

## CONTEMPORARY URBAN HIDEAWAYS: SHOPS IN TWO JAPANESE NOVELS

Beatrice-Maria ALEXANDRESCU<sup>1</sup>  
University of Bucharest

---

maria.alexandrescu@drd.unibuc.ro

**DOI:** 10.35923/AUTFil.60-1.05

**Abstract:** The aim of the present study is to identify how different types of shops—a thrift shop and a convenience store—are represented in two Japanese novels that illustrate various facets of contemporary society: Kawakami Hiromi's (b. 1958) *Furudōgu Nakano shōten* (The Nakano Thrift Shop, 2005) and Murata Sayaka's (b. 1979) *Konbini ningen* (Convenience Store Woman, 2016). What are the narratives that define such spaces of monetary transit? How do these writers weave a specific image of the shop in their prose? And what role does the shop play in these novels that present aspects of contemporaneity – for example, on the one hand, social phobia in the case of Kawakami's male character Takeo, and on the other hand, alienation and the pressure to conform to society's norms in the case of Murata's female protagonist Keiko? In this article I analyze how these commercial spaces are depicted as urban hideaways in Kawakami Hiromi's *The Nakano Thrift Shop* and Murata Sayaka's *Convenience Store Woman*. These places are characterized not only by the

---

<sup>1</sup> Beatrice-Maria Alexandrescu is a PhD student within the Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies (University of Bucharest) and Teaching Assistant in the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures at the University of Bucharest. She received a bachelor's degree in Japanese language and literature and German language and literature from the University of Bucharest in 2018, a master's degree in East-Asian Studies, and a master's degree in German Studies from the University of Bucharest, both in 2020. Her research interests are in the areas of classical Japanese literature, modern Japanese literature, Japanese aesthetics, translation studies, cultural anthropology, imagology, intercultural communication, popular culture, and foreign language didactics. Currently, she is completing her doctoral thesis on the translation of Mishima Yukio's novels from Japanese into Romanian.

financial dimension, but by an emotional one as well, namely the possibility of building new relationships with other people (for instance, the staff members, their relatives, and the customers) and a special bond with one's workplace.<sup>2</sup>

**Keywords:** *Japanese literature, Kawakami Hiromi, Murata Sayaka, shop, hideaway.*

## Introduction

In his seminal contribution to the understanding of individual perception of place, *The Betweenness of Place: Towards a Geography of Modernity*, Nicholas Entrikin wrote:

To understand place requires that we have access to both an objective and a subjective reality. From the decentered vantage point of the theoretical scientist, place becomes either location or a set of generic relations and thereby loses much of its significance for human action. From the centered viewpoint of the subject, place has meaning only in relation to an individual's or a group's goals and concerns. Place is best viewed from points in between. (Entrikin 1991, 5)

Place has not only a spatial meaning, but an emotional one: by indicating the name of a specific place, one does not only delimit it from some different places, but one may also attach a psychological dimension to it – some typical examples for this case are one's room, one's home, and one's homeland. In other words, one deals in such situations with what I would like to call *psychological geography*, in which the spatial coordinates intertwine with one's interiority, which also lends meaning to that particular place. In the modern world, as we know, the inability to find a purpose in life, alienation, mental illness, the pressure to conform to society's norms, and other psychological issues are prevalent. As data indicated by World Health Organization (WHO) show, "1 in every 8 people in the world live with a mental disorder" (World Health Organization 2022). Moreover, as regards Japan, it

...has one of the highest suicide rates among Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Since the economic

---

<sup>2</sup> An earlier version of this research was presented at the International Symposium on Japanese Studies *Japan and the World: Revisiting Cultural Encounters in the Global Era*, April 8-9, 2022.

slump in the 1990s, multiple mental health-related social issues have emerged and highlighted the distinctive psychological features of Japanese society. *Karoshi* - deaths and suicides from overwork, *hikikomori* – people who lock themselves in at home to shut out social contacts, and long-term absentees at schools are the most frequently cited mental and social problems in recent years. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has further increased the focus on active mental health maintenance and mental wellness initiatives. (Statista Research Department 2022)

As can be observed, there are even specific forms of mental and social issues that characterize Japanese society, some of them being related to the over-demanding working conditions or with the need to isolate oneself. What is more, the economic or the pandemic context influenced the emergence of new mental and social disorders or the way they are approached by institutions. Therefore, it seems that places endowed with an atmosphere that may contribute to their guests' or inhabitants' well-being can generate a sense of belonging or constitute an "enclave that offers the characters respite from the rough and tumble of late capitalism", as Larson claimed in his review titled "The Anxiety of Intimacy in Hiromi Kawakami's 'The Nakano Thrift Shop.'" (Larson 2017). Such is the case of the two fictional shops, in Kawakami Hiromi and Murata Sayaka's novels, *Furudōgu Nakano shōten* (The Nakano Thrift Shop, 2005) and *Konbini ningen* (Convenience Store Woman, 2016).

The aim of this study is to illustrate how the space of the shop interacts with the identities of the protagonists of the two works, Suganuma Hitomi and Furukura Keiko. After referring to the category of *shishōsetsu/watakushi shōsetsu* "the I-novel" (a literary category which includes works "narrated in the first or third person in such a way as to represent with utter conviction the author's personal experience" (Fowler 1988, xvi)) in the literature of these two Japanese authors, I will present the relationship between various emotional and social issues and the female protagonists. Then I will explain how the Japanese writers depicted the shop as a contemporary hideaway in both novels.

### **Emotional and Social Issues in the Case of Suganuma Hitomi and Furukura Keiko**

*Shishōsetsu* "the I-novel", a category that, as Hijiya-Kirschner (1996, 3) explained, has origins in "*shizenshugi*, a literary current that took its orientation from European naturalism and declared its dedication

to truth and ‘straightforward description’” (Hijiya-Kirschner 1996, 3), emerges at the beginning of twentieth century (Hijiya-Kirschner 1996, 3). During the Taishō era (1912-1926), it was marked by an extraordinary development (Ng 2009, 311) and “continues to form the metanarrative of Japanese literature and criticism up until today” (Ng 2009, 311). What is more, as Karatani noted, during the Taishō period, the *shishōsetsu* entered the literary world “as a reaction against the structure of the modern novel. The ‘I’ of the *shishōsetsu* was no longer a subject-on the contrary, for that ‘I,’ subjectivity was a fabrication. The *shishōsetsu* was fundamentally antithetical to structure, to logic, and to intellectuality” (Karatani 1998, 171-72). Actually, what characterizes this literary genre is “the conflation ... of the ‘I’ who confesses and the subject of confession” (Karatani 1998, 76). In addition to this, *shishōsetsu* is a combination of “transparency, sincerity, subjectivity, and autobiographical character” (Coenradie 2017, 304); moreover, its foundation lies in “the assumption that realism in the novel can only be founded on authenticated personal experience. Fiction and autobiography thus overlap when the author concentrates on narrating his or her own life and feelings.” (Coenradie 2017, 304)

In analyzing Kawakami’s fictional characters, the researcher Yuko Ogawa commented, her “protagonists’ age depends on the author’s age at the time. Additionally, the background of her protagonist is also similar to the author’s” (Ogawa 2019, 112). As regards Kawakami, she uses the literary conventions of the *shishōsetsu*, an aspect which is demonstrated, for instance, by the striking resemblance between the given name of the main character in the novel *The Nakano Thrift Shop* - Hitomi - and Kawakami’s given name - Hiromi. What is more, when taking into consideration their literary value, one can state that Kawakami’s works belong to “*junbungaku* – high artistic literature, carrying important content” (Kubiak Ho-Chi 2018, 84). *Junbungaku* “pure literature” can be seen as being “In contrast, if not really in competition, to the commercialized genres” (Morris 1997, 270), the opposition between *junbungaku* “pure literature” and *taishū bungaku* “popular literature” or “literature for the masses” being a famous one in the Japanese literary world. Actually, *junbungaku* is regarded as being in opposition to many literary forms: “the way it is used in Japan would seem to indicate that it is an antonym for popular literature or, more specifically, literature of action, tales of adventure, sex stories, and so forth” (Anderson, Richie 1982, 122). As Morris pointed out, to the category of *junbungaku* belong “most of the writers known outside Japan” (Morris 1997, 270), and

“The major publishers ... continue to publish *junbungaku* authors largely as a matter of prestige (Morris 1997, 270). Besides, for Strecher, “pure literature” is related to Japaneseness, through such literary works being illustrated aspects of what it means to be Japanese (Strecher 2017, 73):

‘Pure literature,’ despite its grounding in Western models imported during the Meiji period, was always intended as a wholly *Japanese* mode of writing, intended for *Japanese* readers, meant to construct Japanese models of subjectivity, to express, indeed, something essential about *being Japanese*. (Strecher 2017, 73, emphasis in original)

Regarding the literary subjects Kawakami chooses for her novels, Gebhardt noted that the Japanese writer “offers escape routes from the Heisei reality” (Gebhardt 2011, 469). In the novel *The Nakano Thrift Shop*, the young Suganuma Hitomi, the narrator, works as a shop assistant at Mr. Nakano Haruo’s store, where various second-hand products are sold. She falls in love with her coworker, Kiryū Takeo, and, although their relationship is not yet romantic, in the end, we are told that they meet again in the hallway of the IT company for which Hitomi works after she became a certified accountant.

The semi-autobiographical dimension is present also in Murata Sayaka’s novel *Convenience Store Woman*, in which the life of Furukura Keiko – an unmarried 36-year-old woman – is depicted. As Murata explains,

The convenience store depicted in the novel is an ideal store. I have worked in 5 or 6 different stores and incidentally all of them had gone bankrupt. So, I merged these stores together and created an ideal, ultimate store as if I was its manager: with its morning salutation, with motivated employees. (Murata Sayaka in Buritica Alzate 2020, 149)

The protagonist has been working at the convenience store Hiromachi Station Smile Mart for 18 years. Being unmarried and having no plan for building a family in order to become a person accepted by society, her personal choice to continue working in the convenience store is not understood by her relatives and coworkers, who still hope that they will witness Furukura Keiko’s integration in society. Although not interested in dating, she will live in the same apartment with Shiraha, a former coworker; thus they will build the image of a couple in the eyes of those that consider that having a partner is a very important aspect. Furthermore, after quitting her job at Smile Mart, she understands that she had lost her purpose in life,

so when she “meets” another *konbini*, she is convinced that she belongs to the space of a convenience store.

What is more, Kawakami’s novel *The Nakano Thrift Shop* “offers narrational flatness to a global readership that is indulging in the pleasures of the moratorium culture of contemporary Japan” (Gebhardt 2009, 699); it comprises the figure of the *moratorium man* – the man who puts off phases such as building a family and having a serious career (Okonogi 1981). As defined by Erik H. Erikson,

A moratorium is a period of delay granted to somebody who is not ready to meet an obligation or forced on somebody who should give himself time. By psychosocial moratorium, then, we mean a delay of adult commitments, and yet it is not only a delay. It is a period that is characterized by a selective permissiveness on the part of society and of provocative playfulness on the part of youth, and yet it also often leads to deep, if often transitory, commitment on the part of youth, and ends in a more or less ceremonial confirmation of commitment on the part of society. (Erikson 1968, 157)

This period is distinguished by a different approach to the behaviour considered by society as being specific for adulthood. As “a prolongation of the interval between youth and adulthood, which we will call a ‘psychosocial moratorium’” (Erikson 1968, 143), the *moratorium* denotes an interval during which people postpone the social roles they should fulfill as adults in accordance with the social norms. In addition to this,

Present-day society embraces an increasing number of people who have no sense of belonging to any party or organization but instead are oriented toward non-affiliation, escape from controlled society, and youth culture. I have called them the ‘moratorium people.’ (Okonogi 1978, 17 quoted in Kinsella 1998, 291-92)

Suganuma Hitomi and Kiryū Takeo are such figures; they work at Mr. Nakano’s thrift shop, but after the owner closes it, they will work in a different place – an IT company. Hitomi is constantly seen as a child by Mr. Nakano; for example, she sits in the truck between him and his beloved Sakiko, or Mr. Nakano asks her “‘Hitomi, don’t you think you’re perfectly capable of taking care?’” (Kawakami 2021, 185) after Sakiko told them that they would play *chinchirōin*, a gambling game which implies the use of three dice. Additionally, in this previously mentioned scene, Hitomi and Mr. Nakano play the role of children, while Sakiko plays the role of the parent, which again signalizes that Hitomi is rather portrayed as a girl and not as a woman during

the first part of the novel. At the same time, Takeo, her coworker who goes on pickups, the boy whom she secretly loves and with whom she occasionally goes out without having a well-defined relationship, rarely talks and gives short answers to every question the curious Hitomi asks. He dropped out of high school after being a victim of *ijime* (bullying) (a classmate slammed one of Takeo's fingers in the door) and is afraid of people. Although at the end of the novel Hitomi tells us that she works for an IT company, when meeting again Mr. Nakano, his sister Masayo and Takeo, the protagonist exclaims that she misses the thrift shop and that the presence of the three reminds her of the past, when all of them shared moments in the shop. In addition to this, as Mr. Nakano underlines, "But the Nakano shop lives on forever" (Kawakami 2021, 259), thus suggesting that the store represents a memorable place, where everyone witnessed moments that somehow contributed to embellishing one's life. Moreover, although it is a public space, where one sells second-hand objects, Mr. Nakano's store became a space of intimacy: there are a lot of scenes in which discussions between Hitomi and Masayo or Hitomi and Mr. Nakano on intimate subjects such as love are presented. As Larson explained with regard to Kawakami's literary work,

Even as the novel grapples with the nature of social anxiety in the current culture, it also represents something of an asylum from contemporary, urban Japanese life — for the reader as much as it does for the characters. The thrift shop occupies a storefront in a fading *shotengai* — the shopping districts built during Japan's postwar boom that can be found all over the country — and over the course of the narrative it serves as an enclave that offers the characters respite from the rough and tumble of late capitalism. (Larson 2017)

The thrift shop is a space that can be seen as being in contrast to the rest of the world to which the characters in this novel belong: it can be perceived as a place where one finds a form of tranquility (apart from the urban tumult), which ensures his/her emotional safety. Contrary to the outside world, which is characterized by ceaseless agitation and puts a lot of pressure on people, this store functions as an oasis, where quietude permeates almost everything. Thus, it fulfills a bivalent role: that of opening itself to the public (to the potential customers) by offering a variety of products and that of providing an ambiance of trust and emotional safety, where the unconfident individuals can recount their stories to people that wish to listen to them. What is more, the thrift shop almost functions as a

home, while the characters' homes are rarely mentioned and described, a fact which accentuates the characters' emotional dependence on the store and its total integration into their everyday life.

On the other hand, as the protagonist of Murata's novel tells us in the first part of the novel, her childhood was also made of odd situations which demonstrated her offbeat personality. For instance, after seeing a dead bird in a park, little Keiko thinks she could bring it home and transform it into a meal and, while trying to stop a fight scene between two boys in her school, she hits one of them, thus shocking her teachers. As McNeill describes Murata's main character, she "lives in a sort of Kafkaesque nightmare of standing out or causing offense, and mimics others to blend in, echoing Murata's own detached childhood" (McNeill 2020, 5). Indeed, Keiko's unusual behaviour delimits her from what is considered a normal, socially accepted human being and, as a consequence, she decides to try to get hold of herself, to imitate the others, and to follow the instructions the other people give her. Although she goes to a psychologist, there is no change in her way of acting: her passivity and isolation from the society which imposes norms will accompany her for the rest of her life.

The *konbini* comes into Keiko's life as a presence that contributes to reconstructing her identity and giving her a purpose in life, thus integrating her into the normal cycle of human existence. While rebuilding her in order to fit into society, the shop preserves her peculiarities and even amplifies them, because Keiko only apparently fits society. The convenience store transforms the protagonist into a dependent being—Keiko is dependent on the life of the store—, thus accentuating the main character's singularity. On the first day of work at the convenience store, she feels that she gains a new status, becoming an active part of the mechanism of society: "At that moment, for the first time ever, I felt I'd become a part in the machine of society. *I've been reborn*, I thought. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society." (Murata 2019, 19-20)

She thus participates in the economic and social life, being apparently no more isolated from the rest of the world. After resigning from this part-time job (under the influence of another social outcast that worked in Smile Mart and that lived in Keiko's apartment – the coworker called Shiraha) and entering a convenience store, she writes that "I caught sight of myself reflected in the window of the convenience store I'd just come out of. ... For the first time, I could think of the me in the window as a being with meaning." (Murata 2019, 163)



This excerpt illustrates the fact that the *convenience store*—be it the one where she worked or another one—constitutes a genuine *window*, which shows her true self and her role in the mechanism of society. What is more, the *konbini* represents not only the center of Keiko's existence, but her existence. By working there, she concentrates no more on the demands of her family and friends - that of getting married and being no more a part-time worker -, but finds refuge in a place that hides her from the people that could judge her unconventional way of being.

### **The Shop as a Contemporary Hideaway**

The convenience store, Hiiromachi Station Smile Mart, in Murata's novel is a place where one follows a strict set of rules that are specific for their job and finds purpose in life. By comparison, the thrift shop in Kawakami's work is an urban hideaway clearly demarcated from the rest of the city, where one meets peace and various forms of being together and spending time with her coworker, the owner of the shop and his sister. The fictional characters thus discover "corners" of calmness. Additionally, as I will demonstrate, they contribute to the literary characters' better understanding of their personality and constitute spaces where one can isolate their frail self from the rest of the society that obliges them to abide by rigid norms.

Furthermore, in his analysis of Charles Dickens' literary work *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Hollington stated that „elsewhere ... objects are represented as faithful companions who share and sympathise with the lives of their owners” (Hollington 2009, 4). Products sold in Mr. Nakano's thrift shop,

From Japanese-style dining tables to old electric fans, from air conditioners to tableware, the shop was crammed with the kind of items found in a typical household from the 1960s and later. In the mornings, ... he'd arrange the goods intended to tempt customers outside the front of the store. Bowls and plates that had any kind of fancy pattern, arty task lamps, onyx-like paperweights shaped like turtles or rabbits, old-school typewriters and the like—these were all attractively displayed on a wooden bench set outside. (Kawakami 2021, 3)

accompany the characters as well: the second-hand objects offer Hitomi and Takeo a new life through the fact that they take part in a continuous monetary exchange; the two characters are thus included in the economic dynamics of society. Nevertheless, the shop in Kawakami's novel is characterized not only by this commercial dimension, but also by its psychological importance for Hitomi:

... we all filed into the tatami room in the back. There had been a *kotatsu* heater there but it had been sold only a little while ago and now, in place of the table with its inbuilt heater, just the *kotatsu* cover was laid flat on the tatami. Mr. Nakano brought in a largish Japanese-style dining table from the shop and set it on top of the cover. (Kawakami 2021, 17-18)

As can be observed, the transitory objects in the store (for instance, the *kotatsu* and the table) construct a second home for Hitomi. Although their presence is not permanent, they become a part of Hitomi's experience during her *moratorium* phase. Moreover, the *tatami* room is a place where the characters gather to eat, an aspect that emphasizes the emotional significance Hitomi attaches to Mr. Nakano's shop. Moreover, the products sold in the store also have a sensorial dimension: "When he came back, he was soaking wet. Mr. Nakano tossed him a towel. It had a frog pattern on it. They had got it from the last pickup" (Kawakami 2021, 27). They cover and protect them from anything outside the shop that could harm them. At the same time, the relationship between Takeo and the objects (and implicitly the shop) gains a sensorial dimension: he comes closer to them, he touches them, he feels them on his skin.

Alternatively, Murata's main character establishes an unusual relationship with the *konbini*, a relationship which incorporates also an intense sensorial experience:

I never knew customers could be so loud! Their footsteps echoed and voices rang out as they walked around the store, confectionery packs rustling as they tossed them into their baskets, the refrigerator door clunking open and shut as they took out cold drinks. Overwhelmed by the sheer volume, I kept yelling out 'Irasshaimasé!' over and over again. (Murata 2019, 17)

The main character is absorbed in this world of sounds, which constitutes her reality. The acoustic presence of the *konbini* confers onto her peace and a sense of safety as well as a sense of belonging. Keiko belongs to this world of "echoes", "rustling" and "clunking". The sensorial interaction characterizes Keiko's relationship with the *konbini*, which manifests itself almost as a human being by having needs and a voice: "I couldn't stop hearing the store telling me the way it wanted to be, what it needed. It was all flowing into me. It wasn't me speaking. It was the store. I was just channeling its revelations from on high." (Murata 2019, 160)

Keiko becomes a piece of the *konbini*, participating in its life, while the shop gives her a normal life. By noting that "When I think that my body is

entirely made up of food from this store, I feel like I'm as much a part of the store as the magazine racks or the coffee machine" (Murata 2019, 22), she recognizes that she became a piece of the shop, for instance, one of its vital organs. This excerpt resembles another fact the protagonist in Kawakami's novel *The Nakano Thrift Shop* mentions:

Though I had to admit that I had procured plenty of daily necessities and furniture from the Nakano shop. Things like that yellow stool and this dress, sure, but what I bought most often were baskets. Large ones, small ones, open-weave ones, and tightly woven ones—I bought all sorts and tossed all kinds of things into them. Thanks to these baskets, my apartment was much less messy than it used to be. (Kawakami 2021, 198)

Both Keiko and Hitomi are profoundly connected with the convenience store, respectively the thrift shop: they bring their lives into equilibrium, they regularize them, they lend order to them. The relationship between these main characters and the shops is not only emotional, as already stated, but also economic: they buy products that are sold in them and these objects become essential parts of the two protagonists' private life. They fill or cover their bodies or permeate their home. To put it another way, the image of the store is prolonged in their apartments.

Additionally, Murata's protagonist communicates with the shop as it was pointed out by critic Serrano-Muñoz:

Furukura's eventual realisation that her place is the convenience store requires from her a renunciation of her humanity. ... In Japanese, Murata uses the word *ningen*, a term referring to humans that is free from gender associations. Her body became one with the *konbini* and we are left to judge whether that is subversive freedom or claudication to economic life. (Serrano-Muñoz 2021, 171-72)

No longer a human being, the protagonist experiences the life of a *konbini*. Consequently, Keiko is free, devoid of social norms, but with the freedom to live as a store, and thus protected against social pressures. Furthermore, the *konbini* constitutes a real urban hideaway: although Keiko follows the entire set of instructions during work hours in order to comply with the standards of society, this is only apparent. The shop provides shelter for her peculiar figure and the acoustic dimension—the various *sounds* produced in the shop—enriches her bond with the store. Keiko's total immersion into the *konbini* demonstrates that she lost contact with the world outside the shop, which now also regulates the rhythm of her life. The shop does not

only lend order to her atypical lifestyle, but it also protects her from being judged and prevents her from being evaluated for having chosen to become a “convenience store woman”. She has “faith in the world inside the light-filled box.” (Murata 2019, 30), where there is an atmosphere of calmness. After resigning her part-time job, she no longer hears the song of the *konbini* and loses her balance.

What is more, Keiko depicts not only an acoustic connection with the *konbini*, but a biological one as well:

I suddenly recalled hearing once that the water in a person’s body was replaced every two weeks. It occurred to me that the water I used to buy every morning in the convenience store had already run through my body. The moisture in my skin, in the membrane over my eyeballs was probably no longer formed by the water from the convenience store. (Murata 2019, 149)

Therein yet another facet of Keiko’s relationship with the shop is revealed: the store is her energy source, it feeds her. The essence of the *konbini* runs through her veins, thus constantly refreshing and nourishing her transformed organism. Moreover, this example shows how intimate the relationship between Keiko and the shop has become: through this liquid, it inhabits her body. The absence of water illustrates Keiko’s biological dependency on the store. Interestingly, a similar situation is described by Kawakami’s main character as well:

I doubted this was the real Takeo.

As more time passed, I became increasingly convinced of this. I heard somewhere that human cells renew themselves every three years. (Kawakami 2021, 251)

The absence of the convenience store and the thrift shop can be observed at an anatomical level: once they leave their jobs in the stores, Keiko and Takeo’s organisms are different. Their structural change exemplifies how thoroughly the shop has merged with their bodies. The convenience store and the thrift shop merge with their identities that are subject to remodeling after they depart the world of those two spaces.

Additionally, the convenience store in Murata’s novel functions as a place where one can get wholly immersed, where differences are abolished and where one is not judged based on expectations related to gender or age:

I wished I was back in the convenience store where I was valued as a working member of staff and things weren’t as complicated as this. Once

we donned our uniforms, we were all equals regardless of gender, age, or nationality—all simply store workers.

I looked at the clock—3:00 p.m.—so they'd have finished settling the cash register account and changing money at the bank and would be starting to put the latest truckload of bread and lunch boxes out on display.

Even when I'm far away, the convenience store and I are connected. In my mind's eye I picture the brightly lit and bustling store, and I silently stroke my right hand, its nails neatly trimmed in order to better work the buttons on the cash register." (Murata 2019, 38-9)

The life offered by the convenience store is what the protagonist needs: the shop protects her from the external tensions that could harm her. The *konbini* does not demand her to lead a life governed by social expectations but accepts her as she is and helps her fully integrate into the space enclosed by its walls. This is why she feels a deep connection with the shop, even though she finds herself in a completely different place. Such a bond is also reflected in the need to find oneself in the presence of the *konbini*, which offers her a profound sensorial experience:

Somehow I felt the need to hear the sound of the convenience store, so on my way home from Miho's that evening I dropped into work. (Murata 2019, 81)

I would never again be touching the tools of the trade I knew so well—the bar code scanner, the machine for placing orders, the mop for polishing the floor, the alcohol for disinfecting hands, the duster I'd always carried stuck through my belt. (Murata 2019, 143)

The acoustic and tactile dimensions illustrate in these cases Keiko's need to perpetually live in the convenience store, which has become *her place*. No other sounds and no other objects offer her the same sensorial experience. Additionally, it seems that there's no other place like the *konbini* that creates a similar atmosphere of acceptance:

It was still light out, but the convenience store was lit up more brightly than the sky. It looked like a shining white aquarium...

Normally I would be concerned about work the next day and would be sure to care for my physical needs with food and sleep. My body had belonged to the convenience store even when I wasn't at work. Having been liberated from this, I didn't know what to do with myself. (Murata 2019, 144)

In Keiko's case, working for the store means continuously working and living for it. Although she is at home, she does not feel that this place hides

her from the outside world; instead, it is the *konbini* that offers her emotional security and guards her against the demands of society. In addition to this, there's no other place she would rather be in, since anywhere outside the shop she has to fulfill a social role specific to her gender and age, namely that of a mother. Alternatively, the convenience store lets her be a (simple) member of the staff, without additional constraints. Besides, after quitting her job at Smile Mart, she understands that home does not represent for her what it may represent for other people -- a place for resting oneself and for hiding away from the outside world. Rather the *konbini* fulfills this role in comparison with her apartment, which seems to have nothing in common with Keiko's inner world:

There were numerous sounds in the apartment, from Shiraha's voice to the hum of the refrigerator, but my ears heard only silence. The sounds of the convenience store that had previously filled me to overflowing had now left my body. I was cut off from the world. (Murata 2019, 145-46)

Further, the unchanging life of the store, with its set of principles that Keiko continually carries out, contributes to creating a calm atmosphere, where one knows exactly what has to do:

But here I was repeating the same scene of that first day. Since then we had greeted the same morning 6,607 times.  
I gently placed the eggs in a plastic bag. The same eggs I sold yesterday, only different. The customer put the same chopsticks into the same plastic bag as yesterday, took the same change, and gave the same morning smile. (Murata 2019, 73-4)

By not being subject to change, the *konbini* seems to serve as an area that exists beyond time and the incessant variations that characterize a society. Thus also Keiko escapes from the rhythm of the outside world, being concealed by the atemporality of the store. Such an atemporality or rather another form of temporality, one marked by a total opposition to the urban turmoil, seems to be present in Kawakami's thrift shop as well: "Ever since the Indian summer arrived, customers had been staying away. The street in front of the shop was deserted – there wasn't a single car" (Kawakami 2021, 110). The shop conceals the workers from the urban agitation, constituting a place where one can experience tranquility. Moreover, not only a special form of temporality distinguishes Mr. Nakano's thrift shop from other places, but also its spatial coordinates: "For the past twenty-five years or so,

Mr Nakano had been running his thrift shop in a western suburb of Tokyo that was full of students” (Kawakami 2021, 2). The thrift shop is not located downtown, but in a suburb. What is more, time flows differently inside it:

One day, no customers came in at all. But the Nakano shop was not some high-class antique shop – no matter how slow a day it might be, there were almost always at least three or four people who would wander in to browse. (Kawakami 2021, 111)

Not always crowded, Mr. Nakano’s thrift shop offers an atmosphere of calmness, where one finds refuge from the constantly hectic city. Also, the actions and movements of the potential customers, who look at the different objects displayed in the shop, differentiate it from other stores, which are rather marked by agitation.

### **Conclusion**

The shops in the two novels seem to be depicted as urban hideaways; in fact, it seems like the space of the store is a microcosm of Japanese society. All pressure and social customs, all capitalist tensions are reflected in the stores themselves. What is more, the biological dimension and the sensorial experience that are described in the two novels highlight the strong relationship between the shop and Hitomi, respectively, Keiko. In addition to this, by buying objects that are sold in the stores and either bringing them into their homes or introducing them into their bodies, the two female protagonists establish a particular relationship with the shops. Both places become an essential part of their existence, having not only an economic meaning, but permeating their private lives as well. They transcend the monetary world and become integrated into the characters’ everyday lives.

### **Bibliography**

- Anderson, Joseph L., and Donald Richie. 1982. *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry – Expanded Edition*. With a Foreword by Akira Kurosawa. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (First Tuttle Edition, 1959, First Evergreen Edition, 1960).
- Buritica Alzate, Juliana. 2020. “A Conversation Between Sayaka Murata and Ginny Tapley Takemori: Gender, Literature and Translation.” *Gender and Sexuality* 15: 145-166. Accessed March 5, 2022. <https://subsite.icu.ac.jp/cgs/images/13Buritica.pdf>.
- Coenradie, Sigrid. 2017. “Animal Substitution as a Reversed Sacrifice: An Intertextual Reading of Genesis 22 and the Animal Stories of Shūsaku Endō.” In *Sacrifice in Modernity: Community, Ritual, Identity. From Nationalism and Nonviolence to Health Care and Harry Potter*, edited by Joachim Duyndam, Anne-Marie Korte and Marcel

- Poorthuis, 288-307. Leiden: Brill.
- Entrikin, J. Nicholas. 1991. *The Betweenness of Place. Towards a Geography of Modernity*. Basingstoke/London: Macmillan Education LTD.
- Erikson, Erik H. 1968. *Identity: Youth and crisis*. New York/London: Norton.
- Fowler, Edward. 1988. *The Rhetoric of Confession: Shishōsetsu in Early Twentieth-Century Japanese Fiction*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press.
- Gebhardt, Lisette. 2009. "'Allereinfachste Sätze'. Kleine Narratologie der Zeitgenössischen Japanischen Literatur." *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*, edited by Christian Steineck und Simone Müller, 63, no. 3: 699–721.
- Gebhardt, Lisette. 2011. "Von 'Bubblonia' bis IQ84: Ideale und nicht-ideale Orte als Thema der Zeitgenössischen Japanischen Literatur." *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*, edited by Eduard Klopfenstein, 65, no. 2: 455-77.
- Hollington, Michael. 2009. "The Voice of Objects in *The Old Curiosity Shop*." *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 14, no. 1: 1-8.
- Hijiya-Kirschner, Irmela. 1996. *Rituals of Self-Revelation: Shishōsetsu as Literary Genre and Socio-Cultural Phenomenon*. Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University.
- Kane, Michael. 2020. *Postmodern Time and Space in Fiction and Theory*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Karatani, Kōjin. 1998. *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature* (3. pr. ed.). Foreword by Fredric Jameson. Translation edited by Brett de Barry. London: Duke University Press.
- Kawakami, Hiromi. 2005. *Furudōgu Nakano shōten*. Tōkyō: Bungei shunjū.
- Kawakami, Hiromi. 2021. *The Nakano Thrift Shop*. Translated from the Japanese by Allison Markin Powell. London: Granta Books (First published in Great Britain by Portobello Books, an imprint of Granta Publications, in 2016 and 2017).
- Kinsella, Sharon. 1998. "Japanese Subculture in the 1990s: *Otaku* and the Amateur *Manga* Movement." *Journal of Japanese Studies* 24, no. 2: 289-316.
- Kubiak Ho-Chi, Beata. 2018. "When Your Neighbor Is a Bear, Your Fiancé – a Dog, and Your Lover – a Tuna. About Human-Nonhuman Encounters in the Works of Kawakami Hiromi, Shōno Yoriko and Tawada Yōko. A Critical Posthuman Perspective." *Analecta Nipponica. Journal of Polish Association for Japanese Studies*, no. 8: 83-96.
- Larson, M. W. 2017. "The Anxiety of Intimacy in Hiromi Kawakami's 'The Nakano Thrift Shop.'" *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 27, 2017. Accessed March 5, 2022. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-anxiety-of-intimacy-in-hiromi-kawakamis-the-nakano-thrift-shop/>.
- McNeill, David. 2020. "Mind the Gender Gap: Kawakami Mieko, Murata Sayaka, Feminism and Literature in Japan." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* vol. 18, issue 21, no. 1: 1-9.
- Morris, Mark. 1997. "Japan." In *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary World Literature*, edited by John Sturrock, 268-83. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press (First published 1996 as *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*).
- Murata, Sayaka. 2016. *Konbini ningen*. Tōkyō: Bungei shunjū.
- Murata, Sayaka. 2019. *Convenience Store Woman*. Translated from the Japanese by Ginny Tapley Takemori. London: Granta Books (First published in the United States by Grove Press, an imprint of Grove Atlantic, New York; first published in Great Britain by Portobello Books in 2018).



- Ogawa, Yuko. 2019. "Healing Literatures by Contemporary Japanese Female Authors: Yoshimoto Banana, Ogawa Yoko, and Kawakami Hiromi." PhD diss., Purdue University Graduate School. <https://doi.org/10.25394/PGS.7543124.v1>. Accessed March 5, 2022. [https://hammer.purdue.edu/articles/thesis/Healing\\_Literatures\\_by\\_Contemporary\\_Japanese\\_Female\\_Authors\\_Yoshimoto\\_Banana\\_Ogawa\\_Yoko\\_and\\_Kawakami\\_Hiromi/7543124](https://hammer.purdue.edu/articles/thesis/Healing_Literatures_by_Contemporary_Japanese_Female_Authors_Yoshimoto_Banana_Ogawa_Yoko_and_Kawakami_Hiromi/7543124).
- Okonogi, Keigo. 1978. "The Age of the Moratorium People." *Japan Echo* 5, no. 1: 17-39.
- Okonogi, Keigo. 1981. *Moratoriumu ningen no jidai*. Tōkyō: Chūō Kōronsha.
- Ng, Andrew Hock Soon. 2009. "Confronting the Modern: Kōbō Abe's 'The Box Man' and Yumiko Kurahashi's 'The Witch Mask.'" *Criticism* 51, no. 2: 311-33. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23131513>.
- Serrano-Muñoz, Jordi. 2021. "Bodies and Economic Violences in Contemporary Japanese Fiction. Absence, Change, and Empowerment in Yū Miri, Murata Sayaka, and Kawakami Mieko." In *Narratives of Violence*, edited by Teresa Iribarren, Roger Canadell, and Josep-Anton Fernández, 161-78. Venezia: Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Digital Publishing.
- Statista Research Department. 2022. "Mental health in Japan - statistics & facts." November 11, 2022. Accessed November 27, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/topics/8609/mental-health-in-japan/#dossier-chapter3>.
- Strecher, Matthew. 2017. "East Meets West, then Gives It Back: The Fate of Pure Literature in a Global Age." *Perspectives on Culture* 19, no. 4: 53–80.
- World Health Organization. 2022. "Mental disorders." June 8, 2022. Accessed November 27, 2022. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>.