

Furukura Keiko:

Konbini-Woman or Heroin of a Monstrified Japan? The Thousand Truths

Review article of:

Murata Sayaka 村田沙耶香. 2016. *Konbini ningen* コンビニ人間. Tōkyō 東京: Bungeishunjū 文藝春秋. 151 pages. ISBN 9784163906188. Price: 1,300 YEN.

Reading Murata Sayaka's *Konbini ningen* (*Convenience Store Woman*: 2018)¹ poses different challenges, due to the fact that every perspective of life as well as every view on facts developing under the eyes of the reader can open up confused horizons. The successful writer acquired international fame with her 2003 novel *Ju'nyū*² (*Breastfeeding*), followed by *Konbini ningen* in 2016. Translated into Italian by the flourishing pen of Gianluca Coci,³ this novel unveils the manifold truths that appear to flutter around men and women in the Twenty-First Century. In the event that truth does really exist, the novel invites not to drive it into a labyrinth of habits and norms. An effort that Furukura Keiko takes all along the plot. Norms and rules put such high a pressure in a hugely hierarchical society like the Japan described by Murata Sayaka that no room for complacency is allowed for weak people. Each individual goes his path to survive. Keiko is an adult striving to do her own way abiding by her values and what she holds for dear. Thus, she has hardly something to share with a gentrified society, whose members all behave in a robotic way. All of their actions have conformed with widespread standards. All but Keiko, whose doing is halfway between an inveterate outsider and a robotic girl, who is fine about carrying out the same actions in the same order and does not intend to change the way her life has been shaped for around eighteen years. Because of this, Keiko earns fame of a misanthrope bound to a destiny of self-isolation. Those who dare to escape the pressure of a profit-driven society with well-identified social standards are exposed to scorn, pushed aside by a humongous set of mass-directed individuals.

¹ For the English edition see: Murata Sayaka. 2018. *Convenience Store Woman*. London: Faber and Faber (translation by Gimmy Tapley Takamori).

² Murata Sayaka. 2015. 授乳 (*Ju'nyū*). Tōkyō: Kōdansha.

³ The Italian translator Gianluca Coci, who has been recently awarded the 'Appiani Prize for Literary Translation,' has contributed to spread knowledge about the Japanese culture over the past twenty years. With his translations of Japanese contemporary writers, from Ōe Kenzaburō to Kirino Natsuo, from Abe Kōbō to Murata Sayaka, that constantly rank among the best-sold books in Italy, Coci has opened up a different view on Japan, away from stereotypes and clichés surrounding this culture in the 20th century. For the Italian edition see: Murata Sayaka. 2018. *La ragazza del convenience store*. Roma: Edizioni e/o (translation by Gianluca Coci).

In a society underscoring differences, and where peculiar traits do not make up added values, Keiko is just an awkward 36-year-old woman who has nothing to say, no merit at all and nothing special to convey. Keiko sits at the other side of the fence, in a pathological condition denounced by her fellows. Apparently, Keiko has been able to build her own barrier seeking to stem the Other and those dogmas anyone else is used to sticking to. Albeit she has no interest for truth, at least the one invoked by people surrounding her, Keiko ends up doing exactly what the Other expects. But who is the Other? A mass of conformist men and women from the Japanese middle-class lined up against eccentricity and 'diversity.' In keeping track of what people tell and think about her, Keiko is forced to enter a fourth-dimensional space. In a society that still needs a scapegoat for a social failure due to the steep economic and demographic downturn, Furukura becomes the ideal target. Furthermore, someone who can freely express her or his ideas disregarding the Japanese morality is perceived as a threat against social balance and a homogenous mass-driven society. This society has traditionally acted and played the script told by the Up.

Furukura is a loose cannon, as cannons are the characters set on stage by the Italian naturalized film director Ferzan Özpetek (1959)⁴ in his *Loose Cannons* (2010). If Furukura broke out, the seemingly perfect balance kept in store for centuries with just as much dignity and moral compass would abruptly fade away. And what if the balance really broke down? The answer unveils a truth: a deep social crisis is ongoing, squeezing an insecure society unable to shape its own future. The breakdown would cast light on the many cracks and divisions lying inside the society for centuries, the huge gap between upper and lower classes, the downfall of family and the shrinking traditions and social values taken over by capitalistic patterns.

The direct consequence of a society going through a vertical change is the sense of discontent and 'alienation,' something the post-modernism era had both experienced and given voice to. A loose cannon has a domino-effect, causing to trigger a chain of shattering events as well as to release the profound unease gripping the white souls of a former world powerhouse. This all takes place in a Japan that is 'monstrified,' beset by monsters reflecting a community unable to recognize itself in the image projected by the mirror.

A Japanese monster is well off the Latin *monstrum*, as the sociologist Toshio Miyake (2011) puts it in his essay, where it stands for something exceptional. This dualism, according to which human beings

⁴ The film revolves around the choices Tommaso, an aspiring writer aged 30, is expected to make: giving up his life, his dream of becoming a writer or sticking to his people and his family's expectations.

are genuine and impaired by a tentacular society jeopardizing whatever it gets in its apparatus, whilst the society is governed by dark powers, is both a witty expedient for readers, and an excuse for turning a blind eye to the mounting outrage caused by inequalities, gender and social gaps. As said, the truth can change according to the field angle. Furukura Keiko's conduct can be seen as conspirational, too, except that she is not acting on a level playing field. She is accomplice to a tainted society, where homologation and degradation are the rule. A different field angle projects a Furukura who is seemingly accomplice to the society. She is doing exactly what people expect her doing, so as the judgement on her is not impaired. She is playing by the social norms and is not acting against the tide, while at the same time seeking to remain connected with the real world: the one where people play a given role, laugh or cry in a similar way, nod their head with the same movement, emulate gestures and a drawl that sounds trendy. Acting like that, Furukura changes her habits according to social requirements: she rejects self-isolation, gets closer to her family and a sister overcome by a troubling 36-year-old girl with no spouse by her side. In doing so, Furukura is perfectly playing the script, so much so that she speaks and acts akin to robots. She gets into a character: a nice fashionable girl, whose ambition is to inspire trust and be self-inspired. When lights are off, Furukura's life appears in its real dimension: a pantomime where she stands in the middle, and all she is doing is a pretense. In the end, her path is just a conundrum, she conducts a life that is preposterous and targeted to nothing. The more Furukura insists on playing by her rules, the more her life worsens: she ends up more isolated, her family is troubled by her abrupt changing behavior. Why is that? Furukura's strategies to get along with mass-directed individuals impact on a social tissue pervaded by a dualism inherent to the Japanese society: individuals that should make an integral part of the community are called to perform a subsidiary role.

In a society where, as Ōe Kenzaburō puts it, people are not prone to real integration and fictitiously act as a well-rooted group with authentic values shared within the community, the risk is for them to be weaved in a mosaic of obligations and social conventions. To quote Ōe, once captured, there is no way for 'sheep-men' to escape the net. Likewise, those who stand outside the net will find it utterly hard or truly impossible to get in. This is how Ōe (1969) describes the fight between centripetal and centrifugal forces in his *Warera no kyōki o ikinobiru michi o oshieyo*, four short novels revolving around the difficulty to match present and past as well as to let in something which is culturally too distant from the Japanese set of values.

If in Ōe's pamphlets against the establishment the focus is on how to let democracy in and how to reduce social gaps, some fifty years later Furukura shows how topical – and subtle – the fight still is. In practical terms, this draw-away from reality impacts on how people perceive themselves. Furukura is just a case in point, but there are thousands of Furukura unable to unfold their personality, being victims forced to cling to norms and obligations nobody really dares questioning. Akin to a set of characters set on stage in contemporary Japanese literature – the 19-year-old boy with split personality in Sakumoto Yōsuke (2015) or the psychotic Haruo obsessed by crested ibis in Abe Kazushige (2001), to name just a few – Furukura hears the echo of a national super-ego, imposing norms of conduct, in order for people not to shake the pillars of power. If this is the only way people can go, they will hold it for dear. Furukura is left with a dilemma: paving the way to a future of endless self-isolation or reaching a compromise with the net. At a first glance, she surrenders to consolidated social norms and the power exercised by an authority nobody sees or experiences first-hand, but still an authority constantly keeping a close watch on each Furukura. The 36-year-old has to lay down her personal weapons, allowing a man to enter her life, searching for a more rewarding and socially acceptable job, accomplishing what the society expects her doing. Keiko can easily imagine that if she goes that way, people will stop taking her for a monster: a grotesque woman nobody would let in among ordinary human beings, but still a monstrum capable of expressing her own views and lead an independent life.

Furukura is also a dangerous presence in contemporary Japan, reflecting a distorted ego open to emulation. An ego that might start circulating and lurk before claiming other victims. Furukura might conceal a soundness that mass-directed individuals have lost for quite some time. Thus, she can drive both her insanity and people's morbidity out. Starting from her insanity, Furukura is offering herself as a sacrificial lamb: her life fully unfolds playing the same script, which is tantamount to doing the same job, the same actions in an hypnotical dependency on the events and phases of a day in a convenience store. Furukura plays the same script to the extent that she dehumanizes herself and ends up lacking any sense of solidarity towards anyone, not to mention the lack of any sexual instinct and lust for life. The only thing Furukura can keep unchanged is her sense of duty carved in the long-standing dichotomy between the pedantic sense of duty and the desire for leading a life free from the middle-class. That dichotomy was originally expressed by Thomas Mann (1875-1955) back in 1903 in *Tonio Kröger* (Mann 1903).

In a society crossed by moral principles, personal freedom is repressed. Repressed by whom? This obvious question arises. Compared to a time where people's thoughts were repressed by either fascism or authoritarian regimes, these times nobody is really forcing into a life hard living. So, why is Furukura burning the candle, taking on a creepy mask instead of living her own life? Not only does she lack a

well-defined personality, but she has no interests for leisure. Everything is restricted to working and performing activities people can take profit from. Vital functions such as sleeping and eating food help to be well-performing during the exhausting shifts at the convenience store. Then, Furukura finds a way to skip social events: she keeps saying she is so sick that she cannot afford staying outside and enjoying free time. The same applies to the failure to find a different job. These tricks shield Furukura from a lifestyle and a set of values she has no interest for. So, does Furukura put on a mask? Definitely, she does. One need only think of another giant of contemporary Japanese literature, Mishima Yukio (1925-1970), to experience how people have completely changed their attitude following the capitalistic surge, with its schemes targeting profits, not people. The levers of power have replaced 'humanism' with 'robotism', upturning all existing coordinates. The authentic 'ningen' invoked by Ōe in his post-war novels, the one who was bound to leave his mark in a self-developing society, has faded away without unlocking his full potential or even before starting doing so. The 'new man' invoked by Susan Sontag seems to have failed. In his place a plethora of mass-directed individuals, whereas the mystery lies in catching who is really controlling them: is it solely due to a Japanese morality prescribing elevation from poor standards and basic life principles or is it due to an overall decay involving ordinary men and women? Are they really aware of the path they are going or do they ignore where both the start and the finishing line of their life is? This question clearly arises in Murata Sayaka's novel, too. If it is so, Furukura has no chance but surrendering, unless she wants to exactly turn herself into one of the 'walking' masks she has rejected all her life.

In this monstrified Japan, Keiko is not the only case in point. One need only think of *Seishun robotto* by Sakumoto Yōsuke. Tezaki Rei, the main character, is Furukura's alter ego. In order to survive in a society lacking order as well as love and solidarity towards human beings, the young boy pretends to be a robot to give people what they need the most: considerate attention to their feelings. In addition to it, the young boy acknowledges that the only way for a clever mind to find his own way is pretending to be crazy. At the end of the novel, Tezaki Rei cannot but abide by the order and start living by the rules everybody is subject to. In spite of the original mission, he turns into something prosaic with a earthly aim: being productive and concretely help the society. If this is so, another truth is emerging: the sense of estrangement these weak heroes are bound to is well in line with a long-standing Japanese mythology enhancing frailty, as opposed to Western legends of men holding the power and destined to a glorious life, encompassing victory over the weak and eternal success. In spite of their failure, these heroes prove their strength in helping outcasts and showing the Japanese society what authentic inclusiveness does mean.

Men and women who apparently can least afford showing others the way, are chosen to reinforce national identity, transforming their misery into a sign of election. Literature as well as other media have contributed a lot, setting on stage a plethora of sad heroes, grappling with their awkwardness. The majority of them strive hard to combat their sadness, caused by being orphans face to face with their loneliness, and all of their efforts are intended to restore global order away from hatred and wars. ケンシロウ (Kenshirō)⁵ is just another example.

The storytelling in the late 20th century is rich in characters, mostly men, that readers may also conceive of as self-centered players; indeed, they are relentlessly judging and giving themselves a tongue lashing for not being able to accomplish their mission. These characters are engaged in hunting down the evil, driving it out of the bowels of the earth. Over the past few years heroins created by the pen of novelists such as Kirino Natsuo or Ogawa Ito have swollen the ranks of characters facing thousand truths: unfair treatment, gender inequality, violence and abuse of rights. As a result, these characters are also struggling to stand out in a society spearheaded by men, with their rules, moral deception and tawdriness. These women have decided to disobey and leave room for an alternative life pattern based on solidarity. They set out on a voyage even hard to imagine in a society pervaded by sexism and governed by patriarchal patterns. In spite of their passionate struggle to reaffirm authentic values such as love, solidarity and peace, their mission is bound to failure. So, what remains is solely an attempt by those writers to denounce a society drifting toward nihilism, whose foundations are heavily put in question by both men and women. This leads to one more truth: a generation gap has resulted in a clash between founding fathers on the one side, the offspring on the other side. This clash has only apparently been settled. As a consequence, the society the offspring could not shape is a society they feel unease at. Because fathers have failed, the world ruled by the superior power they believed in has faded away, too. This default has turned in a short circuit where people have started to skip responsibilities and social values they conceive of as unable to co-exist with their condition of 'moratorium ningen.' The majority of them have found it hard to get out of this limbo. This truth highlights how weakened and close to crumbling the Japanese society really is. In spite of their efforts, people cannot rise up and get out of the crisis. This weakness should not be mistaken and be labeled as 'heroism.' Those who do not even try to swim against the tide cannot be taken for heroes, most of

⁵ Kenshirō is the name of a fictional character and the protagonist of a manga series created by Hara Tetsuo and Buronson appearing on TV since 1983.

whom live marginalized, and yet keep standing up for people's rights. In a word, the sincere (wo)man engaged in a fight against prejudice and a social system rejecting diversification is destined to remain in the darkness.

After all, Murata Sayaka tells the story of ordinary people who undertake a shy battle with few and powerless weapons, and translates it into the language of the 21st century. Furukura is not striving for moral superiority nor she is casting about it. She leaves herself vulnerable to criticism, and yet she goes on. By so doing, Furukura adopts the principles of grotesque realism, showing Japan what it really needs: looking at itself and reflect on both its strengths and weaknesses. If Japan and its people can be themselves, they can deserve the attention they need and gain more trust and authority. Furukura provides a cross section of a society asking to live free from stringent obligations and stifling rules. Outside Furukura's *konbini*, there might be thousands of people asking to live their own way, regardless of whether the society approves of their conduct. Like Furukura, people want to decide on their future, on whether they are fit for living a life as a couple, as spouses and so forth. Despite her shy personality, Furukura, like many others, is a little rebel able to turn the clock back to a time and to a pre-3D dimension where people simply took care of their nest, and had no special interest for moral judgment. Yet, theirs was a balanced life.

The ultimate goal of Murata Sayaka's novel is to show how the 'low-cost' society pervaded by principles such as profit and progress at all costs, has left no trace of humanity, changing Ōe's authentic (wo)men into victims of their own uncertainty and apathy. The truth is that the story told by Murata Sayaka has nothing extraordinary in it. It is just the report, in a fresh and vivid language, of human degradation: a condition people living in robotized societies sooner or later will have to face up to. Backed into a corner, pushed by an inquiry into her/himself, every (wo)man is put down as both individual and worker. So, they can survive by resorting to their own truth, the one that is deliberately and carefully planned. This truth is weaved by them on a daily basis, as far as they negotiate an acceptable compromise. If this generally prevents people from wearing themselves out, in Murata Sayaka's novel even this line has been crossed. Again, one truth, thousand truths.

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