract human identity. Yet the novel does not treat this simply as a tragedy. The very system that diminishes her also protects her. It is precisely in refusing to flatten this ambivalence that literary ethical criticism finds its significance. Murata's narrative asks not only how systems exert control, but also why certain systems can come to be experienced as a form of mercy.

Ultimately, *Convenience Store Woman* anticipates a condition of the AI age in which human beings increasingly reorganize themselves around procedural clarity, classification, and infrastructural belonging. Keiko's Alification is not a dystopian fantasy, but a trajectory already legible in the present. Murata's novel invites reflection on the fact that becoming operationally legible may offer relief from social ambiguity, while at the same time narrowing the scope of human life. The task of ethical literary criticism, then, is not to condemn or celebrate such transformation, but to hold open the tension between survival and diminishment. In this sense, *Convenience Store Woman* becomes a profound meditation on how humans may inhabit technological modernity without fully understanding the ethical

cost of becoming readable, classifiable, and operational beings.

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