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Department of Letters and English Language

**Unconventional Identities: Asperger Syndrome's Influence on
Individuality in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*.**

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Master's Degree in Literature and Civilisation*

Submitted by:

Ms. Fatima Zohra HAMIDI

Supervised by:

Mrs. Fatima YAHIA

Board of Examiners

President:	Mrs. Zahera HASSAEINE	MAA	University of Ain Temouchent
Supervisor:	Mrs. Fatima YAHIA	MAA	University of Ain Temouchent
Examiner:	Dr. Selma BELHAMIDI	MCB	University of Ain Temouchent

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Dedications

I dedicate this work to my mother, who has been my unwavering source of encouragement and support throughout my academic journey. Her belief in me during challenging times has been instrumental in helping me reach this significant milestone today.

I also extend my heartfelt gratitude to my father, whose patience and unwavering support have been invaluable in enabling me to complete this work. To my dear little sister, sharing this graduation with you brings me immense joy and pride.

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Abstract

When societies such as Japan become renowned for their entertainment industry, the focus shifts from the significant challenges Japanese citizens face to a glamorised version of the Japanese society overly focused on the country's aesthetics rather than the underlying issues. This study focuses on analysing *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) with the hypothesis that Keiko Furukura, the protagonist, exhibits traits of Asperger Syndrome (AS) that explain her unconventional behaviour. This work addresses the issue of Social Group Categorization and the theory of group consciousness prevalent in Japanese society. It argues that Keiko's identity development was influenced by Asperger syndrome, setting her apart from her peers. The issue of conformity in Japanese society and its impact on individuals such as Keiko is examined by utilising these theories.

Keywords: Asperger's, Normal, Identity, Conformity, Japan, Neurodivergent, Neurotypical.

Abstract in French

Lorsque des sociétés telles que le Japon deviennent renommées pour leur industrie du divertissement, cela déplace l'accent des défis importants auxquels les citoyens japonais sont confrontés vers une version glamour de la société japonaise trop axée sur l'esthétique du pays plutôt que sur les problèmes sous-jacents. Cette étude se concentre sur l'analyse de *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) avec l'hypothèse que Keiko Furukura, le protagoniste présente des traits du syndrome d'Asperger (AS) qui expliquent son comportement non conventionnel. Dans ce travail, j'aborderai également la question de la catégorisation des groupes sociaux et la théorie de la conscience de groupe prévalant dans la société japonaise. Je soutiens que le développement identitaire de Keiko a été influencé par le syndrome d'Asperger, ce qui la distingue de ses pairs. En utilisant ces théories, j'examinerai la question de la conformité dans la société japonaise et son impact sur des individus tels que Keiko.

Mots-clés : Asperger, normal, identité, conformité, Japon, neurodivergent, neurotypique.

Abstract in Arabic

عندما تشتت مجتمعات مثل اليابان بصناعة الترفيه، فإنها تحول التركيز من التحديات الكبيرة التي يواجهها المواطنون اليابانيون إلى نسخة ساحرة من المجتمع الياباني تركز بشكل مفرط على جماليات البلاد بدلاً من القضايا الأساسية. تركز هذه الدراسة على تحليل *Convenience Store Woman*، مع فرضية أن بطل الرواية، كيكو فوروورا، تظهر سمات متلازمة أسبرجر (AS) التي تفسر سلوكها غير التقليدي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، سيستكشف هذا العمل مفاهيم تصنيف الفئات الاجتماعية والوعي الجماعي. أجادل بأن تطور هوية كيكو قد تأثر بمتلازمة أسبرجر، التي تميزها عن أقرانها. باستخدام هذه النظريات، سأدرس قضية الامتثال في المجتمع الياباني وتأثيرها على أفراد مثل Keiko.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أسبرجر، طبيعي، امتثال، اليابان، متنوع عصبي، نمطي عصبي.

List of Abbreviations

ASD: Autism Spectrum disorder

AS: Asperger Syndrome

ToM: Theory of Mind

CSW: Convenience Store Woman

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General Introduction

Many individuals struggle to integrate into society due to social norms and rules that must be followed to avoid being ostracised. Some are unable to adapt to these socially constructed rules even when they adjust their identity to align with the mainstream ideal, resulting in a conformist society. Identity is a complex concept in itself; when other factors are added, identity formation becomes even more challenging in defining one's identity in relation to society. Several factors can influence the development of one's identity, including cognitive disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, specifically Asperger Syndrome, in the case of this study.

Asperger Syndrome impacts an individual's theory of mind and specific brain areas crucial for comprehending concepts like empathy, nonverbal communication, and lack of emotional intelligence. These concepts can be detrimental to a child's identity formation and have lasting effects into adulthood. Individuals with Asperger syndrome face not only personal challenges but also struggle to comprehend social norms, leading to difficulties in conforming and ultimately experiencing exclusion. This was the case for Keiko Furakura, the protagonist of *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) by Japanese author Sayaka Murata. Since the translation of CSW in 2018 and its publication worldwide, there has been a lively debate among readers regarding Keiko's unconventional and odd behaviour that has caused her difficulties integrating into society. Murata skilfully explores the complexities of the mind and social expectations, inviting the reader to contemplate the impact of conformity on individuality.

Convenience Store Woman (2016) tells the story of Keiko Furakura, a woman in her 30s who has worked as a cashier at a convenience store ([Appendix 01](#)) for 18 constructive years. The novel tells the mundane life of Keiko as she manages her work life and attempts to fit into a society that deems her career "not normal" for a woman her age. However, Keiko develops an obsessive relationship with the store where she works and attempts to conform by masking

her identity and entering a relationship with Shiraha. She sacrificed her happiness in the process of meeting social expectations.

What motivated me to work on this piece of writing, and this topic to be exact, is my interest in Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autism is not a well-discussed topic in our society and is even stigmatised. Although it is more common than one might think, raising awareness of the impact of such disability on a person's identity and their perception of their place in an unaccommodating society is very critical. I have also been interested in Japanese pop culture for a very long period of my life, yet after further reading, reality turned out to be deistically different.

The topic of this research work entitled: "Unconventional Identities: Asperger Syndrome's Influence on Individuality in Sayaka Murata's *Convenience Store Woman*." focuses on exploring unconventional identities, specifically examining the influence of Asperger's on individuality. This research suggests that Keiko is a character with Asperger's, which has significantly shaped her personal and social identity within the context of Japanese society. Sayaka Murata is a famous Japanese author who is well-known for her fiction works. In 2016, Murata made her debut in the realism genre with the publication of *Convenience Store Woman*. With it, she won Japan's most prestigious literary award, The Akutagawa Prize.

The primary focus of this research work is to answer the following key research questions: How is Furakura's behaviour and characterisation in *Convenience Store Woman* indicative of traits commonly associated with Asperger syndrome?

1. What identity qualities does Murata highlight as essential for individuals to be considered productive and valuable members of society, and how are these values portrayed and reflected in the individuality of the characters of the novel?

2. How does the representation of Asperger syndrome in *Convenience Store Woman* serve as a symbolic element, and what narrative or thematic purposes does it fulfil in shaping the character dynamics and overall storyline?

In order to answer the previously stated question, the following hypotheses serve as the first step to reaching an adequate conclusion:

Literature that showcases characters with cognitive disabilities often falls within a particular genre, serving a unique purpose. In the case of Keiko, it is speculated that she may have Asperger syndrome due to her display of traits commonly associated with the condition despite lacking an official diagnosis. Murata subtly hints at this possibility throughout the narrative, prompting the formation of this hypothesis.

It is hypothesised that the omission of an official diagnosis may have been a deliberate choice by the author, aiming to shed light on not only the detrimental effects of societal norms on individuals who strive to live life according to their own unique goals and aspirations but also on the negligence of the society as a whole towards mental disability. By delving into Furukura's inner thoughts and reflections, it is possible to emphasise the absurdity of mainstream expectations and the pro-capitalistic Japanese society. This prompts us to question the structure of the Japanese society.

In CSW, Furukura's living situation and career choice seem to be a pretty heated discussion among the other characters, who take it upon themselves to fix and cure her until she becomes another generic member of society. Here, it is hypothesised that the author could have used this discourse to show the hypocrisy of societies promoting individuality, yet these individuals are questioned for their differences at the slightest divergence. Therefore, Autism in this context may have been a form of enquiring about the value of individuals based on what they give back to society.

This research work is structured in three chapters. The first chapter has been divided into two parts. The first section has been dedicated to understanding fundamental theories that have helped in understanding the concepts of conformity and identity in Japanese society and analysing the novel from this perspective. The following section is a literature review on identity in Japanese literature. Followed by an introduction to Autism and Asperger Syndrome and the defence mechanism developed by individuals on the spectrum. In addition to a detailed literature review of the use of Autism and Asperger's in fiction and how it reflects on the community.

The second chapter delves into Keiko's identity development, which is influenced by her Asperger's diagnosis. It also examines her social identity within the context of group categorisation in Japanese society. Additionally, this chapter explores the connection between social consciousness and group categorisation, highlighting their importance in the novel. Given the significance of convenience stores in the story, the cultural significance of convenience stores in Japan is explored further to understand their relevance to Keiko's character better.

Chapter three focuses on the correlation between the characteristics of Asperger's syndrome and the behavioural and cognitive peculiarities exhibited by Keiko from childhood through adulthood. Furthermore, the impact of conformity on Keiko has been explored, taking into account her diagnosis of Asperger's. The chapter also examines the influence of gender stereotypes in Japanese society as portrayed through Keiko's experiences. Lastly, this chapter investigates the defence mechanisms that individuals with Asperger's, like Keiko, employ to cope with their challenges.

Finally, this research work is conducted under the scope of a Corpus-based analysis of the novel *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) by Sayaka Murata using an interdisciplinary approach incorporating theories such as the theory of Group Consciousness, Erikson's theory

of psychosocial identity development, and the Intergroup conflict theory to reach the anticipated results. In addition, a qualitative research approach has been used to examine the source and information needed to understand the research problem better.

To conclude, the works cited and writing methods, as well as the overall format of the research paper, have adhered to the guidelines outlined in the seventh edition of the MLA Handbook for writers of research papers to ensure accurate and proper documentation.

Chapter One:

Literature Review

I. 1. Introduction

To adequately explore the topic of this research work, it is imperative to gather and analyse sufficient information on its components. As such, the theory of Group Consciousness has been introduced to examine the social narrative of *Convenience store woman*. Additionally, the concept of conformity and non-conformity within the Japanese society and their implications have been explored in depth. These concepts have also been tied to their influence on the formation of the Japanese identity in relation to society. Moreover, an adequate literature review has been conducted, delving into the definitions and origin of Autism spectrum disorder and Asperger syndrome has been provided, in order to provide a more thorough analysis of the novel.

I. 2. Exploring Identity in Japanese Literature: Group Consciousness and (Non) Conformity

Japan is characterised as a homogeneous state founded on a distinctive set of collectivist and harmonious social values, which sets it apart from other cultures. How dominance was achieved and sustained over time has been under-analysed and left no clear framework to understand possible challenges to its hegemony (Rear 02). According to Daniel De Carvalho (200), Some scholars have emphasised the significance of social interaction for Japanese self-identity and their group orientation. Japanese people are often portrayed as valuing interpersonal relationships highly in order to uphold harmony (245-6).

De Carvalho attributes the image of Japanese society as homogeneous and harmonious to the construction of Japanese identity, which he believes is connected to the birth myth of Japan as "...a product of an incestuous relationship between sister and brother- Izanami and Izanagi. Later, Izanagi gave birth to Amaterasu, the sun goddess, from whom the imperial house is said to have been based. The Shinto worship of ancestors further deepened the importance of

“blood” (258). Japanese people place great importance on blood relations; a member’s mistake can affect the whole family.

Because Japanese society is depicted as a homogeneous, well-integrated totality, it is overly group-oriented and divided into two categories: insiders (Uchi) and outsiders (Soto). The insiders are those who form close relations with each other for a long time, like family or close acquaintances. On the other hand, outsiders are those who do not fit these descriptions. Japanese society comprises numerous interdependent groups; belonging to a group means members of the group have to follow unspoken rules of conforming to the group’s interests, customs, and values rather than the individual. Those who fail to adhere will be excluded from the group (Davies and Ikeno 195-6).

This ideology of group consciousness is well integrated into the lives of the Japanese people: groupism is a concept that has been part of Japanese society since the Feudal era. Interdependence was quite common at the time due to the lack of resources and the high risk of natural disasters. People had a better chance at survival when they were in a group rather than as independent individuals (De Carvalho 255). Groupism was further reinforced during World War II when Japanese people were forced to unconditionally obey the military. Even though it greatly benefited the country’s economy post-war, it now prevents individuals from being independent due to the fear of rejection and ostracising (Davies and Ikeno 196).

Socio-psychologists believe that the primary reason behind this ideology of group consciousness is the desire for affection engraved in individuals. In Japan, the word “amae” has no direct translation in English but roughly translates to “dependence on the benevolence of others” (Davies and Ikeno 17). The concept of amae is regarded as the key to understanding the psychology of Japanese individuals and the social structure as a whole (Doi 26).

In 1970, Robert Frager conducted a study on conformity and anti-conformity within Japanese society. He questioned the common belief that Japanese individuals tend to fully immerse themselves in one group, shaping their behaviour and identity around that group. Frager also explored the idea of a social nexus: “Japanese traditionally scorn abstract, logical thinking, and that there is a “social nexus” at the root of most Japanese behavior” (203). That influences their behaviour. He reports that previous studies show data that prove the existence of “...strong collectively orientation in Japan” (203). Frager makes a comparison between the USA and Japan that traces the reason behind conformity in Japan to Japanese politeness, modesty, and strong concern for social consideration. However, these traditional factors can only last so long except for the need for social approval, which he believes to be the most appropriate conclusion: “Japanese conformity may be a response to strong social pressures rather than a result of conformist tendencies in Japanese personality” (204-8).

Anti-conformity, on the other hand, is just another form of Japanese culture, and when Japanese individuals are closely tied to a single primary group, they are more likely to be influenced solely by that group. They may reject pressure from other social groups and resist demands that go against the values of their primary group. Additionally, a society that strongly emphasises conformity can lead to significant personal negativity. This negativity may not be evident in all situations, but rather when there is a lack of strong sanctions and pressure for conformity (204).

Frager’s statement that conformity is due to a strong need for social approval is further supported by a recent study by Tuukka Toivonen, Vinai Norasakkunkit, and Yukiko Uchida, who wrote that family expectations and educational experiences have constantly reinforced adherence to specific legitimate means and standard social role. Japanese youth have had limited exposure to alternative modes of agency or success. Consequently, they continue to retreat and “...they may never develop an agency that is either independent or interdependent”

(06). In Japanese society, an “interdependent cultural system” is formed where individuals place great emphasis on acknowledging their weaknesses. This self-awareness is crucial for personal growth and development, as it allows individuals to strive towards meeting societal expectations and maintaining social harmony. They seek to avoid losing face (Public embarrassment) by failing the standard social roles, “...in a conformist, interdependent cultural context like mainstream Japan, maintaining “face” is crucial to one’s success and functionality” (06).

I. 2. 1. Identity in Japanese Literature

In Japanese literature, the theme of identity is often connected to sub-themes like gender or capitalism. For example, Haruki Murakami’s novel *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) explores the link between the search for identity and a capitalist society. Wattanagun and Chotiudompant believe that Murakami made use of the novel’s three characters, Kafka, Hoshino, and Nakata, to explore the concept of individual identity.

Hoshino represents a problematic identity shaped by the constant consumption of meaningless symbols. Hoshino becomes disconnected from his true self in a capitalistic society where identity is often tied to objects or images. Nakata’s identity challenges societal norms, as his “empty” self questions the values of the capitalist system. According to Wattanagun and Chotiudompant, Murakami prompts readers to consider whether Nakata is seen as unintelligent and empty due to his physical limitations (Brain damage) or social biases. Nakata’s empty self serves as a tool for Murakami to critique oppressive capitalistic ideals.

This analysis is seen as “...Murakami’s outlook toward ‘problematic’ reality he recognizes in his society” (38). In a society focused on consumerism, where people define themselves through what they consume, one way to break free from this cycle and build a stronger sense of self is through self-exploration. This involves looking within oneself and then

interacting with the outside world in a new way. This appears to be the solution that Murakami presents through the character Kafka, who explores his inner world and reconstructs his identity by borrowing and redefining other people's stories and memories (38).

Haruki Murakami delves into the complex theme of identity and alienation in his works. This exploration is evident in novels such as *Norwegian Wood* (2003) and *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years Of Pilgrimage: A Novel* (2014). Murakami's characters often embody a sense of isolation, choosing to distance themselves from family, society, and even themselves. Despite their rational nature, these characters find themselves detached from the world, particularly when faced with the absence of loved ones. The sudden loss or disappearance of these characters has a profound impact on the narrative, shaping key elements of the story (Priya 260). According to Priya, loss in the case of *Norwegian Wood* (2003) is centred around the protagonist's best friend's suicide and later his lover, who began to exhibit symptoms of mental illness. The protagonist, Watanabe, experiences Alienation after the sudden absence of his loved one, causing him to be disconnected and isolated from others. As a result, he withdraws from human contact in an effort to rediscover his will to live (263).

On the other hand, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years Of Pilgrimage: A Novel* (2014) is centred around loss in the life of a young Tsukuru who feels alienated from his friend group who all have names that mean colours in the Japanese language except for him (Priya 263). At the age of 20, Tsukuru finds himself adrift, a mere shadow of his former self from his teenage years. He navigates through life with a sense of detachment, as if he is merely going through the motions without truly living. This feeling of emptiness is brought into sharp focus when he returns to his hometown of Nagoya during a break, only to discover that his friends from high school have inexplicably severed all ties with him. Tsukuru's perceived lack of colour, reflected in his name, reinforces his belief that he was always destined to be an outsider within his friend group, never fitting in. His passive acceptance of his friends' abandonment

further underscores his sense of powerlessness and lack of agency in shaping his own destiny. This lack of agency is further highlighted when another friend eventually abandons him, leaving Tsukuru feeling even more isolated and powerless to change his circumstances (Priya 264-5). Priya believes that both of Murakami's novels are proof of his ability to combine "...fractured modernity and its uneasy..." (266). However, he also takes his readers' minds and hearts into account. His characters are typically portrayed as loners who live in a dream-like state because they struggle to connect with reality. They often struggle to find meaning in the world around them, leading them to either descend into madness or meet a tragic end. Suicide is a common theme used by characters as a way to escape their loneliness. Those who feel disconnected from the world often try to numb the pain caused by reality by falling into a dark abyss (267).

I. 3. Identity Formation: Social and Individual Identity

According to Burke and Stets, an individual's identity is a collection of meanings that accumulate through role occupation in society, engagement with different groups, and possession of distinct characteristics that set them apart from others (3). However, Identity is ever-changing as humans age, consume, and receive influence through various mediums. The study of identity development started with Erik Erikson, who was inspired by Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Erikson focused on the importance of the Ego in personality development, viewing it as more than just a mediator between the Id and Superego. He believed that personality development begins at birth, with social interactions playing a crucial role in shaping one's identity (Erikson 20).

His theory suggests eight successive stages of human development, which are influenced by biological, psychological, and social factors throughout a person's life. Erikson's theory had a significant impact on various fields of study, such as gerontology, personality development, identity formation, and life cycle development (Orenstein and Lewis). The eight

stages of development were not divided according to age groups but stages in life during periods of life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Stages One to Four happen during childhood (trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority), stage Five during adolescence (identity vs. confusion), and stages six, seven, and eight occur during adulthood (intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. stagnation, integrity vs. despair). According to Erikson, each developmental stage has its challenges called crises. These crises of the Ego embody challenges to the development of individuals (Fleming 04). The first stage of Erikson's development stages is called Trust versus Mistrust. Trust vs Mistrust is the first crisis a child faces; in the early stages of life, children have strong hope, believing every difficulty they may face will have a positive outcome. This sense of hope is essential for future situations they may face in later stages of development.

For the sake of this study, the focus has been on the first and fifth stages of Psychosocial Identity Development. During the first stage of development, a child's needs are not simply oral and sexual, as Freud suggests, but they extend to the need for constant physical contact and attention, "The child's sense of trust grows along with the development of the ego: it senses that its needs will be met in an orderly fashion while also learning the importance of delay of gratification" (07). The antithesis of hope in Erikson's view is the lack of hope and withdrawal; in this case, a child is deprived of the feeling of trust in his mother and, by extension, will reflect negatively on later stages of development. Therefore, the mother figure is crucial for the healthy development of trust. In addition, he believes that a mother's state of mind is reflected in her child: "An anxious mother transmit[s] this anxiety to the child, which he [saw] as unhealthy: a mother's tension causes a corresponding state of tension in her baby, resulting in a feeling of insecurity and lack of trust" (08).

On the other hand, during the fifth stage (Identity VS. Role confusion), Adolescence is a crucial developmental stage that typically occurs between the ages of 12 and 18. It is during

this period that adolescents embark on a journey to discover their sense of self and personal identity. This exploration involves delving deeply into their personal values, beliefs, and goals. Throughout adolescence, the transition from childhood to adulthood is a pivotal stage in an individual's development. This period is marked by a significant shift towards independence as young people begin to contemplate their future in terms of careers, relationships, families, and housing (Mcleod)

Adolescents strive to find their place in society and yearn to be accepted by their peers. They embark on a journey of self-discovery, seeking to establish a strong sense of identity by exploring various roles, activities, and behaviours. Adolescence is a critical stage of development where individuals must define their roles as adults. This period involves a re-examination of one's identity and a quest to discover one's true self (Mcleod).

The significance of social relationships during adolescence cannot be overstated. It is essential for adolescents to have supportive social networks that foster a healthy exploration of identity. Parents, teachers, and mentors play a crucial role in providing guidance as adolescents navigate their social relationships and roles. Their support and guidance are invaluable in helping adolescents develop a strong sense of self and establish meaningful connections with others. This phase of life is characterised by a desire for autonomy and a need to define oneself within the larger social context. It is a time of exploration and experimentation as teenagers navigate the complexities of growing up and forging their own path towards adulthood (Mcleod).

According to Mcleod, failure in developing this stage may cause failure to establish a sense of identity within society, which can lead to role confusion. If adolescents lack the necessary support, time, or emotional capacity to explore their identity, they may be left with unresolved identity issues, feeling uncertain about their roles and future. This can potentially result in a weak sense of self, role confusion, and a lack of direction in adulthood. Role

confusion occurs when an individual is unsure about themselves or their place in society. In response to role confusion or an identity crisis, an adolescent may begin to experiment with different lifestyles, such as work, education, or political activities. It is important for adolescents to have the necessary support and resources to navigate through this crucial stage of development in order to establish a strong sense of self and direction for the future. In turn, The social identity approach is based on certain assumptions regarding the nature of individuals and society, as well as their interconnectedness. It asserts that society is made up of social categories that are positioned in power and status hierarchies in relation to one another. Social categories encompass distinctions based on nationality, race, class, occupation, religion, and other factors, while power and status relations indicate that some categories hold more power, prestige, and status than others. These categories do not exist independently; they are defined in comparison to one another, creating contrasting categories. The characteristics of social categories and their relationships with one another shape a society's unique social structure, which exists independently of individual human beings. Individuals are born into a specific society, meaning that social categories largely predate individuals in terms of their existence (Abrams and Hogg 13).

When it comes to group categorization, Turner suggests a set of related attributes that assist individuals to identify themselves within a social group: Attitudes and feelings, i.e., individuals belonging to a society would observe social groups and decide which group they would like to belong to. This process often leads to the formation of stereotypical perceptions. This involves the observation or judgment of all members of a social category or group as sharing certain characteristics that set them apart from other social groups. These beliefs are rooted in the cultural history of the society in which the one resides (Abraham and Hogg 19).

I. 4. From Autism Spectrum Disorder to Asperger Syndrome (ASD)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects social interaction, communication, and behaviour. It is typically diagnosed in the first three years of life and is considered a permanent disability. Symptoms can vary in type and severity, including social communication difficulties, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviours. People with ASD may struggle with maintaining eye contact, understanding non-verbal cues, and making and maintaining friendships. Some individuals may also have intense, long-lasting interests and heightened sensory sensitivity. Parents of high-functioning children with autism may not initially be concerned but often become worried before the age of three due to challenges in social interactions. Children with ASD may experience difficulties in accessing professional help if their condition goes unnoticed (National Autistic Society)

Klin, in his article, also mentions how oftentimes, parents of high-functioning children with autism may initially be less worried during the first year or two of their child's life, especially if they are starting to develop speech and language skills. However, even in these situations, parents typically become concerned before the age of three as the significant challenges in social interactions with their parents (56). As some children grow with ASD unnoticed, they experience difficulty accessing professional help (Howlin and Moss 279).

In 1943, at the University of Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore, USA, child psychiatrist Leo Kanner published an article titled "Infantile Autism", in which he describes 11 children in his clinic displaying a lack of social instinct to interact with others. These children were also fixated on objects and showed a strong preference for routine and resistance to unexpected changes. A year later, Hans Asperger (1906-1980), an Austrian paediatrician, wrote an article describing children with similar differences to Kanner's (Baron-Cohen 1329). According to Klin, Asperger referred to the condition he identified as "autistic psychopathy", which is characterised by social isolation and a stable personality disorder.

Despite having intact intellectual abilities, the children lacked nonverbal communication, such as gestures and emotional tone in their voices. They also showed poor empathy, a tendency to intellectualise emotions, and a preference for long-winded, one-sided, and sometimes confusing speech that was formalistic (58).

Unlike Kanner's assumption, children observed with Asperger's did not seem withdrawn or aloof; on the contrary, they were able to develop efficient grammatical speech, and similarly to children with high-functioning autism could not be diagnosed at early stages (Klin 58). In the early 1940s, before the publication of "Autistic Psychopathy" (1943), Asperger highlighted the unique talents found in many autistic children, emphasising the importance of autism to society (McGrath 52). When it comes to the diagnosis and clinical features of AS, it is necessary to show difficulties in social interactions and limited interests, which are the same as autism. Unlike autism, AS does not include criteria related to language and communication issues. Additionally, the onset of symptoms should not involve a noticeable delay in language development, cognitive abilities, or self-care skills. These symptoms can lead to serious difficulties in both social interactions and work performance (Klin 59).

Klin describes individuals with Asperger's as often feeling socially isolated, but they are not usually withdrawn when around others. They tend to approach people in a manner that may be seen as inappropriate or eccentric; some may even develop symptoms of anxiety or mood disorder that may require treatment, such as medication. They may struggle to understand or react appropriately to emotional cues in social interactions, often coming across as insensitive, formal, or indifferent to others' feelings. While they can accurately describe other people's emotions and social expectations logically, they have difficulty applying this knowledge in real-time, leading to awkward or disconnected interactions. This reliance on strict rules and lack of spontaneity can give the impression of social inexperience and inflexibility (59).

In an attempt to assimilate or rather go unnoticed as different in society, individuals with Asperger's tend to develop defence mechanisms such as masking, camouflaging, and mimicry. In most cases, masking is related to late or missed diagnoses; conversely, camouflage is more common in females than males. Many "...autistic individuals show a range of behaviours and strategies that help them mask some of their symptoms and mimic behaviours of neurotypical individuals to fit in the community" (Alaghband, Hajikarim, Motamed et al. 02).

I. 4. 1. The Use of Masking, Camouflage, and Mimicry

Autistic masking, according to Pearson and Rose, is when someone consciously or unconsciously suppresses their natural responses and adopts different behaviours in various aspects of life, such as social interactions, sensory experience, cognition, movement, and behaviour (05). It is considered to stem from stigmas associated with AS or ASD; stigma affects how people perceive and treat an individual, as well as how that treatment is internalised and influences their identity (06). Masking can be connected to the social identity theory, i.e., individuals with AS or ASD may experience identity shifts in different situations, such as between interactions with colleagues and friends. They may experience stress from masking their autistic self, as contextual shifts do not involve concealing their true self but rather emphasising different aspects of identity.

The Autism Awareness Centre defines Masking as "Autistic people may feel the need to present or perform social behaviours that are considered neurotypical or may hide neurodiverse behaviours in order to be accepted and fit in. An autistic person may mask to avoid being outed or harassed at school or the workplace. It can help a person feel safe from misunderstandings or aggression..." (Bennie). What motivates these individuals to adopt this self-preservation behaviour is the want to blend in and not stand out from the crowd, obtain a job for personal safety, increase connections and relationships with others, lessen the risk of

failure in social stings, and avoid discrimination. This behaviour may later affect the person's well-being, causing exhaustion, change in self-perception, amplified stress and anxiety, depression, burnout, and a delayed autism diagnosis (Bennie).

Individuals with ASD engage in camouflaging by suppressing, hiding, or controlling behaviour viewed as inappropriate in different situations, for some camouflaging happens less frequently when with close friends or family, whereas, with others, they are in a constant state of camouflaging (Hull and K.V. and Carrie et al.). Hull et al. mention that "Masking encompasses the aspects of camouflaging that focus on hiding one's ASC characteristics and developing different personas or characters to use during social situations" (2525). The motivation for such behaviour is similar to that of masking.

In his seminal work *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*, Homi Bhabha explores the complex dynamics of mimicry in the colonial context. Bhabha argues that mimicry is a form of strategic imitation used by colonized subjects to negotiate power relations with the colonizer. He highlights how mimicry can be both a subversive tactic that challenges colonial authority as well as a mechanism of survival and adaptation in the face of oppression. Bhabha suggests that mimicry inherently involves a degree of ambivalence, as it blurs the lines between identity and difference and exposes the contradictions within colonial discourses (126).

Mimicry can be more than a part of post-colonial theory. Attwood states that children with Asperger's often develop four compensatory or adjustment strategies when they realise they are different from other children (23-8). He adds mimicry or imitation as an intelligent and constructive compensatory mechanism children exhibit by observing and absorbing the behaviours of socially successful individuals. These children typically start by observing social interactions from the sidelines, taking note of what works. They may then replicate these behaviours in their own solitary play, using dolls, figures, or imaginary friends to practice and

perfect their social skills. By rehearsing and refining their roles, they aim to build fluency and confidence before venturing into real social situations.

These children can demonstrate remarkable astuteness in their observation skills, precisely mimicking gestures, tone of voice, and mannerisms. In essence, they are honing their ability to become natural actors in social settings. He states, “He or she then re-enacts the scene using ‘borrowed’ dialogue and body language. There is a veneer of social success but, on closer examination, the apparent social competence is not spontaneous or original but artificial and contrived” (27-8).

I. 4. 2. Theory of Mind

The psychological concept known as Theory of Mind (ToM) refers to the capacity to recognize and comprehend the thoughts, beliefs, desires, and intentions of others in order to interpret their behaviour and anticipate their future actions. It has been likened to “mind reading” or “mind-blindness” and colloquially described as the challenge of “putting oneself in another person’s shoes.” A related term is empathy. According to Baris Korkmaz, “ToM fails to develop in individuals with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as autism...” (104). Individuals with Asperger’s syndrome, whether children or adults, often struggle to perceive and understand the cues that convey the thoughts and emotions of others to the extent expected for their age group. In contrast, typically developing children, particularly those over the age of five, demonstrate a remarkable ability to discern and interpret social cues that reveal thoughts and emotions. It appears as though their cognitive processes prioritise social cues over other environmental information, leading them to develop a mental framework for understanding and responding to social interactions. This heightened sensitivity to social cues is so ingrained in typical individuals that they may anthropomorphize animals and even inanimate objects, attributing human-like social behaviours to them (Atwood 112).

In the case of impaired “ToM”, a person with Asperger’s will find it difficult to read the social/ emotional messages in someone’s eyes, in addition to making literal interpretations, being considered disrespectful or rude, honesty, difficulty managing conflicts, being self-conscious, understanding embarrassment, Anxiety, slow social reasoning, and exhaustion (Atwood 114-123).

I. 5. Autism and Asperger Syndrome in Literature

While it is challenging to prove a character has a cognitive disorder such as Asperger’s, previous studies have successfully demonstrated this in both fictional characters and authors. Gordon Bates, in 2010, wrote an article entitled “Autism in Fiction and Autobiography”, where he mentions a few characters that are hypothesised to be autistic or with Asperger syndrome. For clarification, Autism Spectrum Disorder and Asperger Syndrome fall under the same umbrella of cognitive disability. However, it is debated whether Asperger syndrome is an independent diagnostic category or is a part of the autism spectrum (qtd. in Myles and Simpson 132).

Sonya Freeman Loftis, in a book on stereotypes of autism and Asperger in fiction, entitled *Imagining Autism Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum* (2015), describes the difference between Asperger syndrome and Autism, which has been confusing for many people. Initially, they were seen as distinct conditions, but they are often seen as related in the medical field. Autism is diagnosed when someone has autistic traits and language delay during childhood, while Asperger’s is diagnosed when someone has autistic traits but no language delay (Loftis 07).

Literature dealing with explicit cases of autism where representation is considered close to accurate can be seen in works such as *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) by Mark Haddon, an English novelist. On the other hand, works such as Sherlock

Holmes' are where different researchers argue for accuracy. Bates states that the depiction of stereotypes varies from emotionless intellectuals like Holmes to characters used for comedic relief and many others. He also mentions that it is relatively difficult to find novels that "...show the full triad of primary symptoms of autistic disorder, with impairment of language and socialising and a preference for routine..." (47). Sometimes, characters would be described as having various symptoms that constitute ASD, while others would only have one, such as high intelligence or having a rigid routine.

In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the author, Mark Haddon, never uses the word "autism" or "Asperger's" to describe the narrator, Christopher Bone. Nevertheless, according to Loftis, his condition is extremely obvious (142). Writers employ various techniques to express the contrast and separation between the perspective of the 'neurotypical' (mainstream) and autistic individuals (Bates 48). That is what Haddon has done in his novel. Bates considers the way he first introduced Christopher as striking; he uses a first-person point of view and simple language for the reader to experience his autistic worldview (48). This worldview is also emphasised through the tone of narration, where Christopher is portrayed as an unreliable person for his focus on irrelevant details, and instead, the reader learns to reinterpret his perceptions and version of events because they are highly subjective. Mark Haddon effectively uses dramatic irony to give the reader a better understanding of the situation than Christopher, the narrator (48).

Some individuals with autism or Asperger's lack empathy and social awareness, while others with autism may prefer to be alone and focus on themselves. Many individuals with Asperger syndrome desire social interaction but find it difficult to connect with others or maintain friendships. Loftis here contradicts this idea by saying that Christopher, who is assumed to be autistic, is influenced by stereotypes that autistic people are especially perceptive due to their differences in sensory perception, attention, and memory (125). In Bates's opinion,

the main issue seems to be a lack of empathy, making it challenging to understand and interpret other people's emotions through non-verbal cues or the surrounding situation. This inability to infer emotions from these sources is a significant obstacle (Bates 49). Christopher's lack of empathy and social awareness is seen on page 236 of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* when he discovers shocking information, yet his attitude suggests otherwise.

Christopher is highly influenced by Sherlock Holmes. After all, the premise of the novel is to investigate a dog's murder case. Loftis argues that the novel is a cluster of autism stereotypes done in a complex and multi-layered manner (124-5). Haddon used the current hypothesis that Sherlock Holmes is an autist to push the narrative of the detective frequently associated with autism. The author is believed to use the tradition of autistic detectives, like Sherlock Holmes, to explore autism as both a strength and a potential source of pain. Christopher, the protagonist, sees himself as similar to Sherlock Holmes and views him as an autistic hero.

This suggests that Christopher has chosen Holmes as a role model because he sees him as someone with autism. The portrayal of Holmes as an autistic figure is becoming more common in popular culture, and Christopher is growing up in a world where Holmes represents a stereotypical autistic identity. This highlights Christopher's place within the autistic detective tradition. Additionally, Christopher's disability is portrayed as the key to uncovering the "mystery" of trauma and sorrow within his own family, highlighting the potential pain associated with autism (Loftis 125).

The previously mentioned stereotypes by Loftis contribute to the concept of Sherlock Holmes being a role model for youngsters like Christopher, who likens himself to a detective "as a way of taking pride in his autistic characteristic" (125). Loftis states that Haddon made use of Christopher as a 'humorous parody' of the autistic detective stereotype. The plot structure is said to cause neurotypical readers to view him condescendingly because Haddon presents

Christopher as missing the emotional knowledge and social maturity needed to be a detective (127). In another paper, Christopher is described as a loving and expressive child. However, his way of showing affection is different from what is considered typical. When his mother gets sick and has to go to the hospital, Christopher expresses his affection by mentioning that they should bring her food because he knows hospital food is not good. He also decides to make her a Get-well card because that is what people do for others who are in the hospital. Christopher's way of showing affection is logical and practical, which illustrates that autistic people can feel compassion but express it differently (Alfansi 138-9).

As previously mentioned, Sherlock Holmes is believed to be on the spectrum of autism; however, Loftis suggests that even though this sounds to be the case, it is not feasible to diagnose an imaginary character with a neurological condition like autism. It is noteworthy that the public often associates Sherlock Holmes with being on the autism spectrum. The character created by Conan Doyle helped establish the stereotype of a detective with autistic traits, thereby perpetuating common misconceptions about autism (Loftis 23). Holmes' description as distant, callous, and hard to understand is emphasised by his companion Watson, who represents the neurologically typical reader; he objectifies him by comparing him to machines and calling him "inhuman". This perception of him as mysterious and unknowable creates a legacy of mystery and mysticism adjacent to "the autistic detective that carries over into the famous figure's many pop culture analogs" (Loftis 23).

The idea that Sherlock Holmes has Asperger's syndrome is widely discussed among fans and professionals. However, many of these discussions focus on negative stereotypes and provide a limited understanding of autism. The demeaning description was used in diagnosing him, such as 'rude', 'mind-blind', and 'cold-blooded'. This statement suggests that portraying the character of Holmes (and, by extension, people with autism) as unable to form emotional connections is troubling. Such interpretations often view autism as abnormal in comparison to

a neurotypical standard and reinforce incorrect beliefs about autistic individuals lacking emotions, empathy, and love. Furthermore, it is concerning when the psychiatric community labels a fictional character as having a specific cognitive disability, as it can lead to problematic interpretations (Loftis 24-5).

Another character diagnosed with Asperger's is Newt from the screenplay *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Newt's gestures, facial expressions, and demeanour are described in great detail, including his gaze patterns. These stage directions reflect how the protagonist evolves in relation to his quest and other characters. Initially seen as quirks, Newt's mannerisms become ingrained in the plot, showing the expected reactions from him. Interestingly, Newt's behaviour, which resembles someone with Asperger's, challenges common stereotypes associated with the condition (Camacho 403). Camacho suggests that there is a focus on the main character's scientific perspective, which may be seen as resembling the stereotype of an "Autistic savant." However, the character's scientific approach to others prevents him from being seen as merely an object of experimentation, thereby avoiding the cliché of an "Autistic savant" (404). He also states that The clinical diagnosis of Asperger's is related to the use of repetitive or unique language. While Newt's use of stock phrases reflects his peculiar behaviour, it can also be seen as a cultural difference rather than a cognitive-linguistic one.

Camacho discusses how adults with Asperger's tend to talk "at" rather than "to" others and show little interest in their partners' responses. This creates one-sided conversations that disrupt the back-and-forth flow. This behaviour is known as "inward focusing," where individuals block out their surroundings and become internally focused. In the book *Fantastic Beasts*, stage directions reveal that the character Newt's lack of attention to the conversation is due to his desperate search for his Niffler, providing a practical reason for his behaviour. This creates a communication gap that neurotypical individuals might perceive as simplistic. The

stage directions add depth to the story and demonstrate that Newt's lack of interaction is strategic, challenging typical interpretations (405).

Fantastic Beasts shows that people with different neurological traits can engage in social interaction when they share mutual interests. The protagonist, Newt, is extremely passionate about magical creatures, and the movie emphasizes how the other characters become equally interested in these creatures, which helps Newt overcome his previous reluctance to connect with others. Typically, people with Asperger's Syndrome are believed to struggle with 'shared enjoyment,' or the ability to appreciate and respond to something that is shared with them. This includes difficulty in understanding the facial expressions of others who want to share something with them (Camacho 406).

Camacho also delves into the importance of the representation of autism and Asperger's in the entertainment industry. Drama helps children with Asperger's improve in areas of nonverbal communication that they struggle with, such as eye contact, facial expressions, posture, and gestures. Unlike clinical therapy, drama therapy provides a narrative setting that allows children to imitate social interaction. Acting can teach social understanding and flexible learning by observing and copying gestures, tone of voice, and mannerisms.

Fantastic Beasts is a good choice for drama therapy because it has many stage directions that can create a therapeutic setting for a group of Asperger's children paired with neurotypical children (409). The *Fantastic Beasts* screenplay portrays Newt displaying characteristics of Asperger's syndrome, which can help make people feel more comfortable during initial rehearsals. This is important for children who may have difficulties with eye contact, touch, and reciprocal communication. *Fantastic Beasts* provides a safe environment for practising nonverbal communication through scenes with minimal dialogue (409).

In the case of diagnosing authors with autism or Asperger's, one study was conducted hypothesising that Franz Kafka is a person with autism by analysing his biography, letters, dairies, and major work. "Kafka and Autism: The Undisclosed Logic Behind Kafka's Work" by Jerry Stuger suggests that any previous psychoanalytical diagnosis can be explained through a posthumous autism analysis. In the past, the perspective of individuals with autism was seen by the autism establishment as a flaw or a version of the typical perspective rather than acknowledging it as a distinct and independent way of perceiving reality. In the study of Franz Kafka's work, he has often been mistakenly linked to various diagnoses that only consider his outward behaviours and ignore or fail to explain his inner thoughts and the logic behind his writings. It is important to include a comprehensive diagnosis that takes into account these aspects as well (Stuger).

Stuger uses autism spectrum disorder symptomology and examples from his biography and works to prove the case that Franz Kafka is a person with autism. The characteristics used in this study that are associated with autism are memory, attention to detail, a discrepancy between events and emotional reactions, noise sensitivity and hypochondria, honesty and conscientiousness, shame and guilt, obeying (social) rules and obligations, compulsive behaviour and repetitive behaviour, special interests and preoccupations, etc. Kafka, according to Stuger, had an excellent memory, which allowed him to pass his exams without studying much during the academic year. He had a unique way of interpreting his memories and described them as a perpetual state rather than something that could be classified chronologically. This is similar to how individuals with autism have special talents and cognitive strengths.

In addition to memory, Kafka was overly focused on details; people like Kafka tend to focus on small details to the point where they lose sight of the bigger picture. This can also be seen in individuals with autism, who may assess situations differently than neurotypical people.

Understanding that their logic and reactions may not make sense to others is important. Research on Kafka suggests that he had a strong attention to detail, which sometimes resulted in a lack of clarity in his stories. However, it is important to remember that this interpretation is based on a neurotypical perspective and may not align with Kafka's own logical process (Stuger).

The effect of not being able to align emotion with events is caused by the dominant influence of primary emotions on mental images in individuals with autism, which has been found to result in certain effects. For instance, Franz Kafka, who may have been autistic, experienced a lack of affection and love from his parents and sister Ottilia when he was writing *The Judgment* and *The Metamorphosis*. Additionally, during the period leading up to *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka was involved in a family dispute related to an asbestos factory. This conflict caused Kafka to feel intense rage, particularly because Ottilia sided with his parents. He even contemplated suicide by jumping from his fourth-floor apartment. This example highlights the disparity between actual events and Kafka's emotional response, which primarily manifested as a struggle or fight-or-flight reaction resulting in either a physical conflict or avoidance of the conflict altogether. Such emotional outbursts may be seen as indications of genuine autism in individuals (Stuger).

Kafka frequently experienced insomnia, fatigue, and digestive issues. He also worried about hair loss, spinal problems, and being underweight. Additionally, his sensitivity to sensory stimuli made him easily irritated by even the smallest noises. According to his friends and his writings, Kafka was known for his honesty and lack of belief in falsehoods. He was incredibly diligent and detailed in his work, as well as in addressing any injustices he encountered. His strong moral compass led him to question ethical dilemmas frequently. "The autistic person's sense of loyalty towards family and close friends and his inability to deceive is the mechanism behind the infinite" (Stuger).

In summary, individuals with autism have a unique mindset that prohibits them from deceiving others and fosters strong loyalty towards those close to them. Therefore, they experience great distress when confronted with dishonesty or irrational behaviour. This is mainly due to cognitive difficulties and emotional disconnects in the autistic mind. As a result, intense feelings of guilt arise, impacting both the mind and body of the person with autism. This guilt may stem from their inability to recognize deceit or understand that others have different perspectives (Stuger).

Stuger states that Kafka's letters to Felice Bauer displayed compulsive and repetitive behaviour. He repeatedly criticized himself, which can be attributed to his disappointments in their relationship. He also had a compulsion to constantly discuss his hypochondriac concerns about his own body. Additionally, Kafka was not good at engaging in small talk. It was clear to Felice Bauer that Kafka despised trivial conversations, as he believed that even mundane topics had a deeper significance. The contrast between Kafka's intense focus on everyday matters and his grandiose arguments about their importance became increasingly apparent. Kafka's desire for a true, genuine life was now evident as he and Felice Bauer decided to marry.

Kafka is also suggested to have had a strong fascination with asceticism, which he incorporated into his thoughts and identity. Despite denying himself certain comforts and necessities like warmth, meat, drugs, and medicine, he showed great willpower and self-control. Asceticism for Kafka was not about austerity alone; it was a means of self-regulation and self-formation to gain complete control over his body and life. This interest in asceticism, along with other traits, also suggests that Kafka may have had autism. His intense focus on asceticism, evident in his writings, could be considered unusual and clinically significant. This lifestyle also likely contributed to his tuberculosis, as none of his family members contracted the disease. Kafka's need for asceticism can be seen as a way for him to establish a sense of identity in the face of perceived inadequacies or alienation.

The term alien and the feelings of alienation are often associated with people with Asperger's. Aliens, usually depicted as beings from outer space, are different from humans. However, our portrayal of aliens reflects more about humans rather than the actual extra-terrestrial beings. This often includes a significant amount of fear, as humans may fear that they are more similar to the aliens they imagine. This fear is connected to a paradox involving autism and aliens. In some autistic communities, there is a belief that autistic individuals are like aliens, while non-autistic people may seem alien-like to those with autism (Hacking 44).

Ian Hacking explores the use of autism as a contrast or a comparison to the idea of aliens. He questions why autistic individuals are often portrayed as alien-like and what sets them apart from other people. Hacking also discusses the power of using catchy but oversimplified phrases to create a fear that aliens are taking over children. The author believes that by understanding what makes something not autistic, we can gain insights into what autism reveals about humanity.

Sometimes, aliens are depicted as better than humans, while other times, they are shown as a threat and often used as a way to reflect on the best and worst aspects of humanity. In addition to this, the idea of "alien" can also be applied to autism, where the word becomes a metaphor for being different or foreign (45). Hacking also believes that an alien refers to a rational, conscious being from outer space. However, at a deeper level, the term is used figuratively to describe the unique characteristics or behaviour associated with autistic individuals, highlighting their distinctness and unfamiliarity (45-6).

Before *Rain Man* (1988), an American road comedy-drama directed by Berry Levinson and written by Barry Morrow and Ronald Bass, hardly anyone was familiar with autism, unlike today when almost every reader is familiar with the disorder. Autism has become a popular theme in books and fiction, with some autistic individuals embracing the idea of being "aliens" and celebrating their differences, while others reject the label and focus on changing social

norms. There is also a genre of fiction that includes autistic characters, often written by parents or relatives of autistic children. Some of these books portray the challenges and emotions experienced by families dealing with autism (Hacking 49).

In a passage, Hacking discusses the use of the alien trope in literature and the differing perspectives surrounding it. It mentions a book called *Of Mice and Aliens* that combines science fiction and children's tales, following a boy with Asperger's syndrome and an alien named Zeke as they navigate life together. The passage also mentions a character named Baj, who has magical tools on a different planet. It then contrasts the positive portrayal of aliens in literature with Tito Rajar-shi Mukhopadhyay, a non-verbal Indian autistic writer's negative reaction to Portia Iversen's *Strange Son* (2007), a book about two mothers of autistic children meeting. In the book, Mukhopadhyay, a gifted autistic author, felt as if he had been demonized by Iversen.

Mukhopadhyay criticizes the book for comparing autism to alien beings. The passage discusses the division among people's opinions on using aliens as a metaphor for autism; it mentions Autism Speaks, a charity founded by Bob and Suzanne Wright, and their desire to find a solution for autism. On the other hand, Jim Sinclair, from the organization GRASP, the Global and Regional Autism Spectrum Partnership, an Autistic and Neurodivergent organisation, argues against mourning the loss of a neurotypical child and emphasizes that it is the parents and neurotypicals who are "alien" to the autistic child's experience (Hacking 50).

Later, he mentions that the concept of the alien can be seen in two ways: autistic people are considered aliens, or neurotypical people are seen as aliens by autistics. An example that combines both perspectives is Aspergia, a mythical planet that is said to be the origin of Aspergians (people with Asperger's syndrome). Aspergia, a fictional planet created by Craig Thomson, a person with Asperger's, is often viewed as a utopia by some individuals, who consider Earth to be inhabited by a different species called humans. This notion parallels the idea of how different cultures have their myths to explain their existence and origin (51).

Alternatively, ordinary people struggle to understand what is happening when an autistic child engages in hand-flapping, for example, as it is not a behaviour they can easily comprehend. While outsiders may sense some agitation, the child appears calm during this action. Autistic individuals explain that hand-flapping provides a sense of calmness. However, neurotypical individuals who rely on instinctive ways of interacting with others cannot grasp the child's emotions or understand their actions. This lack of understanding can lead to the perception that autistic children lack emotional depth and continue to be emotionally detached as adults (Hacking 55).

As a final remark, it is not easy to represent autism or Asperger syndrome in fiction that it is in human nature to be exclusive (Hacking 57). Therefore, exclude anyone who is even the slightest different. Marginalising individuals come in many forms as they vary in characteristics, making stereotypes easy to conjure. However, what is true for one person with autism or Asperger's is not necessarily the same for another.

Despite all that has been mentioned above on topics of identity, alienation, mimicry, and nonconformity, one common point found is that Keiko displayed odd behaviour throughout her childhood and adolescence. She only began to mutate her personality in adulthood to what is common in Japanese society. One thing to note is that her conduct as a child was odd enough for her parents to seek help from a psychiatrist; however, not enough effort was made to determine the root of the issue with her behaviour. The case of Keiko is speculated to have Asperger Syndrome (also known as Asperger's or AS). Her display of certain features such as lack of social skills and communication, limited range of interest, and sensory issues and others contribute to such hypothesis.

Naoise Dolan, an Irish autistic author, wrote an article for The Guardian: "I thought I was too different to see myself in a novel – but Sayaka Murata got me" (2020) where she finds recognition in the character of *Convenience Store Woman* (2016). Dolan explains her feelings

in her article where she says, “I’d thought my brain was too different to appear in a novel, but there I was. I smiled whenever I recognised an experience, which meant I basically smiled for the whole book” (2020). She suggests that Keiko’s mimicry is not driven by a desire for companionship but rather by a feeling that her true self is not appreciated. Dolan explains that Keiko’s suppression of her emotions is a result of her concerns for her family, as well as her struggle to convey the appropriate tone and facial expressions. She believes that the novel illustrates the idea that adopting a different persona can be freeing when one feels like an outsider, providing a sense of direction. Furthermore, she emphasises that the story does not indulge in unrealistic fantasies of power but rather acknowledges the necessity of conforming to social norms when one is perceived as different.

1. 6. Conclusion

This chapter tackles various concepts surrounding the topic of this research work, including identity and related concepts of social norms, group consciousness, conformity, and non-conformity that constitute a Japanese individual’s identity formation. Equivalently, a new topic was given attention, and that is the possibility of Keiko, the protagonist of *Convenience Store Woman* (2016), being on the spectrum of autism, i.e., a person with Asperger’s. Researchers have delved into the various themes and aesthetics of the novel; however, the mental aspect of the protagonist was left untouched, leaving room for psychological analyses of the main character. Although short, the novel has flagged social issues commonly found in Japan, such as marriage, workplace toxicity, and what is regarded as “normal”.

Although fictional, the novel is nevertheless based on social issues found in Japanese society; therefore, there exists a cultural context special to Japan that enforces conformity, and efforts to maintain harmony among members of society can take variants shapes, among them societal rules. Thus, this research work has tackled the novel from a different perspective where

the protagonist is an individual on the spectrum with Asperger's and navigates the Japanese society in order to appear normal and avoid the radar of social criticism through defence mechanisms often developed by people with AS. In the process, all of the above concepts contribute to Keiko's unconventional identity formation.

Chapter Two:
Neurodiversity:
Redefining Identity in
a Conformist Society

II. 1. Introduction

The concept of identity is intricate and multifaceted, encompassing various aspects of an individual's self-perception. It is a dynamic and ever-evolving construct influenced by a myriad of factors, including personal experiences, upbringing, cultural background, and relationships. One significant factor that can alter this equation is disability, whether physical or cognitive, which can fundamentally change an individual's perspective on the factors that typically shape their identity.

In cultural contexts such as Japan, there is a strong emphasis on group cohesion, known as 'groupism', which can pose challenges to an individual like Keiko in developing her identity both on an individual and societal level. The impact of the convenience store on Keiko's identity has also been explored in this analysis. Overall, the interplay of various factors, including disability and cultural norms, can significantly influence an individual's sense of self and how they navigate their identity within society.

II. 2. Flawed Psychosocial Identity Development

Following Erikson's model of identity formation, it can be argued that Keiko's ego has experienced a crisis without the necessary foundation of hope that children typically possess due to her neurodivergent state of mind and lack of support from her parents, who play a crucial role in achieving a positive outcome. At birth, all stages of development are present, but they only begin to unfold in accordance with both a natural progression and one's ecological and cultural upbringing. The development parallels the Japanese socio-cultural norms in the *Convenience Store Woman's* case. Each stage presents the individual with new challenges to confront and, ideally, master. The successful completion of earlier stages serves as the foundation for progress in subsequent stages. However, due to Keiko's neurodivergent state,

challenges from stages that were not successfully completed resurfaced as problems in the future.

Although Keiko's childhood memories are described as blurry, she still remembers her feelings and the reactions of others to her behaviour. Which left what could be considered a traumatic experience she is unaware of. According to Erikson's theory, a solid and nurturing relationship with parents, particularly mothers, is crucial for the healthy development of a child's identity. Keiko believes that her family provided her with a loving and supportive environment, "I was born into a normal family and lovingly brought up in a normal suburban residential area" (09), indicating that the first crisis is necessary for Ego development - Trust Vs. Mistrust - was successfully navigated during her infancy years. It leaves room for the possibility of Asperger's syndrome affecting her identity development in later stages since symptoms become more apparent at around 3-5 years old. Using the information provided by the character of her childhood, the analysis of Keiko's development will begin from the stage of preschool until early adulthood.

The first memory provided by Keiko is of herself during nursery school when she was approximately 4 to 5 years old. Children at that age usually face the crisis of Initiative vs. guilt, typically by family. During that period, Keiko experienced her first idea of initiating an act of kindness toward her family. Despite her positive intentions, her action was considered abnormal by everyone present except for Keiko because of her neurodivergence. While other children her age felt sadness about a bird's death, Keiko thought of gifting it to her family to make dinner with, knowing that her father's favourite dish is made of birds' meat. Adults present at that moment had a look of disbelief, implying that Keiko's actions were unordinary. Her actions were atypical in comparison to those of her developing peers.

Her mother's reaction was negative, and she attempted to correct the situation while dismissing her child's action without explanation: "My mother kept murmuring, as if trying to

convince me. But I didn't think it was sad at all" (9). Under typical circumstances, Keiko would have likely experienced feelings of guilt towards her desires and potentially grown from the experience as she matured. However, due to her Asperger's (AS), Keiko tends to intellectualise her emotions, making it difficult for her to feel the guilt associated with this crisis. Unlike neurotypical individuals, these emotions of guilt, inferiority, and confusion may build up unconsciously within her, leading her to withdraw from social interactions. Self-isolating, in addition to the previously mentioned defence mechanisms that develop in individuals on the spectrum: masking, camouflage and mimicry, appears to be Keiko's best choice to avoid criticism that is causing more emotional harm to her family than herself.

Keiko's mother played a significant role in influencing Keiko's self-perception. The constant mention that young Keiko needed to be cured of whatever was causing her to behave oddly led Keiko to develop a narrative in which she viewed herself as a flawed individual needing repair. Consequently, she began to conceal certain aspects of her identity in order to conform to social norms: "You eliminate the parts of your life that others find strange" (61). In Erikson's model of identity formation, motherly figures are supposed to provide the child with a sense of hope and trust for the child's proper development as an individual.

However, Keiko's mother was in a constant state of anxiety, attempting to redirect her child's actions so she would not stand out as unusual in front of others, which reflected negatively on Keiko. Rather than encouraging her child to adapt to society, Keiko absorbed her mother's negative emotions and assumed the responsibility of alleviating her mother's anxiety. Therefore, Keiko grew up insecure, afraid that she would not survive in the real world, and afraid to trust other members of society, such as her friends and coworkers. She justifies her mother's actions as having stemmed out of love and care for her, but all it did was hinder her personal development by ignoring the underlying issue of her behaviour. If her parents had

been more proactive in seeking professional help for their child, Keiko perhaps would not have struggled as much in the future.

The emotions of guilt, inferiority and confusion were primarily caused by Keiko's mother, who constantly stated in front of Keiko that she needed to be cured without even knowing what. Keiko grew to believe so, leading her to fear society finding out about her 'flawed' identity. In an attempt to guide her, Keiko met with a therapist but was dismissed again, resulting in a dent in her identity development. It was not until the stage of Identity vs. role Confusion that she found herself seeking a role in society so she could fill the void she felt from not understanding herself. Based on Erikson's theory, the ability to settle on an occupational identity is pleasant; Keiko describes this stage in her life as being reborn. Even so, her feelings of fear and uncertainty remain with her until the novel's end, when she affirms her identity as completely formed of her role identity.

Keiko's identity development does not entirely rely on Erikson's eight stages of identity development, considering the hypothesis that Keiko is a person with Asperger's. Individuals with Asperger's tend to obsess over certain things that are unique to them. In Keiko's case, the obsession overlapped with her role occupation, making her identity strongly tied to the convenience store.

Having now explored how a typical identity is formed for neurotypical individuals, neurodivergent people like Keiko, if aware of their disability, it becomes a big part of their identity, as equally important as race, gender, and ethnicity. Keiko's unawareness of her disability left her with no frame of reference, making her look odd in the eyes of society. As much as Keiko tries to comprehend the world by mimicking the norm, failure is unavoidable since she experiences the world differently.

Frequently, Individuals with AS define their identity solely in opposition to neurotypical individuals, which, in the case of Keiko and the group of insiders, is the way they

dress, talk, and more. This means that the autistic self (including Asperger's) is shaped by contrasting neurotypical peers. Keiko is constantly reminded that she is flawed in comparison to her peers and needs fixing, especially since seeking therapy that might have helped her understand herself better was unsuccessful. Instead of believing herself to be simply a variation from normal, she grew to hide and wear the mask of 'normal'. This resulted in her individuality being perceived as fundamentally at odds with the world outside her safe place.

To compensate for her difference, Keiko immersed herself in one social group and moulded her identity around it. This social group coincidentally aligned with her interest in the convenience store and convenience store worker status. After 18 years as a store worker, the convenience store shaped her existence that was void and replaced the missing frame of reference of AS to the store and thus, Keiko identified herself as a convenience store worker: "More than a person, I'm a convenience store worker. Even if that means I'm abnormal and can't make a living and drop down dead, I can't escape that fact. My very cells exist for the convenience store" (101). The influence of the convenience store on her identity was so profound that it became more than just an occupation but an obsession.

II. 3. The parallels between Intergroup Conflicts and Group Consciousness

The theory of group consciousness suggests that Japanese society is built into a system of groups, Insiders and Outsiders, with one group being more dominant and controlling the social order. Comparatively, the theory of intergroup conflict follows a similar concept. The dominant group in the novel is the insiders who follow the societal norms and enforce them on others; on the other hand, Keiko belongs to two groups based on the IST; one group is of the convenience store workers and the group of insiders partially.

When Keiko is within the group of convenience store workers, her anxiety eases, and she finds herself working for the sake of society “I felt I’d become a part in the machine of society. *I’ve been reborn*, I thought. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society” (17). something she doubted she would ever be able to achieve, considering her condition. Wanting to belong to at least one group that constitutes society is essential both for her personal and social identity development. Once she became a working group member, she could identify herself with the dominant intergroup in Japanese society: the insiders, i.e., those who are normal. When it came to Keiko categorizing herself in her society, she had to observe the difference between her, who has always been criticised as abnormal, and others who fit in; for example, Keiko’s sister served as someone who represented the average Japanese individual who belongs to the group of insiders by the theory of group consciousness definition.

Keiko’s sister served as an insider who has blood ties with Keiko, which means Keiko’s odd behaviour would reflect negatively on her as well. Assisting Keiko in assimilating into the group of insiders portrays the nature of Japanese society prioritising groupism over individuality. This means Keiko’s unusual behaviour reflects poorly on her family; for this reason, Keiko’s sister relentlessly helps Keiko conceal her “flawed” self from the group of insiders.

Despite the sister’s efforts to guide Keiko, she seems to be out of love. When Keiko showed no signs of improvement, her sister eventually expressed her frustration, saying, “I simply can’t take it anymore. How can we make you normal? How much longer must I put up with this” (83). Keiko’s state of anomaly was evident to her family because Keiko did not mask her identity around them. They tried to support her integration into society, yet they, too, think that her abnormality has increased once she joined the store “you’ve gotten weirder and weirder” (83). No matter what Keiko did to try to fit in and please others, it never seemed to be enough. Working at the store is insufficient, but being jobless is also unacceptable. The group

is unsatisfied with Shiraha as her partner, but it is better to be with him than be single in your 30s. None of this made sense to Keiko because she did it to please the group, not herself. In a society constructed of various groups, it was impossible for her to please everyone.

In the case of group categorisation of the social identity theory, Keiko's observation of social groups led her to think that she must join the group of insiders because they are the salient group in the Japanese society, which gives them the power to control members of the group to follow the norm. Keiko's feelings of alienation significantly contribute to her desire to belong within the group despite her condition, which sees little importance in following social norms to achieve social harmony. Murata herself speaks about her feelings in an essay she wrote for Lit Hub. She describes the feelings of alienation she always had since childhood and desperately attempted to hide to avoid getting noticed and bullied: "The last thing I wanted was to become a foreign body in the class, so I imitated the other children around me, and tried hard to be as normal as possible and not stand out" (Murata). Murata projects her feelings of alienation and struggles to be accepted into society as she states, "Foreign bodies were quickly spotted, persecuted by the group, and made objects of ridicule. I wanted to be the most ordinary Earthling there was".

By choosing to act 'normal,' she forces herself to follow the insiders' rules of conformity, afraid of being labelled as Alien; for instance, one criterion of normalcy decided by the salient group is marriage; based on the novel, Japanese women are expected to be married by the age of 30 unless they have a grand career that substitutes the need for marriage, which means that as long as a woman holds high status whether it be through work or marriage it gives some leeway for fulfilling other criteria. To illustrate, on page 51 of *Convenience Store Woman*, both Keiko and another friend are unmarried, but only Keiko is criticised by the group, stating: "If finding a job is so hard, then at least you should get married". However, the reaction her friend receives was utterly different "...you have got a high-flying job, ... you earn more than

most men, which I guess makes it pretty hard to find a good match” (52). It goes to show the double standards when it comes to being part of the group; it seems that individuals have to earn several points to be considered normal humans who contribute to the prosperity of society.

In this regard, it could be said that Keiko views the convenience store as the sole environment where she can contribute meaningfully to society. Her identity is intricately linked to her role at the store. Working there may cause her to be scrutinised and be seen as an alien compared to her peers; nonetheless, working there not only gives her a sense of purpose but also a feeling of belonging, as she sees herself as an integral part of a social group of the Japanese society that she considers to be a big machine and she is “...one of those cog...a functioning part of the world...” (08). Describing herself as a cog and society as a machine suggests the importance of the human element in maintaining societal functionality. However, this human element is only beneficial when functioning according to societal norms so that the machine of society can run smoothly. Keiko personifies the store and considers herself one of the many cells that are keeping it alive. However, once a cell dies, it is easily replaced to ensure the body’s functioning. The same goes for a machine; if a cog is missing, it gets replaced so that it can continue to function. It could be said that the store is a microcosm of society. Individuals who are of no use to society are replaced, hence the saying, “one of the cells of the store was again being replaced” (48). Murata foreshadows Keiko’s departure from the store later in the story by a new employee.

Now that Keiko believes the store is where she belongs, bearing in mind Keiko’s Asperger’s, being able to bring happiness to people is something she has struggled with due to her lack of empathy, so being able to achieve that further reinforced her belief that the convenience store workers are the group she belongs to; regardless of her age, gender, and status.

II. 3. 1. Convenience Store Culture

Convenience stores are widespread in Japan and have lived up to their name of “convenience” by providing various services to customers. It is more than just retailing; it offers a wide range of products, including daily necessities, luxury items, and entertainment goods. Customers can also receive products from Amazon and other delivery companies and access a bank ATM. With WI-FI and dining spaces available, convenience stores cater to the needs of people at hours of the day and night (Akiba 14-5). These stores have become an integral part of Japan’s culture. Japanese consumers have a preference for frequent shopping trips to convenience stores because of the accessibility it provides, allowing young consumers access to items on the go as part of their daily retail routine, whether on their way to or from school, work, or college (Marshall).

The outer appearance of Convenience stores is bright to a point where everything inside is visible to those passing by. When Keiko first passes by the convenience store in the novel, she describes it as “an aquarium” (13). Aquariums are typically enclosed environments that provide a haven for marine life. It is possible that Keiko, upon joining the store, felt more secure within the confines of the “aquarium” than when navigating the unpredictable outside world. Fish are among the most commonly found marine life in aquariums. Keiko’s state outside the store was like a fish swimming against the tides of normality.

However, once she stepped inside the store’s environment, she felt safe and had a sense of belonging, which made it hard for her to leave. The area where Keiko first stumbled upon the convenience store was in a newly constructed office district, where she was lost. Her surroundings were pristine white, including the store itself. This moment of loss and confusion mirrored Keiko’s feelings of isolation and uncertainty in society. Murata’s description of the area as white signifies new beginnings. This encounter serves as a metaphor for Keiko’s journey toward finding her place in society through that convenience store.

Her social life began at that store, as Keiko repeatedly used the words “reborn” and “cog” in relation to the store; Murata emphasised the importance of Keiko’s position as a store worker. The term “reborn” is employed by Keiko to illustrate the stark difference between her former self: “The time before I was reborn” (09). Before joining the store and her transformed self thereafter: “I had aged since the day I’d been reborn as a convenience store worker” (50).

People often frequent convenience stores on their way to work, school, or during their free time, and these establishments symbolise the fast-paced nature of modern Japanese life. However, Keiko’s life stood at a standstill when she started working at the store. Working at the store is usually a part-time job for minors, immigrants, college students, or housewives in need of extra money. Keiko is none of that, hence why she is questioned for working there for 18 years. After all, Success is also a criterion of normalcy in the novel. Kurniawan and Samanik state, “Keiko’s work is seen as odd. The impression of part-time work is considered a distraction...he also received an emphasis that when it comes to a person’s success status, society has certain standards that must be achieved” (498). Even though Keiko is described as the ideal store worker, immersing herself in the world of capitalism. Ethnographic studies such as that conducted by Allison (2013) suggest that the prevalence of social precarity in modern-day Japan is the result of feelings of hopelessness and alienation experienced by the working class, in addition to employees being expected to sacrifice their personal lives for the sake of their companies (Jaseel and Rashmi 05).

Keiko serves as a prime example of this as she compares herself to a plant that relies solely on the store for sustenance, giving up all other aspects of her personal life, “This form of resignation arises from her precarious living conditions where she fails to reproduce conventional gender roles, apart from surviving on a socially acceptable job” (05). They argue that post-Fordism Japan primarily benefits capitalist corporations rather than the majority of working people.

II. 4. Escaping Groupism: Prioritising the Self

Embracing one's true self/ identity is the way to achieve individuality, hence Keiko's struggle with various groups of society while not having a concrete idea of her 'difference' that everyone is urging her to fix. She finally realises the importance of her personal happiness over that of the majority (Salient group/ Insiders). After 18 years of employment, Keiko was removed from her place of comfort, where she first conformed to social norms, the convenience store. For someone with a cognitive disability such as Asperger's, it is not simply about switching careers to better fit into society but more about losing a part of yourself suddenly, "All too quickly, as if the eighteen years of my employment had been just an illusion..." (89). As if it was overdue, Keiko's colleagues spoke gleefully of her departure, making assumptions that Shiraha, her pseudo-partner, would be the breadwinner in the relationship while Keiko would resign to her gender role as dictated previously by the group of Insiders. This assumption highlighted the Japanese societal pressure for individuals to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. Once again, Keiko sacrificed her happiness for the sake of normalcy and social harmony: "I was taking on the form of a person that their brains all imagined as normal" (90)

Her colleagues' response only confirmed her initial belief that convenience store employees are viewed as expendable and easily replaceable. "Over the course of eighteen years I'd seen any number of people leaving, and in no time at all the gap they left was filled. The space I had occupied, too, would quickly be replenished, and from tomorrow, the convenience store would carry on operating as usual" (90). The title of "convenience worker" may serve as a metaphor for members of society, with the convenience store itself symbolising society as a whole. Murata describes the stores "...like they are microcosms of society". She also believes that just like how stores need to evolve to meet customers' needs, society should

also change and develop according to the needs of its citizens. Social norms and the concept of groupism could not possibly still be applicable in modern societies.

Both Japanese society and convenience stores operate under rules strictly followed by the group of workers/ Insiders for them to function, and so does society. The difference in this aspect is that the manual for rules and norms is not physical but learned by individuals from childhood as they develop their identity. Taking into account Keiko's Asperger's, she could not develop a proper social identity like her peers, and thus, the store's physical manual is what facilitated Keiko's integration into the group of workers and not into the one of Insiders.

As stated above, Keiko's sudden separation from the convenience store caused her depression, commonly developed by people on the spectrum when their interest is forcefully taken from them. Her attachment to the store was severe to the point that her physical and mental state after leaving was as if she was in withdrawal. This led to a series of events where she sought a new interest and a new job, going full circle only to abandon all desire for normalcy and embrace her true, natural self as a convenience store worker. Murata describes Keiko's actions as "it wasn't what she wanted anymore. Loving a convenience store became more precious of a thing to believe in than being a normal person... So at first becoming a normal human was her longing and her goal, but in the end she came to want something different".

Keiko comes across a rival convenience store on her way to her new job. Despite being warned not to, she could not resist and unconsciously found herself doing her usual chores around the store as if she worked there, "the store's voice began streaming into me. All its sounds quivered with meaning, the vibrations speaking directly to my cells, like music to my ears. I knew instinctively what this store needed without even having to think about it" (Murata 98). Keiko's obsessive interest in the convenience store went beyond its original purpose and became part of her identity.

After living for 32 years battling society and 18 years working as a convenience store worker, Keiko decides to abandon everyone and everything for the sake of the convenience store, even if it goes against social conventions, “It’s not a matter whether they permit it or not. It’s what I am” (101). What began as a first step toward conformity turned into a haven for Keiko. Everything negative about society and all the criticism disappeared in that enclosed environment. For individuals with Asperger’s, interpreting social and emotional cues can be challenging; thus, adherence to social norms is a complex task. It requires the person to have the appropriate motor skills (ToM) to navigate abstract dispositions, which supposedly every member of society is obliged to follow or else will be ostracized by social groups, making them feel alienated.

Murata (2018) states that Keiko was most authentic when she was in her natural state, such as during her time in kindergarten, where she felt free to express herself openly. However, working at the store changed her; she found herself confined by societal expectations, which ultimately transformed her into a more conventional human being. While wearing the mask of a cashier, Keiko was able to conform to societal norms and interact with others to a certain extent so that they would be deemed acceptable. This allowed her to break free from previous isolation and experience a newfound sense of freedom. In essence, working at the convenience store provided Keiko with the opportunity to connect with others and be accepted for who she truly is.

Her true self as a person with Asperger’s needed a foothold so that she could assimilate into society without having to sacrifice her comfort. The convenience store provided Keiko with enough rules to survive inside and outside the store but not enough to be considered a ‘normal’ person outside the store as she declares, “...there was a detailed manual that taught me how to be as store worker, and I still don’t have a clue how to be a normal person outside that manual” (Murata 17). Inside the store, she is considered the perfect worker, appreciated by

her coworkers for her precarity; thus, the value of being a convenience store worker and the store itself is too precious for Keiko to abandon.

II. 5. Between the Convenience Store and Home

The title of the novel *Convenience Store Woman* implies the significance of the convenience store setting to the protagonist, Keiko. Having dedicated 18 years of her life to working at the store, it has become an essential part of her identity. If we look at her description of both settings, it is apparent which place is more valued. The view-scape and soundscape create a variety of aesthetic experiences that can trigger appreciation in an engaged observer or listener (Keiko). In *Convenience Store Woman*, Keiko is not only a dedicated and conscientious worker but also actively listens to the sounds of the convenience store. These sounds evoke certain feelings in Keiko, causing her to describe the convenience store as a “world of sound” (44). The soundscape of the convenience store serves as a foundation and support for her belief and the value she places on her life choices.

She possesses a keen awareness of the auditory elements that are both invoked and evoked by Japan’s convenience store culture and soundscape. Immersed in this sonic environment, Keiko has developed a deep understanding of the subtle nuances and implicit moral implications that are ingrained in this unique setting. Keiko is intimately connected to the convenience store environment as a dedicated store worker. Her extended periods within the store allow her to absorb the full range of sounds that make up its acoustic landscape. From the welcoming chime of the doors to the clacking of customers’ heels and the beeping of barcode scanners, Keiko is attuned to every sound that fills the space. In addition to the everyday sounds of the store, Keiko also takes note of the background music, promotion jingles, and advertisements that contribute to the overall soundscape: “It all blends into the convenience store sound that ceaselessly caresses my eardrums” (06). Through her attentive

listening, Keiko is able to appreciate the intricate tapestry of sounds that make up the auditory experience of a typical convenience store.

It is questionable whether ordinary people who frequent the convenience store are as attentive to the sounds around them as Keiko. The translator of the novel may have answered this question by expressing her opinion on whether the author has exaggerated her description of the convenience store: “It is instantly recognisable to anyone who has ever visited one, right from all the sounds [described] in the very first paragraph” (qtd. in Studarus).

Ultimately, Keiko finds working at a convenience store both fulfilling in terms of quantity and quality. It not only provides her with a way to earn a living but also allows her to create a meaningful life. Applying the idea that our livelihood is determined by what we receive, and our life is determined by what we give. Keiko’s dedication and commitment to her job as a convenience store worker throughout her working life are remarkably valuable. By using her unique human perception, she transforms the ordinary role of a convenience store worker into something extraordinary.

As Keiko tends to intellectualize her emotions, the store sounds appear to evoke them. When she felt alienated by her friends, she felt the need to “hear the sound of the convenience store” (53). The convenience store serves as Keiko’s sanctuary, where she can truly be herself without feeling like an outsider or an alien. Keiko cherishes this haven too much for her to abandon it for the sake of being “cured” and conforming to social expectations. Even if it meant that her family and friends would be disappointed, Murata (2020) describes the extent of her attachment to her room, which represents her haven: “If I’d been accused of escapism and laughed at, or ended up being “cured” and losing my imaginary aliens, I’d have died. Humans die when the only place where their soul can recuperate is destroyed”. When Keiko felt suffocated by Shiraha’s presence in her house, she went to the store to unwind and recuperate.

Even during holidays, she would rather spend that time at the store than visit family, something others would not do.

In comparison, Keiko's house pales. She rarely mentions her feelings when it comes to her home. She has described it as an "old-fashioned type consisting of one tatami room (Appendix 02) that opened onto a small kitchen, with separate bathroom and toilet" (64). This means that her home had only the necessities of life, nothing luxurious. Her income does not allow her to rent or buy a moderately proper apartment. In addition, Keiko views her home simply as a place to recharge between her demanding shifts at the store. This contrast highlights where her priorities lie. With a strong emotional attachment to her work, Keiko sees no reason to invest in unnecessary distractions that may detract from her job performance.

When Keiko quit her job at the Convenience store, she found herself spending several weeks at home consumed by thoughts of her former workplace. "Since I'd left the store, I no longer knew what time I should wake up in the morning. I slept whenever I felt sleepy and ate when I woke up" (93). Her daily routine became regimented, from her sleeping schedule to her meals and overall health. Without the structure of her job at the store, Keiko struggled to establish a new routine and found herself unsure of when to wake up in the morning, struggling to sleep, eat, and keep up her body's well-being.

II. 6. Conclusion

This chapter utilises the theory of psychosocial identity to examine Keiko's identity formation. It is evident that Keiko has faced numerous challenges in shaping her identity, both from external social pressures and internal struggles. These obstacles have resulted in feelings of guilt and confusion, leading Keiko to experience a prolonged period of isolation. In order to maintain harmony within her family and society, Keiko has felt compelled to compromise her true identity.

Upon analysing the Japanese society depicted in the novel, it becomes apparent that it is structured around strict adherence to social norms by social groups. This societal construct has influenced Keiko to believe that her unconventional self must find a way to contribute to society. In her efforts to conform to these societal expectations, Keiko has found herself sacrificing what is most important to her: her job at the convenience store. Even within Japanese society, the convenience store's role in the novel plays a significant role in Keiko's identity formation as it is overly focused on occupation. It provided her with a role in society and a social group to belong to.

This analysis shows that children must go through the eight stages of Erikson's psychosocial identity formation to develop the skills and emotional intelligence needed to form a healthy individual identity in relation to society. Sometimes, when individuals reach the stage of identity vs role, they experience a sense of belonging.

**Chapter Three:
Situating Keiko
Furakura on the
Asperger's
Continuum.**

III. 1. Introduction

Keiko, the narrator of her own story, opens the novel *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) by vividly describing the convenience store that serves as a symbol of her place in society and her contribution to its functioning. Her life revolves around the store, occupying her thoughts even in her dreams. This obsession with the store and her desire to fulfil a role in society to validate her normalcy and usefulness can be traced back to her childhood, which greatly influenced her as an adult. While her memories of childhood are somewhat blurry, Keiko recalls being labelled as a “strange child” (Murata 09). by those around her. Kurniawan and Samanik believe that Japanese society and culture primarily depend on the harmonious relationship between members. When individuals fail to follow the rules like Keiko in *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) but instead follow unconventional ways, the public views them as figures outside of normality and as abnormal or outside the realm of reasonability (494).

As a child, Keiko’s strange behaviour puzzled the adults in her life, who failed to delve deeper into the reasons behind her perceived strangeness. In diagnosing Asperger’s, childhood experiences play a crucial role and are often considered a vital indicator of an accurate diagnosis. Consequently, Keiko internalised the belief that she was indeed abnormal since childhood and needed to fix herself by conforming to social norms through specific strategies.

This notion of her abnormality became ingrained in her psyche and persisted into adulthood; however, through the lens of ASD and, more specifically, Asperger’s, her peculiarities and abnormalities begin to make sense. While she navigates society, she also develops certain defence mechanisms to hide her autistic characteristics. However, she soon realises it is not enough to face society because of the rigid sense of conformity in Japanese society. In this section, relevant Asperger syndrome symptomology is used to prove that Keiko is a character of Asperger’s.

III. 2. From Childhood to Adulthood: Keiko's Asperger's Journey

This section analyses Keiko's display of characteristics associated with Asperger's. First is the age onset, then the empathy gap, and lastly, restricted interest and repetitive behaviour.

III. 2. 1. Age Onset

Keiko asserts that the period of her life before becoming a convenience store worker was somewhat hazy (Murata 09). Despite this claim, she vividly recalls events from her childhood, detailing everyone's reactions and facial expressions as if she were reliving the moments. This exceptional memory suggests a keen attention to detail and a strong recall of past experiences. The situations Keiko describes span various stages of her life, from nursery school to primary school, and these recollections not only highlight her awareness of her circumstances but demonstrate that her experiences were not isolated incidents but rather a continuous part of her growth and development (22).

Attwood (2007) states that young children with Asperger's syndrome may not initially realize they are different from their peers. However, adults and other children will begin to notice that the child behaves, thinks, and plays differently. Initially, adults in the family and at school may view the child as rude and selfish, while peers may see them as strange. Without a diagnosis and explanation, others may pass moral judgments that can harm the child's self-esteem and lead to negative attitudes and consequences.

Over time, the child will start to understand that they perceive and experience the world uniquely, leading to concerns about their differences from other children. This includes varying interests, priorities, social knowledge, as well as facing frequent criticisms from peers and adults. The realisation of being different typically occurs between the ages of six and eight for children with Asperger's syndrome. During this stage of development, children with Asperger's

syndrome may desire social inclusion and a friend to engage with. It is during this time that they may become acutely aware of their differences from their peers, leading to the development of adjustment and compensation strategies (61). Keiko provides examples from her childhood during her time at nursery school and primary school that highlight a lack of situational awareness and empathy towards living creatures. In Japan, children typically attend nursery school between the ages of five months and five years old, coinciding with the onset of Asperger's around age three. This particular incident serves as a poignant illustration of Keiko's early struggles with understanding social cues and emotions.

III. 2.2. The Empathy Gap

When her friends stumbled upon a lifeless bird, their immediate response was to shed tears and feel sorrow, but Keiko had a unique perspective. Instead of succumbing to sadness, she felt a surge of joy, knowing her father's fondness for Yakitori, a dish made from bird meat; in her mind, bringing the dead bird home for dinner made perfect sense.

"What's up, Keiko? Oh! A little bird ... where did it come from, I wonder?" she said gently, stroking my hair. "The poor thing. Shall we make a grave for it?"

"Let's eat it!" I said.

"What?"

"Daddy likes yakitori, doesn't he? Let's grill it and have it for dinner!" (Murata 09).

Keiko's thought process diverged from that of her neurotypical peers and family, but her actions were entirely rational to her. Despite the shock it caused to those around her, Keiko remained unfazed. As the novel describes, "The mother sitting next to her gaped at me, her eyes, nostrils, and mouth forming perfect O's. She looked so comical I almost burst out laughing" (Murata 09). From this passage, it is evident that not only was her behaviour

surprising, but she also could not read people's faces and recognise emotions through facial gestures.

I was captivated by the vision of my parents and little sister happily tucking in around the dinner table. My father was always saying how tasty yakitori was, and what was that if not grilled bird? There were lots more there in the park, so all we had to do was catch some and take them home. I couldn't understand why should we bury the bird instead of eating it (Murata 10).

Nevertheless, based on the quote provided, it is evident that Keiko has some understanding of emotions and can evoke them but struggles to comprehend the reasoning behind emotional reactions and has difficulty applying them in real time like a neurotypical individual.

A similar situation is highlighted from her time in primary school when two boys were fighting. When asked for someone to intervene, Keiko, being straightforward and simple-minded, thought the quickest way to stop the fight was to grab a spade from the tool shed, run over to the boys, and hit one of them on the head. She explains her reasoning by saying, "But everyone was saying to stop Yamazaki-kun and Aoki-kun fighting! I just thought that would be the quickest way to do it," I explained patiently. Why on earth were they so angry? I just didn't get it" (10). She could not understand why teachers were angry at her behaviour. Jaseel and Gaur's analysis of Keiko's behaviour concluded that Keiko's character is eccentric and extremely pragmatic, and "This uncanny behaviour in the protagonist provides the author with the flexibility and versatility to place Keiko outside of existing social customs to provide the readers with a foreign yet advantageous perspective" (03).

This behaviour from the lens of Asperger's can be attributed to the impairment in social interactions, i.e., the struggle to understand or react appropriately to emotional cues in social interactions. Adults around her, such as her parents, seem to be aware of her impairment, and

it reflected poorly on Keiko's psyche, "'I wonder why you can't understand, Keiko ...'" she muttered helplessly on the way home, hugging me to her. It seemed I'd done something wrong again, but I couldn't for the life of me understand what was the problem" (11).

According to Attwood, individuals with Asperger's usually describe being able to understand and relate to family members, including engaging in social activities with siblings. However, when it comes to interacting with peers at school and connecting with a teacher, they perceive themselves as markedly distinct from children of their age (15). Keiko loves her family, but when it comes to classmates and teachers, she can't understand why they are upset with her behaviour. For instance, when her teacher, one day, became hysterical, Keiko applied what she had seen on TV to stop her "...in order to shut her up I ran over and yanked her skirt and knickers down. She was so shocked she burst into tears, but at least she became quiet" (11) because it seemed to be the most suitable method. However, Keiko "...couldn't for the life of me understand what was the problem" (11). Keiko does not exhibit signs of intellectual impairment; however, she seems to struggle with social comprehension compared to her peers.

These incidents caused her to develop defence mechanisms often found in individuals with autism, such as mimicry. Young Keiko decided to mimic those around her who appeared to be "normal," in addition "...to simply follow instruction" (11). Since people are not satisfied with her decision-making, initially, this attitude brought her some peace of mind, but it was short-lived. Her quietness made the adults worry for her again. Nevertheless, she continued in her demeanour, for it was "...the most sensible approach to getting by in life" (12). Keiko still could not grasp the logic behind emotions, even regarding her family. When her mother would scold her sister and be angry at her, she would ask for the reason behind her anger. Keiko's sister would think that Keiko was protecting her, but Keiko was genuinely curious.

Since Japan is believed to be group-oriented, her family, classmates and teachers could be seen as a group of insiders, and Keiko is the outsider who does not fit in and is incapable of

following the norms they all share. On a final attempt to seek a cure for their daughter, Keiko was taken to a therapist who "...immediately assumed there must be some problem at home, but really there wasn't" (12). A professional assessment is crucial for children who fall on the autism spectrum. In Keiko's case, her condition was overlooked, possibly due to the fact that symptoms of Asperger's are not as readily apparent at a young age compared to those of autism.

The motor coordination problems of girls may not be so conspicuous in the playground, and they are less likely to have developed the conduct problems that can prompt a referral for a diagnostic assessment for a boy. Thus, where a girl has developed the ability to conceal her signs of Asperger's syndrome in the playground and classroom, and even in the diagnostic assessment, then parents, teachers and clinicians may fail to see any conspicuous characteristics of Asperger's syndrome. (Attwood 47)

As a result, she missed out on the opportunity to receive an explanation for her differences and consequently entered adulthood believing that she needed to be cured of whatever was causing her to be perceived as abnormal.

III. 2. 3. Restricted Interest and Repetitive Behaviour

Individuals with Asperger's syndrome often struggle with interpersonal interactions yet may possess exceptional skills in specific areas of expertise. Growing up with minimal interest and in isolation, one could say that once Keiko joined the convenience store, her interest solely and obsessively revolved around it. This restricted, repetitive pattern of behaviour manifested through her anxieties as someone with a cognitive disability such as Asperger's but is unaware of her own frame of reference. Her daily routine developed as a coping mechanism, protecting her from her fears of social criticism and giving her a sense of normalcy that she has always longed for. Such routines are helpful in making life more predictable and orderly. After

becoming a convenience store worker, Keiko's routine revolved around her interest which is the convenience store.

Sometimes I even find myself operating the checkout till in my dreams. I wake up with a start, thinking: *Oh! This new line of crisps is missing a price tag, or, We've sold a lot of hot tea, so I'd better restock the display cabinet.* I've also been woken up in the middle of the night by the sound of my own voice calling out: "Irasshaimasé!" When I can't sleep, I think about the transparent glass box that is still stirring with life even in the darkness of night. That pristine aquarium is still operating like clockwork. As I visualize the scene, the sounds of the store reverberate in my eardrums and lull me to sleep. When morning comes, once again I'm a convenience store worker, a cog in society. This is the only way I can be a normal person. (Murata 18).

Keiko's interest in the store initially began as her obsessive interest in becoming normal, and the convenience store provided her with that. The secure environment of the convenience store gives Keiko comfort and security from the society outside. This sort of interest sometimes stems from a pleasurable experience; when Keiko first came across the convenience store, she was fascinated by its structure that, in her words, resembled an aquarium that contained her and protected her from the outside world and at the same time, the pleasure she felt in becoming part of society was superior to anything else she ever felt.

With regard to routines developed alongside the interest, i.e., the convenience store, Keiko's day begins and ends with the convenience store occupying her existence. From pages 18 to 23 of the novel, Keiko narrates her daily routine. Once she gets to her work, she expresses, "I love this moment. It feels like "morning" itself is being loaded into me. The tinkle of the door chime as a customer comes in sounds like church bells to my ears. When I open the door, the brightly lit box awaits me—a dependable, normal world that keeps turning. I have faith in the

world inside the light-filled box” (23). However, after partnering with Shiraha, her routine and sense of security in the convenience store were disturbed, something Keiko is not accustomed to, and she could not fathom why would trivial things such as her relationship status be more important than running the store properly which made her feel irritated because she firmly believed that, “As a convenience store worker, I couldn’t believe they were putting gossip about store workers before a promotion...” (75).

The sense of security and comfort that she experienced as a store worker started to diminish as a foreign element was added to her routine (relationship), and with it, the sense of sameness and homogeneity among the store workers and Keiko blurred.

Even though they still wore the same uniform and did the same work, I had the feeling they were less like store workers than they had been before. Only the customers remained unchanged and continued to need me to be a perfect store worker for them. I’d thought the rest of the staff was made up of the same cells as me, but in the current strange atmosphere a village mentality was taking over and they were fast reverting to ordinary males and females. Now only the customers still allowed me to be just a convenience store worker. (81)

When they began treating her as a normal person, it conflicted with her interest and desire to simply be a store worker. When completely removed from the convenience store, Keiko developed depression, as she could not adjust her body and mind to a different routine after she had been connected to the store for 18 years. She states, “My body has always had been connected to the convenience store even when I wasn’t working” (91). Being separated from the store was akin to being “...cut off from the world” (92). Her existence seemed meaningless; there were no standards to live by, “There was nothing to guide me over whether an action was rational or not. Before I became a store worker, I must have been following some kind of logic in my judgments, but I’d forgotten whatever guiding principles I’d followed back then” (94).

During this period of disorientation, Keiko decides to pursue a new interest that could potentially give her new living standards while also benefiting society “I’m an animal of the human species, so perhaps having children to make my species prosper would be the correct path for me” (95). Despite her lack of empathy and dislike toward babies, mentioned in previous sections, however, this thought was quickly shut down by a person from the group of insiders, bluntly stating that “You’ll be doing us all a favour by not leaving your genes behind. That’s the best contribution to the human race you could make” (96). This shows that despite Keiko’s effort to engage with society, it is not enough to be welcomed into the group of Insiders; from society’s standpoint, both she and Shiraha are outsiders.

III. 3. Asperger’s and the Struggle of Conformity

Once Keiko decided to remain quiet to keep away from trouble, she found herself in a state of solitude commonly linked to children and adults with Asperger’s: “In solitude, the child does not have a *qualitative impairment in social interaction*. At least two people are needed for there to be a social interaction, and if the child is alone, there will be no evidence of any social impairment” (Attwood 55). Therefore, she engulfed herself in solitude to avoid social interaction for fear of trouble, saying, “I basically spent my free time alone, and didn’t talk to anyone in private at all” (Murata 12). Nevertheless, her state of solitude could only last for so long, and just like that, she grew into an adult who needed to survive and had no shows but to socialise and find a job. Consequently, when Keiko first entered university, she came across the convenience store where the majority of events take place; at that time, Keiko was only thinking of part-time work. However, what she experienced there was much more than just a job to gain income; it was the place where she could use her defence strategies and be trained to “...accomplish a normal facial expression and manner of speech” (Murata 14).

Since joining the convenience store, Keiko has found solace and has been fascinated by the sense of normalcy that comes with being “homogenous” (Murata 15). By this statement, convenience store worker Murata may symbolise the convenience store as a homogeneous Japanese society. At eighteen years old, Keiko, as a youth, had embodied to some extent the traits of a typical Japanese individual; as a youth, she was obliged by the conformist Japanese society to follow the norms of studying, working, marriage, and having children. So far, Keiko has accomplished two of these by completing her education and finding a job. However, she realizes that even career choices must be approved by society. In line with Frager's statement, Keiko acknowledges her weaknesses, even if she does not fully understand them, and is motivated to meet social expectations in order to maintain social harmony.

As Keiko spent the majority of her time at the convenience store, her social circle was very small, limited to her sister Mami, who is married and has a child, her parents, co-workers, and a few friends from school whom she keeps contact with because when else would she be able to meet ‘normal people as she says. However, she was not very fond of the idea of always having to seem normal to her friends. Otherwise, they would not like her, and therefore, her social circle would be even more limited, and news of her ‘abnormality’ would be discussed by everyone, just like during her childhood, which bothered her quite a lot. In this regard, Keiko always attempts to find excuses for her stagnant social status of being single, childless, and unable to get a ‘proper’ job.

there wasn't any difference between Miho's child and my nephew, and I didn't understand the logic of coming out all the way here just to see him. Maybe this particular baby should be more important to me than the others. But so far as I could see, aside from a few minor differences they were all just an animal called a baby and looked much the same, just like stray cats all looked much the same. (Murata 38)

In the passage above, it can be seen that Keiko does not hold any special affection toward people. It is more like a chore to her; keeping in contact with her family and friends is an obligation of social norms she does not understand. Her description of babies shows that she does not hold any affection for things everyone else finds adorable, such as babies. She even goes as far as to call them animals and describes her nephew as "...strangely soft, like a blister" (38). People with Asperger's, like Keiko, tend not to have any particular affection, even toward their family, let alone friends, only for looks. Even when Shiraha, a new store employee and later the person she enters a contractual relationship with, starts living with her, she describes him as an animal "It's the first time I've kept an animal at home, so it feels like having a pet, you see" (70). For her to pass as normal, Keiko seeks help from her sister Mami, who takes the role of a member of the insider's group in Japanese society and also the role of a friend for a person with Asperger's (Keiko). In both cases, her role is to help Keiko uphold her position inside the group. Mami provides with social monitoring (rehabilitated as Mami calls it in the novel) and guidance on what is appropriate social conduct, so Keiko often makes requests of Mami to "... come up with a better excuse for me. Lately when I tell them I'm not very strong, they give me disbelieving looks" (38).

Being weak is an excuse Keiko habitually uses when asked why she still works at the convenience store; now that they question it, Keiko feels anxious because she believes that once they get the idea that she is not 'normal' they will "give her a hard time about it...That'd be a lot of bother. So it'd be handy to have an excuse to fend them off with" (38). Since the binary between Insiders and Outsiders must be made evident, Murata shed light on this mentality found in those in the insiders' group who, once notice someone not adhering to the norms of totality, they will be ostracised. Keiko expresses her feelings on this matter by saying, "When something was strange, everyone thought they had the right to come stomping all over your life to figure out why. I found that arrogant and infuriating, not to mention a pain in the neck. Sometimes I

even wanted to hit them with a shovel to shut them up, like I did that time in elementary school” (38-9).

Keiko’s problem-solving skills did not change even as an adult; she may not have acted on it, but she still thought of the easiest, always violent solutions. Similar to the case of the people who criticise, her nephew was no exception; Keiko thought once she saw him crying, “What a hassle I thought. I looked at the small knife we’d used to cut the cake still lying there on the table: if it was just a matter of making him quiet, it would be easy enough” (39). People with Asperger’s may possess original problem-solving methods but are also unconventional.

Murata makes an allegory amidst the novel when Shiraha joins the store. He was soon fired since he was showing inappropriate conduct and being a nuisance to the rest of the employees. Shiraha represents the outsider in Japanese society, and the rest of the employees are the group of insiders, while the convenience store is a symbol of Japanese society. In this part of the novel, Keiko mentions a couple of times that the convenience store is a “...forcibly normalized environment...” (46) and that Shiraha would soon be “fixed” (46). Like how she has been fixed. However, the word fixed holds a double meaning, which is ‘fired’, which is what happened to Shiraha.

Keiko believes that she and Shiraha are similar; both try to look and act human, except that he is not hiding it, unlike her, and is heavily criticised by others. Ridout (2020) described Shiraha’s character as one-dimensional; she went as far as to label him as an ‘incel,’ i.e. (involuntary celibate) who thinks all men are entitled to sex. They believe their inability to find sexual or romantic partners is the result of only their physical appearance and the increasing empowerment of women. He contrasts and is similar to Keiko. His toxic and sexist beliefs are supposed to be met with repulsion on the reader’s side. However, he ultimately does not fully embrace these ideas, much like Keiko. The difference between the two lies in the method in which they handled the conformity issue. Shiraha constantly complains about how unfair it is

for those who do not conform, which is partly true, but he fails to recognise his flaws. Deep down, Shiraha desires to conform because of his insecurities, unlike Keiko, who seems secure in herself. Nonetheless, Shiraha's behaviour, especially toward marriage, reflects an idealised traditional family-corporate system in Japan, which is criticised for being based on outdated biological essentialism (Jaseel and Rashmi 06).

Keiko is far more similar to him than she thinks; they are both in their thirties and working the same job. However, Shiraha is described as "A dead-ender. The worst type, just a burden on society. People have a duty to fulfil their role in society either through the workplace or the family" (42). When the co-workers realized that the description was similar to the situation of Keiko, they attempted damage control by saying that there exist exceptional cases such as Keiko's and that it is different for men and women. Thornbury (2020) states that "...in a strangely unpredictable way, she is the most conforming" (70). After all, her life witnessed a silver lining when she was first employed at the convenience store and found salvation in the employee handbook. To others, family and friends view her as a failure and an object of pity. Keiko may not be the ideal Japanese woman or individual, but her qualities allow her to be a pillar of Japanese society (70).

Nevertheless, this shows that if Keiko had not fulfilled her social role in the convenience store society and maintained social harmony, she too would have been fixed in another sense. When everyone rejoiced at the departure of Shiraha, Keiko thought to herself, "...if I ever became a foreign object, I'd no doubt be eliminated in much the same way" (48). In the event of Shiraha's dismissal, "Keiko was mentally disturbed at how easily misfits are replaced in a capitalist institution" (Jaseel and Rashmi 06). On top of her irregular employment, her gender as a woman contributes to her struggles. According to statistics from OECD (2020) provided by Jaseel and Rashmi in Japan, a large number of women work part-time or in low-paying jobs. In 2019, 44.5% of employed women had part-time or temporary positions, while only 11.7%

of employed men did. Ridout (2020) states that the author “provides a greater commentary on Japanese society, brushing on issues such as sexism and the unhealthy relationship Japanese people have with work”, and the role of Shiraha is used as an irony since the status of being in a marital relationship is more important than the dynamic of the people of that relationship. This situation makes Keiko question the dysfunctional nature of society (Jaseel and Rashmi 07).

III. 3. 1. Conformity by Adhering to Women’s Stereotypes

Keiko is frequently reminded of her differences, even by her parents. Now and then, her mother calls to inquire about any new developments in her life. However, the response is consistently unchanged. Keiko is keenly aware of her parent’s expectations; she describes her mother’s reaction as “she sounded both relieved and disappointed at once” (50). Showing that although they wish for her to change, they are also relieved that she has not caused any trouble that would attract attention to herself like in the past, which can sometimes lead to feelings of depression when they discover that nothing has changed about her.

Keiko’s parents are not the only ones expecting change at this time; even her friends seem to think it is time for Keiko to conform by getting married if she is not going to develop her career path, after all as a Japanese woman, it is not socially acceptable to remain unwed. Keiko was invited to a friend’s gathering, and she was put on the spot by many who thought it was only natural to find a good job or get married. Her friend’s husband, whom she had never met before, looked at her as if she was an alien and said, “I mean, if finding a job is so hard, then at least you should get married. Look, these days there are always things like online marriage sites, you know” (51). Everyone in the room agreed that it was about time Keiko got married, completely disregarding her wishes. Herlina and Al Hafizh discuss women’s stereotypes shown in the novel, such as women’s role as mothers. Almost every other woman

in the novel is married and has a child except Keiko. The real thoughts of society on Keiko's situation can be witnessed through a brief discussion she had with her friend's husband while trying to sign her up on a marriage website:

“Well, worth trying, the sooner the better. You can't go on like this, and deep down you must be getting desperate, no? Once you get past a certain age it'll be too late.”

“I can't go on like this? You mean I shouldn't be living the way I am now? Why do you say that?” (52).

Everyone thinks it is logical, except for Keiko, who, due to Asperger's, cannot understand the need for marriage. This reaction causes her to be ostracised again, just like when she was a child; she was viewed as an outsider who was kicked out of the group because they could not follow the norms. She recalls, “The next thing I knew, just like that time in elementary school, they all turned their backs on me and started edging away, staring curiously at me over their shoulders as though contemplating some ghastly life form” (53). Consequently, it raises attention to societal pressure on single or childless women, yet women's struggles are still undermined in comparison to men; it can be seen in Shiraha's speech on marriage,

Don't make it sound so easy! We men have it much harder than women, you know. If you're not yet a fully-fledged member of society, then it's get a job, and if you've got a job, it's earn more money, and if you earn more money, it's get married and have offspring. Society is continually judging us. Don't lump me together with women. (58)

Shiraha, a misfit like Keiko, blames society for his current; he makes a correlation between the theory of group consciousness and The Japanese society, where conformity is a must, to a village where “People who don't fit into the village are expelled” (58). he continues to make his point by giving examples of social norms enforced on people “...men who don't hunt,

women who don't give birth to children. For all we talk about modern society and individualism, anyone who doesn't try to fit in can expect to be meddled with, coerced, and ultimately banished from the village" (58). Through Shiraha's speech, Murata criticises modern societies, primarily Japan, claiming to embrace diversity and individualism while simultaneously rejecting any form of nonconformity. This commentary sheds light on the paradoxical nature of societal expectations and the challenges confronted by those who do not adhere to the status quo.

With Keiko being unable to form strong relationships based on affection, the fear of rejection by society leads her to form a relationship with Shiraha, another outsider like her "I found society just as annoying as he did..." (57). If she cannot change her job because she is attached to the convenience store, the next best thing to do is get married so she can be back in the group of insiders. And Shiraha will be isolated from society's preying eyes as he wishes. Her marriage offer to Shiraha was met with rejection. Even though Shiraha has been complaining about society thus far, he is still part of the problem; rejecting Keiko because she is not the ideal woman a Japanese man would want, Herlina and Al-Hafiz suggest that when Keiko entered a contractual relationship with Shiraha, his comments on her body were very demeaning but reduced to "truth" because that is how society views middle-aged women who have not achieved anything by society's standards (280-2). Keiko's desperate attempt to conform to societal norms through marriage highlights individuals' pressure to fit into predetermined roles and standards. Ultimately, the rejection she faces from Shiraha serves as a plain reminder of the harsh reality of societal judgment and the challenges of navigating relationships in a society that values conformity above all else.

Eventually, Shiraha and Keiko form a relationship of convenience; contrary to Shiraha, Keiko's condition allows her to remain practical: "...I don't have any particular purpose of my own, if the village wants things to be a certain way, then I don't going along with it" (61).

However, Shiraha holds resentment toward society, which is to be expected from a normal person facing obstacles for being different, as he claims, “That’s why contemporary society is dysfunctional. They might mumble nice things about diversity of lifestyles and whatnot, but in the end nothing has changed since prehistoric times...not being of any use to the village means being condemned just for existing” (68).

By pretending to fulfil one of the social norms, “marriage”, she starts facing much more pressure from society. She then realizes that she would have done so long ago if normalcy warranted getting married. However, she would not have known that due to her condition, Asperger’s, she needed to be expressly told what to do just like in the convenience store where a manual exists, except the world’s manual existed in human minds. Her cognitive condition did not allow her to have that “the manual for life already existed. It was just that it was already ingrained in everyone’s heads, and there wasn’t any need to put it in writing. The specific form of what is considered an “ordinary person” had been there all along, unchanged since prehistoric times I finally realized” (63).

Upon hearing of her relationship, many of her acquaintances automatically assumed that she would be getting married and having children, disregarding the fact that he had never stated so, which shows society’s expectations of women. Shiraha’s character could be said to be a symbol of society’s criticism of women even when the society itself is dysfunctional. He constantly comments on her body, career, and celibacy: “You need to wake up, Furukura. To put it bluntly, you’re the lowest of the low. Your womb is probably too old to be of any use, and you don’t even have the looks to serve as a means to satisfy carnal desire. But then neither are you earning money like a man...you’re just a burden on the village, the dregs of society” (67). His speeches contribute to her feelings of anxiety, making her wish for any change in her life that would turn the tide in her favour.

Despite the fact she is supporting him, Shiraha, an incel, constantly criticises and marvels at Keiko's struggle "I always did want revenge, on women who are allowed to become parasites just because they're women" (78). Completely disregarding the social criticism, Keiko constantly faces and attempts to conceal herself from it. Keiko's cognitive condition makes it so his words do not affect her, and she continues to refer to him as an animal because, in Keiko's mind, there is no distinction between male and female, but they are animals of the human species. Now that she has done something stereotypical of women, Keiko feels as if her worth as a store worker has been reduced "...but in the current strange atmosphere of the village mentality was taken over, and they were fast reverting to ordinary males and females" (81).

With the idea that *Convenience Store Woman*'s main character is a woman, the novel's original title is *Konbini Ningen*, which should have been translated to *Convenience Store Human*; however, a choice was made to change "human" into "woman". The term *Human* would have made it more inclusive as the feeling of alienation and nonconformity is not exclusive to women, but any human could find himself in a similar situation. The only difference lies in gender discrimination, and women are more likely to face this problem. The decision was made by the publisher and not the author or the translator (Murata 2018). This means that it could have been a move to appeal to Western audiences, making it clear that the novel's protagonist is a woman, thus passing the novel as a feminist work. Murata explains that although Keiko is a woman, once she started working at the convenience store, "she became so constrained by it, and those constraints turned her into a very human creature. When she wears the mask of a cashier, she can act like a human, as if she were a human". When Keiko puts on her uniform, she transforms from a middle-aged woman without a husband or children into a convenience store worker, as she describes herself as a free worker from the constraints of gender roles and society's expectations (Ridout).

Gangidi (2023) considers the convenience store to serve as a personal refuge, allowing her to blend in with the crowd and experience a sense of equality among her co-workers. The repetitive nature of her daily tasks further contributes to this feeling of normalcy. She argues that those around her also influence Keiko as she strives to achieve a level of normalcy that is deemed satisfactory. By incorporating the acceptable behaviour of others into her own identity, she embodies a socially acceptable form of imitation, which is seen as a natural way to preserve humanity.

III. 4. Unveiling Keiko's Defence Mechanisms

Per the defence mechanisms found in people with Asperger's, Keiko seems to have developed some that she is aware of, such as mimicry and others, such as Masking and camouflaging faces of the same coin unknowingly. At a young age, Keiko mimicked those around her to seem more normal and avoid unwanted criticism from her social milieu.

III. 4. 1. Mimicry

To show that Keiko has developed mimicry as a defence mechanism after she could not grasp the concept of normality, she declares, "I would no longer do anything of my own accord, and would either just mimic what everyone else was doing, or simply follow instructions" (Murata 11). Mimicry enabled her to cope with social pressure by hiding away parts of herself that others found strange, and it developed with time, especially when she joined the workforce. After all, one thing she loves about her job and the reason why she continued to work at the convenience store for eighteen years is being able to use her ability to mimic others. Jaseel and Rashmi claim that Keiko's work environment helped her persuade her to mimic a normal person. At work, it was easier for her to act normal because it provided her with instruction, and an authority figure was always present to tell her what to do, whereas she struggles to be

normal outside of work (04). At the same time, she appears 'normal' in at least the aspect of her career to her colleagues, friends, and family.

She mimics certain aspects of her colleagues around her age, like the way they dress, talk, the slang they use or the tone of voice, "My speech is especially infected by everyone around me and is currently a mix of that of Mrs. Izumi and Sugawara" (20). Keiko believes it is humane nature to mimic each other to "maintain ourselves as human" (20). Therefore, she sees nothing wrong in spying on her female colleagues' clothing articles and makeup products and purchasing similar ones because if he copied them to a tea, others would notice her mimicry and might shame her for it, which contradicts the purpose of mimicry.

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 20)

In the passage above, Keiko admits that her identity is not solely her own but a mix of others. Sometimes, the people she mimics would like the items she brought, and that would make her happy because now, she must look so ordinary and normal, "I'm sure everyone must see me as someone with an age-appropriate bag and a manner of speech that has a perfect sense of distance without being reserved or rude" (21) Keiko mimics her supervisor and colleagues to fit in and feel like a person. However, this imitation prevents her from forming close relationships and expressing her true feelings and thoughts. Despite feeling disconnected from intimacy, she continues to perform her duties as a store worker repeatedly. This concept of iterability in her actions is important to understand her identity formation since her job at the convenience store gives her a sense of purpose and identity. The latter demonstrates that her performance as the ideal store worker is not a one-time event but a repeated ritual driven by social constraints and

the fear of being ostracized (04). It is argued that Keiko's repetitive imitation stems from a desire to be treated as normal and to make her life bearable, influenced by societal norms rather than personal identity. "Murata's characterisation of Keiko asks the pertinent question of hegemonic norms and capitalist policies, leading to a life of precarity" (Jaseel and Rashmi 04).

Keiko has observed that her ability to mimic others has positively impacted her social interactions. When people respond favourably to her appearance, speech, and emotions, she feels a sense of validation and connection. This feeling is particularly significant to her, as she expresses, "I'd felt similarly reassured any number of times here in the convenience store" (22). Spending the majority of her time in the convenience store, more so than the average Japanese individual, has given her a feeling of belonging. She feels she serves a purpose in this familiar environment and can navigate societal norms comfortably and efficiently.

Keiko's momentum did not last long because she constantly changed who she mimicked or added different things to her compound personality. People outside the convenience store noticed these light changes. Keiko dreads social interaction outside the convenience store. However, she forces herself to meet with people her age so she can "... mingle with "normal" women my age" (24). When Keiko met with her friends after a long time, it was noticeable to them, who had not seen her in months, that she had changed; her friend exclaimed, "You have changed somehow", and continued to comment, "Didn't you use to speak more normally? Maybe it's just your hairstyle, but somehow there is a different air about you" (24). This indicates that Keiko's ability to mimic puts her at a disadvantage when she changes social settings or is around people she meets less frequently, like this one friend. Since she is used to the convenience store environment, she has been accustomed to a different tone of voice, which she has absorbed from her colleagues Izumi and Sugawara. However, she admits that it changes over time when she meets new colleagues. Although she seems content with the status quo, she also displays signs of anxiety and depression because nobody acknowledges her authentic self

“It was the me with different clothes and speech rhythms that was smiling. Who was it that my friends were talking to?” instead, they are interacting with a version of herself that exists solely to fit into societal norms. Keiko adds, “Yet Yukari was still smiling at me, repeating again how much she’d missed me” (25). In this statement, Keiko questions who her friend misses; undoubtedly, it is not the real her, for they have never met the real Keiko.

Keiko observes her friends’ gestures and habits and notices that they, too, mimic each other. For example, they talk and speak in the same manner, but she cannot remember whether they have always been like this, yet she never comments on their behaviour. On the contrary, she does not pay enough attention to others as they do to her for her to comment on it. Murata could have used this narrative to show the binary between insiders and outsiders. Although they are all part of the same Japanese society, the insiders, which in this case are her friends, pay attention to details so they can maintain the group and Keiko, who is the outsider, doing her best so she can remain within the group of insiders, but it was never enough.

III. 4. 2. Masking and Camouflage

Mimicry often results in the masking of one’s true identity, as seen in Keiko’s case of autistic masking. Each time Keiko adopts a new behaviour, whether in speech or appearance, she conceals her autistic self. This behaviour is rooted in Keiko’s fear of rejection from society, stemming from past experiences of social exclusion during her childhood. Mimicry became a survival mechanism for Keiko, leading to the inevitable outcome of masking. Similarly, camouflaging also played a role in Keiko’s life, as she suppressed her true thoughts and emotions in an effort to blend in with the mainstream. The primary incitement for developing such habits goes back to the behaviour people on the spectrum display within social interactions stemming from difficulties in the area of verbal and nonverbal social communication, which

sets them apart from neurotypicals in the group (María and Loisa Bennetto). Both masking and camouflaging involve hiding one's differences in order to fit in with societal norms.

The driving force of Keiko's determination to mask herself from society goes back to her childhood when her mother constantly talked about how Keiko needed to be fixed and cured, in addition to the negative reactions she received upon taking action on her own accord. Now, even though Keiko is an adult, the thought remains attached to her: "You eliminate the parts of your life that others find strange— maybe that's what everyone means when they say they want to "cure" me" (61). Keiko is self-aware of her differences and wants to blend in with the group (insiders). Previously, it has been mentioned that when a group member is not adhering to the rules, they will be constantly reminded to follow them or else they will have to leave. Similarly, Keiko has been constantly reminded of the norms she has not been adhering to: "These past two weeks I'd been asked fourteen times why I wasn't married. And twelve times why I was still working part-time. So for now I'd decide what to eliminate from my life according to what I was asked about most often I thought" (61).

The primary purpose of masking is to fit in; when Keiko announced her relationship with Shiraha to her friends, they were overjoyed, and Keiko for the first, time felt as if she had finally become one of the insiders "for the first time I was part of their circle. I had the feeling they were all welcoming me on board" (72). And that made her very aware of her position before this novelty "...until now they'd evidently thought of me as an outsider" (72). One crucial consequence of masking is a delay in autistic screening and, by extension, Asperger's. This is the case with Keiko; since childhood, she has been concealing herself from society, pretending to be normal. However, her latest measures to blend in led to an outburst from her sister "Will you ever be cured, Keiko ...? ...I simply can't take it anymore. How can we make you normal? How much longer must I put up with this?" (83) it shows that her efforts until now were tolerated but, she was never thought of as normal instead they were aware that she has

behaving strangely “Ever since you started working at the convenience store, you’ve gotten weirder and weirder. The way you talk, the way you yell out at home as if you were still in the store, and even your facial expressions are weird. I’m begging you. Please try to be normal!” (83). While Keiko thought she managed to pretend to be a normal human, the group thought otherwise. A suggestion to see a counsellor was brought up again after 30-something years when it was too late and uneventful in Keiko’s opinion: “it didn’t do any good, did it? And I don’t even know what it is I need to be cured of” (38).

Considering Keiko’s Asperger’s, she is unfamiliar with the appropriate behaviour of someone in a relationship, and assuming that her sister is someone safe to be around, with no need to pretend, she tells her the true state of her relationship with Shiraha. However, her sister's reaction made Keiko question what was wrong with her: “So, will I be cured if I leave the convenience store? Or am I better staying working there? And should I kick Shiraha out? Or am I better with him here? Look, I’ll do whatever you say. I don’t mind either way, so please just instruct me in specific terms” This statement shows that Keiko was exhausted, stressed and anxious for nobody was helping her but would rather see her as normal even if she was having problems “She’s far happier thinking her sister is normal, even if she has a lot of problems than she is having an abnormal sister for whom everything is fine. For her, normality—however messy—is far more comprehensible” (84).

III. 5. Conclusion

Upon examination of Keiko’s behaviour in alignment with characteristics found in individuals with Asperger’s, it could be said that Keiko has the cognitive condition Asperger syndrome under the spectrum of autism, leading to experiencing social pressure and ostracising at a young age. As a result, Keiko engulfed herself in solitude while thinking of the best course of action that would save her from social criticism. Mimicry, making, and camouflage came to

be handy in managing social settings; however, as a Japanese woman, society holds her to some expectations.

Despite her efforts, the use of mimicry and masking in order to maintain her position within the group of insiders turned out to be a futile attempt from her side, for the insiders were not satisfied with her just fulfilling some social roles. Therefore, she could not continue to live life as she wished. However, as society decreed, she was forced to conform by abandoning her comfortable celibacy and career for the sake of social harmony and others' need for a sense of normalcy, even if it brings misery to unconventional/neurodivergent individuals such as Keiko. Both Keiko and Shiraha represent men and women in Japanese society who are held to certain social expectations based on gender, or else they would be considered abnormal and consequently ostracized.

Keiko's effort to maintain social harmony and integrate into society caused her more harm than it did in protecting her from social criticism. The reason for her unconventional thinking and personality could have been connected to her neurodivergent state; only then would she have understood the root of her behavioural issues, and appropriate measures would have been taken to ensure Keiko's role in society is suited to her condition

General Conclusion

This research work has been one of the first attempts to thoroughly examine the possibility of Keiko, the protagonist of *Convenience Store Woman*, being an individual with Asperger's. It has set out to investigate the various concepts related to identity within the context of Japanese society. It delved into social norms, group consciousness, conformity, and non-conformity, all of which shape an individual's identity in Japan.

Despite being a work of fiction, *Convenience Store Woman* sheds light on real social issues in Japan. The novel reflects a cultural context that emphasises conformity and harmony within society, often through adherence to societal rules. This research took a unique approach by exploring Keiko's experiences as an individual with Asperger's navigating Japanese society and the defence mechanisms she employs to appear normal and avoid criticism.

By examining Keiko's journey through the lens of identity formation, this research provided a deeper understanding of the complexities of individuality and societal expectations in Japan. It has explored how Keiko's identity formation has been influenced by societal pressures and internal struggles, leading to feelings of guilt and isolation. Keiko felt compelled to conform to societal expectations, sacrificing her true self in the process. The novel's depiction of Japanese society emphasises strict adherence to social norms, which has shaped Keiko's beliefs about her role in society. Her job at the convenience store plays a significant role in her identity formation, providing her a sense of belonging and purpose. The analysis suggests that individuals must go through Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial identity formation to develop the skills needed for a healthy sense of self and belonging within society.

However, one of the aims of this research was to test the hypothesis of whether Keiko was a person with Asperger syndrome. Upon analysing Keiko's behaviour guided by the DSM-five Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, in relation to characteristics commonly found in individuals with Asperger's syndrome, it is evident that she exhibits traits consistent with the cognitive condition of Asperger's syndrome, which falls within the Autism

Spectrum. This has resulted in Keiko facing social pressures and experiencing ostracism from a young age. In response, Keiko withdrew into solitude, contemplating the best course of action to shield herself from social criticism.

Utilising mimicry, masking, and camouflage became essential tools for Keiko in navigating social situations. However, as a Japanese woman, societal expectations placed additional constraints on her. Despite her efforts to conform and maintain her place within social circles, Keiko found that her attempts were ultimately futile. The insiders were not satisfied with her merely fulfilling social roles, leading to her inability to live life on her own terms. Consequently, she felt compelled to conform, sacrificing her personal desires, celibacy, and career for the sake of social harmony and the need for perceived normalcy.

Both Keiko and Shiraha exemplify individuals in Japanese society who are constrained by rigid social expectations based on gender, risking ostracism if they deviate from societal norms. Keiko's pursuit of social integration, aimed at avoiding criticism, ironically resulted in more harm than protection. It is plausible that her unconventional thinking and personality stem from her neurodivergent state. Recognising this connection could have provided insight into the root of her behavioural challenges, enabling appropriate measures to be implemented to ensure Keiko's societal role aligns with her condition.

Convenience Store Woman can be further analysed from multiple lenses. Although Murata describes her work as a description of Japanese society and the natural human nature, many themes in the novel could be analysed from a feminist point of view. The gender gap shown in the novel could also be analysed from different perspectives, such as work and social discrimination.

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Appendices

Appendix 01: Convenience Store (Bigman)



Appendix 02: Tatami (McElhinney)

