

Is Furukara Losing Her Life? : A Reader Responses Analysis in the Translated Novel Convenient Store Woman Written by Sayaka Murata

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A B S T R A C T

This study explores how readers construct meaning and form interpretations of the character Furukara Keiko in the translated novel *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata through a reader-response perspective. Furukara is portrayed as a woman with a “strange” disposition, socially alienated due to her deviation from normative gender expectations. Her refusal to pursue a conventional lifestyle—such as seeking a full-time job, marriage, or motherhood—invites a myriad of reader perceptions that reflect broader socio-cultural negotiations about identity and normality. Adopting a mixed-method approach, this research combines content analysis with the theoretical framework of reader-response criticism as formulated. Data were collected through stratified random sampling of 400 Goodreads reviews, from which Indonesian-based 50 reviews were purposively selected for their expressive and reflective depth. The analysis draws on seven response strategies by Beach and Marshall in Iskhak (2015): engage, describe, explain, conceive, interpret, connect, and judge. Findings reveal that the most dominant strategy is *engagement*, indicating strong emotional identification with Furukara’s marginalization and social resistance. Readers often describe her life in their narratives, reimagine her conditions, and relate them to their experiences. The character mirrors and critiques societal norms, particularly concerning gendered expectations. This study defines the mutual interaction between reader and text, stress that literary meaning is not fixed but co-constructed through affective, cognitive, and contextual engagements. These insights contribute to the growing discourse on gender representation and reader agency in literature.

K E Y W O R D S

Reader-responses theories; literary works; corpus-based analysis; woman representation; interpretative communities

INTRODUCTION

Literature contains several inseparable values, namely aesthetic, moral, and conceptual values (Esten, 2021). Literature becomes a medium for reflecting on problems in people’s lives (Priskila, 2024). In 2020, a novel entitled *Gadis Minimarket*, hereinafter referred to as *Minimarket Woman*, was written by Sayaka Murata in Japan in 2016. Sayaka Murata is a Japanese writer whose works are inspired by the social problems around her. Many of the themes and background stories of the characters she writes are inspired by her daily observations while working part-time at a convenience store. Sayaka Murata’s writing explores the different consequences of incongruence in society for men and women, especially

those related to gender roles, parents, and sex. Society's response to infidelity, including asexuality and celibacy (not marrying and living single), reappears as a theme in several of her works, such as the novel *Shoumetsu Sekai (The World of No-Self)* and the short story *A Clean Marriage*. This unorthodox lifestyle is accepted as one of the unique aspects of her work. One of her works, in the form of a short story entitled *A Clean Marriage*, is about a married couple who happily do not have sex in their marriage (Priskila, 2024).

Sayaka Murata received the prestigious Akutagawa Prize and Vogue Japan's Woman of the Year award in 2016. These awards were given for her work, *Gadis Minimarket* or *Minimarket Woman*, which has sold more than 650,000 copies in Japan. This novel is also Sayaka Murata's first novel to be translated into English and has been translated into various languages, including Indonesian. The novel *Minimarket Woman* tells the story of Furukara Keiko, a woman who is described as having a 'strange' character. She is portrayed as lacking sympathy and empathy like other 'normal' people. When children her age cry upon seeing a dead bird, she only considers it her father's favorite food and wants to cook it immediately. This novel tells the story of a 36-year-old woman named Keiko Furukara who has worked at a convenience store (*konbini*) for almost half her life. Furukara understands a way of life that can be said to be 'different' from others, so people think Furukara is an abnormal woman. Furukara worked part-time at a convenience store for a long time because she wanted to know what everyday life meant to people, and she found herself considered normal when she worked at a convenience store. At 36, she has not considered finding a partner, having a permanent job, or having children like the people around her.

This novel also depicts relationships between people and the social construction that is formed. In this case, it is related to the depiction of gender. Gender is defined as society's expectations of men and women (Perdana, 2019). In literature, the depiction of gender can be seen from various perspectives, such as gender construction in the community environment and gender injustice towards women (Ana et al., 2023; Anggreani, 2020; Hapsoro et al., 2021; Nisya et al., 2024; Riki et al., 2022). This work describes the social construction of ideal women according to society. Social construction is a view that all values, ideologies, and social institutions are created by humans (Ngangi, 2011). Based on this, the standard of living described as 'ideal' is when a 36-year-old woman like Keiko already has a permanent job, is married, and has children.

Other researchers have not widely conducted research on this novel, especially in the context of reader response. Other studies have attempted to identify Furukara's representation in the context of self-image (Purba, 2023), simulacra by Baudrillard (Priskila, 2024), and moral aspects in the concept of structuralist literature (Nuraini, 2022). Of course, based on previous research, discussing Furukara's representation in the perception of reader responses is important.

The reader-response approach in literary criticism emphasizes the reader's active role in creating the meaning of the text (Isser in Park, 2012). Unlike the formalistic approach, which

focuses on the text itself, this theory highlights the interaction between the reader and the text, opening up space for diverse and personal interpretations, and enriching the understanding of literary works. The reader-response theory emerged as a reaction to the New Criticism movement. Rosenblatt (1982) defines reading as a transaction or reciprocal process between the text and the reader in time and specific conditions. According to Rosenblatt, through the joint contribution between text and reader, written words stimulate consciousness while the reader connects them to the linguistic experience that has been had (Rosenblatt, 1982, p. 268).

Whether as a listener, writer, speaker, or reader, each forms an interaction through linguistic resources, experiences, and traces of previous transactions in life and language (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 381). Likewise, Iser emphasizes the diversity of interpretations of texts as a result of the reader's efforts in the process of constructing meaning by filling in the gaps that the author deliberately leaves in the text (1978, cited in Park, 2012).

The active involvement of readers and the presence of their past experiences, information, and beliefs are expected to enrich the reader's response (Rosenblatt, 1982, 1993; Iser, 1978). Leading reader-response theorists—such as Richards (1974), Rosenblatt (1993), Fish (1970), and Iser (1978)—affirm that reading is an act that is realized through a 'transaction' between the text and the reader. According to them, every reading activity is a unique experience that involves the reader as a whole—ethically, intellectually, socially, and aesthetically.

Previous studies have examined the character of Furukara in *Convenience Store Woman* from various theoretical angles, yet they often exclude the reader's interpretive role. For instance, Purba (2023) focused on Furukara's self-image through a psychoanalytical lens, emphasizing internal conflict and identity suppression without considering how readers perceive these aspects. Similarly, Priskila (2024) analyzed the character through Baudrillard's theory of simulacra, revealing how Furukara represents hyperreality and the collapse of societal meaning, but this analysis remained confined within a structuralist interpretation. Both studies center on textual and theoretical deconstruction, yet leave a methodological gap regarding how readers actually experience and construct meaning from Furukara's character. This research addresses that gap by using reader-response theory, particularly the concepts of Iser (1978) and Rosenblatt (1993), to analyze Goodreads reviews as dynamic sites of textual engagement. This approach emphasizes not just how Furukara is constructed in the novel, but how she is reconstructed by readers across emotional, moral, and social dimensions. The aim of this study is to investigate the variety of strategies readers use—such as engaging emotionally, explaining morally, or interpreting culturally—to respond to Furukara's character. The benefit of this research lies in its ability to enrich literary analysis through lived reader experience, giving voice to interpretive communities and broadening understandings of gender, normality, and deviance as constructed through fiction. The study also contributes to interdisciplinary literature by offering insight into how translated texts mediate between cultural contexts and reader identities.

This study is very valuable in determining how far the reader's experience goes in interpreting Furukara's self-image or representation in the novel *Minimarket Woman* by Sayaka Murata. Of course, this study will focus on Furukara's representation in her life by focusing on reader reception on the Goodreads website, a site for providing online novel assessments, through a study entitled "Is Furukara Losing Her Life?: A Reader Response Analysis in the Translated Novel *Convenience Store Woman* Written by Sayaka Murata."

METHOD

This study uses a mixed-method approach by Sugiyono (2020) to identify and analyze reader responses to the Furukara character in the *Minimarket Woman* novel by Sayaka Murata, employing the reader-response approach by Beach and Marshall in Iskhak (2015). The subject of this study is the *Minimarket Woman* novel by Sayaka Murata. The object of this study emphasizes the Furukara character, highlighting her efforts to survive within the gender-based social construction that binds her. This study investigates reader response strategies in line with Beach and Marshall in Iskhak (2015) toward the Furukara character by applying reader-response theory. Data were collected through textual analysis of comments on the novel, using a corpus approach on the Goodreads website, with a focus on diction and style of language in the reviews column.

Table 1. Reader Responses Strategies by Beach and Marshall

No.	Strategies	Description
1	Engage	Engaging the reader's emotions and personal experiences in responding to the text.
2	Describe	Describe the reader's experience or response to a particular text part.
3	Explain	Explain the reasons behind the reader's response to the text.
4	Conceive	Imagining the text's situations, characters, or events or creating new meanings.
5	Interpret	Interpreting the meaning of the text based on the reader's experiences and knowledge.
6	Connect	Relating the text to personal experiences, other texts, or the real world.
7	Judge	Assessing the quality of the text, characters, or message based on the reader's perspective.

Source: Adapted from Iskhak (2015)

The data collection technique in this study was carried out through observation of Indonesian reader reviews on the Goodreads platform for the novel *Convenience Store Woman* by taking 400 reviews using the stratified random sampling technique (Sugiyono, 2020) based on the distribution of ratings from one to five stars. Of these, 50 reviews were selected purposively because they contained expressive and reflective narratives about the character of Keiko Furukura. For more details, see Table 2.

Table 2. Minimarket Woman Community Reviews on Goodreads using Stratified Random Sampling

Rating	N	%	X	S
★ ★ ★ ★ ★	60,644	17%	68 sample	9 data

Rating	N	%	X	S
★★★★★	143,556	42%	168 sample	21 data
★★★★	108,166	31%	124 sample	15 data
★★★	24,194	7%	28 sample	3 data
★★	4,605	1%	4 sample	1 data
Total	341,165 ratings	100%	400 sample	50 data

Source: Sugiyono (2020)

The data obtained were then analyzed using a content analysis approach combined with reader-response theory to explore how readers form meaning and position themselves toward the main character. The analysis focused on seven reader-response strategies as proposed by Beach and Marshall (1991), namely: engage (the reader's emotional involvement with the story), describe (re-description of characters or situations in the reader's own words), explain (attempts to explain the behavior or motivation of the character), conceive (re-imagining the context or social conception of the character), interpret (interpretation of the meaning of the story or values in the character's experience), connect (association between the story and the reader's personal experience), and judge (moral or social judgment of the character). These strategies were analyzed within the framework of reader reception theory by Iser (1978), which emphasizes the importance of the role of readers in filling in the gaps in the text, and Fish (1970), who highlighted the formation of meaning as a product of the interpretation of a community of readers who have specific reading strategies. Thus, this study not only maps the tendency of judgment toward Furukara but also reveals how readers construct, negotiate, and reflect on meaning through their reading experiences.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following describes the findings of this study to reveal reader response strategies using the theory of Beach and Marshall in Iskhak (2015), presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Representation of Furukara using Reader Responses Strategies of Beach and Marshall

No.	Strategies	N	%	Findings
1	Engage	10	20	Many readers expressed emotional involvement with Furukara, feeling sad, angry, or frustrated by the social pressures she experiences for being "abnormal."
2	Describe	6	12	Reviews often described how Furukara lives her life in unique and "absurd" ways, including her routines at the convenience store and her responses to social norms.
3	Explain	4	8	Readers explained why they sympathized with or disagreed with Furukara's decisions, such as her choosing to live by the convenience store's guidelines to be accepted by society.
4	Conceive	5	10	Some readers imagined what it would be like to live like Furukara—isolated, misunderstood, and having to imitate others to appear "normal."

No.	Strategies	N	%	Findings
5	Interpret	2	4	Many interpretations emerged about the meaning of “normality” that Furukara challenges, and how she has become a symbol of criticism of rigid social standards.
6	Connect	2	4	Readers relate Furukara’s experiences to their own lives, especially the pressures of marriage, steady employment, and being the “ideal person” that society defines as “the ideal person.”
7	Judge	2	4	Some judged Furukara as a strong character for daring to live according to her choices, but others criticized her decisions as a form of resignation

Source: Adapted from Iskhak (2015)

Based on an analysis of 50 reader reviews selected by purposive sampling (Sugiyono, 2020) from the Goodreads platform, it was found that the most dominant reader response strategy was Engage (20%). It shows that many readers respond to Furukara’s character with strong emotional involvement, such as feeling sad, angry, or even feeling themselves reflected in the character’s experiences. The following most prominent strategies are Describe (12%) and Conceive (10%), which show how readers not only re-imagine Furukara’s life, which is considered “absurd,” but also imagine what it would be like to live as a figure who is constantly considered abnormal by society. Meanwhile, strategies such as Interpret, Connect, and Judge only appear in 4% of reviews, indicating that only a few readers explicitly interpret the symbolic meaning of Furukara’s life choices, relate them to personal experiences, or provide moral judgments about them. These findings reinforce Iser’s (1978) idea that literary texts open space for readers to actively shape meaning. Fish (1980) also emphasizes that the interpretation process is greatly influenced by the interpretive community in which the reader is located.

Engage

The Engage strategy shows that readers experience deep emotional involvement in Furukara’s character. Many of them feel sad, angry, or frustrated by the social pressure Furukara experiences because she is considered “abnormal”. These emotions emerge in response to the narrative depicting Furukara’s alienation and incompatibility with societal norms. In the context of reader-response theory, this is in line with Rosenblatt’s (1993) view, which emphasizes the importance of transactions between text and reader, where meaning is formed through the reader’s affective and reflective experiences of the text.

Furthermore, this emotional involvement also reflects how readers fill in the “empty space” in the text, as explained by Iser (1978). When the text does not explicitly state Furukara’s psychological condition, readers fill it with their experiences and emotions, creating personal meaning. In this case, Furukawa becomes a mirror for readers who have felt alienated or not under social expectations. This finding also strengthens the results of Purba’s (2023) study, which highlights Furukara’s representation as a symbol of a self-image crisis in modern society.

Describe

The Describe strategy emerges when readers re-describe Furukara's life in their own words. They highlight the uniqueness of this character in carrying out his routine at the minimarket and how he responds to social pressure in a way that is considered "absurd" but consistent. This strategy shows that readers understand the character and re-present it narratively, strengthening their engagement with the text.

In Rosenblatt's (1982) theoretical framework, this strategy reflects aesthetic reading, where readers seek information and experience and re-live the world in the text. Meanwhile, according to Fish (1970), this re-description results from a reading strategy formed by an interpretive community, namely a community of readers who share the same values and ways of reading. In this context, Goodreads readers as a digital community tend to highlight Furukara's eccentric side as a form of criticism of homogeneous social norms.

Explain

The Explain strategy is seen when readers try to explain the reasons behind Furukara's decisions, such as why she chose to live according to the minimarket's work guidelines. This explanation shows a cognitive effort to understand the character's internal logic while criticizing or justifying her choices in the social context that oppresses her. Readers receive the narrative and interpret the motives and rationality behind the character's actions.

From Iser's perspective (1978), this strategy shows that readers actively form meaning by bridging the gap between what the text says and does not say. They fill the narrative gaps with logical interpretations from their experiences and knowledge. This is also in line with Fish's approach (1970), where meaning is not fixed but is formed by a community of readers with a specific frame of mind. In this case, readers accustomed to the narrative of marginal characters tend to see Furukara's decisions as a form of adaptation, not deviation.

Conceive

The Conceive strategy emerges when readers imagine what it would be like to be Furukara—isolated, misunderstood, and having to imitate others to be accepted. This strategy shows that the text successfully triggers the reader's imagination to put themselves in the character's shoes, expanding their understanding of life experiences that differ from the general norm. Readers not only understand but also imaginatively experience the character's life.

According to Iser (1978), this imagining process is part of the reader's "text actualization," where the text comes alive through the reader's imaginative projection. Meanwhile, in Rosenblatt's (1993) framework, this strategy reflects a transactional reading that allows readers to form meaning through personal and imaginative involvement. This finding is also related to Priskila's (2024) study, which uses Baudrillard's concept of simulacra to show that Furukara's identity is the result of imitation and social construction that is never fully authentic.

Interpret

The interpretation strategy appears in the form of reading, which interprets the symbolic meaning of Furukara's character and his life choices. Although only a few readers explicitly use this strategy, those who do tend to see Furukara as a symbol of resistance to rigid social norms, especially regarding gender, work, and life expectations. This character is understood not simply as an individual but as a representation of a broader social critique.

In Iser's (1978) theoretical framework, this strategy reflects how readers fill in the gaps in the text with reflective and conceptual interpretations. Iser emphasizes that literary texts do not provide meaning directly but invite readers to interpret them through their experiences and knowledge. Meanwhile, Fish (1970) adds that this interpretation is formed by the interpretive community, a community of readers who are critical of social construction. This finding also aligns with Nuraini's (2022) approach, which examines the moral and social structural aspects of the representation of Furukara as a character who rejects the traditional role of women.

Connect

The Connect strategy is seen when readers relate Furukara's experiences to their own lives. They reflect similar social pressures, such as the demands to get married, have a steady job, and become the "ideal human" according to society. Although not dominant, this strategy shows that the text has high social relevance and can bridge the fictional experience with the reader's reality.

According to Rosenblatt (1993), transactional reading allows readers to bring their personal experiences into the reading process, making the text a space for reflection on real life. In this context, Furukawa becomes a meeting point between the fictional world and the reader's life experiences, strengthening the function of literature as a social mirror. Fish (1970) also emphasizes that meaning is formed in a particular social context, and the Connect strategy shows how readers interpret the text based on their collective experience as part of a society that demands conformity.

Judge

The Judge strategy emerges when readers give moral judgments to Furukara. Some see her as a strong figure because she dares to live according to his choice, while others consider her to have given in to social pressure. This judgment reflects an ethical evaluation of the character and his actions, showing that readers understand and judge based on their personal or social values.

In reader-response theory, this strategy reflects the active position of the reader as a subject who not only receives meaning but also shapes and evaluates that meaning. User (1978) states that readers are free to evaluate the text based on their interpretation, while Fish (1970) emphasizes that the norms and values of the interpretive community influence this judgment. In this context, readers who evaluate Furukara positively or negatively reflect the diversity of values in the reading community and the moral complexity offered by the text.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of reader responses to the novel *Convenience Store Woman* reveals that readers engage with the character Furukara through dominant strategies such as *Engage*, *Describe*, and *Conceive*. These approaches indicate a strong emotional, imaginative, and narrative connection formed between readers and the character, suggesting that Furukara effectively serves as a vehicle for personal reflection and social critique. Through their responses, readers not only relive the narrative but also grapple with broader themes such as societal expectations, the concept of normality, and questions of individual identity. Simultaneously, the presence of interpretive strategies such as *Explain* and *Interpret* reinforces Fish's notion of interpretive communities, showing how collective and cultural frameworks shape individual readings. These insights emphasize that literary interpretation is a dynamic, multilayered process influenced by both personal and sociocultural dimensions. Future research could extend these findings by examining responses from broader digital platforms such as Storygraph or LibraryThing to capture diverse interpretive communities. Additionally, interdisciplinary integration with representation theories like Baudrillard's simulacra or social identity theory would enrich the analysis of how characters like Furukara are interpreted across cultural contexts. Including readers from non-Asian backgrounds may further illuminate how cultural values influence engagement with characters who defy societal norms. Overall, this study highlights the importance of reader agency and cultural situatedness in literary interpretation, offering new pathways for understanding how literature resonates across different audiences.

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