

A Sisyphean Irasshaimase in the Middle of Japanese Konbini: Keiko Furukura's Existence Between Authenticity and Absurd

Japon Konbini'de Sisifosçu bir Irasshaimase: Keiko Furukura'nın Otantiklik ve Absürd Arasındaki Varoluşu

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Abstract

In existentialist philosophy, especially in names like Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, Heidegger and Jaspers, the problem of inherent meaninglessness of existence and notion of authenticity are related to each other. This relation is generally constructed through the awareness of the human condition of being thrown into the meaningless world (*geworfenheit*). Being conscious about the phenomenological difference between human (as the element which can create meanings and values by itself) and world (as the element without any meaning by itself) is being conscious about the absurd this is the source of the possibility of authenticity. Without being aware of the absurd, one can't even begin to be authentic. Even though the relation between absurd and authenticity is obviously there, its phenomenological layers are not examined enough in a way that uncovers this

Özet

Varoluşçu felsefede, özellikle Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, Heidegger ve Jaspers gibi düşünürlerde, varoluşun içsel anlamsızlığı problem ile otantiklik kavramı birbiri ile ilişkilidir. Bu ilişki genellikle insanın anlamsız dünyaya fırlatılmış olması (*geworfenheit*) durumunun farkındalığı ile inşa edilir. İnsan (kendi başına anlamlar ve değerler yaratabilen öge olarak) ve dünya (kendi başına herhangi bir anlamı olmayan öge olarak) arasındaki bu fenomenolojik ayrımın bilincinde olmak, absürdün bilincinde olmaktır ve bu otantiklik olasılığının kaynağıdır. Absürdün farkında olmadan, otantik olunmaya başlanamaz bile. Her ne kadar absürt ve otantiklik arasındaki ilişki bariz bir şekilde ortadaysa da, bu ilişkinin fenomenolojik katmanları, bu ilişkinin deneyimde ortaya çıkan farklı varyasyonlarını açığa çıkaracak şekilde yeteri kadar incelen-

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relation's different variations occurring in experience. In this article, we will focus on, through a literary criticism, the main character of a novel. First, we aimed to set a questioning environment with a short recap of how Camus thought of the absurd through an interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus. Then with grounding our investigation in this existential sense of absurd, we explored the relation between authenticity and absurd. After this, in Sayaka Murata's novel titled Convenience Store Woman, through the main character Keiko's way of living, we found the possibility of understanding the relation between absurd and authenticity in a new way where they are closely intertwined with each other. With a close reading of the novel, we widened and deepened the experience of absurd and authenticity philosophically, by manifesting a close, rather strange, interaction between those two. This experience of the relation between absurd and authenticity was a situation that the earlier examinations of existentialist philosophy fall short in recognizing it. This experience which is manifested through the examination of Keiko's life and existence, at the same time, sets a good example on how Japanese thought may contribute essentially to Western culture.

Keywords: Comparative Philosophy, Existentialism, Japanese Thought, Literary Criticism, Novel.

memiştir. Bu makalede, edebi eleştirisi aracılığıyla, bir romanın ana karakterine odaklanılacaktır. İlk olarak, Sisifos mitinin bir yorumu aracılığıyla, Camus'nun absürdü nasıl düşündüğünün kısa bir özetiyle sorgulayıcı bir ortam oluşturmayı amaçladık. Sonra, araştırmamızı bu varoluşsal absürt anlayışında temellendirerek, otantiklik ve absürt arasındaki ilişkiyi inceledik. Bundan sonra, Sayaka Murata'nın Kasiyer başlıklı romanında, romanın ana karakteri Keiko'nun yaşam tarzı üzerinden, absürt ve otantikliğin yeni bir şekilde sıkı sıkı birbirinin içine geçmiş olduğu absürt ve otantiklik arasındaki ilişkiye dair bir anlayışın olanağını bulduk. Romanın dikkatli bir okumasıyla, absürt ve otantiklik arasında yakın ve tuhaf bir etkileşimini ortaya çıkararak absürt ve otantiklik deneyiminin felsefi açıdan genişletip derinleştirdik. Absürt ve otantiklik arasındaki ilişkinin bu deneyimi varoluşçu felsefenin daha önceki incelemelerinin bu deneyimi fark etmekte yetersiz kaldığı bir durumdur. Keiko'nun yaşamının ve varoluşunun incelenmesiyle ortaya çıkan bu deneyim, aynı zamanda, Japon düşüncesinin Batı kültürüne nasıl kritik katkılarda bulunabileceğine dair de örnek oluşturmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edebi Eleştirisi, Japon Düşüncesi, Karşılaştırmalı Felsefe, Roman, Varoluşçuluk.

One must imagine Sisyphus happy

Camus finishes his remarks about Sisyphus with this line above (Camus, 1979: 111). We don't or can't know whether Sisyphus was really happy with his own situation or not, but Camus thinks we must imagine him to be happy. We must imagine him happy, because at the very moment Sisyphus has realized the absurd nature of his punishment, at the very moment he became aware of the absurdity taking place in his walks up and down the mountain, which becomes his own destiny, that he will push that boulder to the top of the mountain, again and again, until the end of his time; something essential suddenly changes. He no longer has the mentality of a prisoner who is being punished. His whole way of understanding, seeing and constructing the sense of reality has changed in a second, at the very moment he embraced the absurdity of that reality. He welcomed the absurdity happening with open arms. For Camus, this is precisely what makes Sisyphus an absurd hero. Sisyphus is the absurd hero, because he uses the punishment itself, which is no longer a punishment for him, to mock the gods by enjoying the very act they force him to do it. He doesn't have a false hope in his heart which says, "maybe this time, I will push the boulder to the summit and my punishment will be over, and I'll be set free". No, he is completely aware of the truth that the boulder will never reach the top of the mountain no matter how many times he tries, no matter what he does. He knows his every possible endeavour would be completely in vain every time. But he continues to push the boulder towards the impossible summit anyway, because this is the absurd and he acknowledges it, he doesn't fight against it. He made his peace with it.

Sisyphus also doesn't have a cunning voice inside himself which says, "I'm humouring this stupid charade, only until the moment I'll come up with a plan to escape from it". He is not, inside his mind, secretly plotting his escape from this punishment. Since he outsmarted death twice before, maybe he could've gotten out this situation if he were to put his mind into it, but that wasn't what's happening there for him. He knew this was the end for him. He saw the inherent meaninglessness and futility of the task

which was given to him, and the way to reconcile with this ultimate meaninglessness came to him through the absurd itself. If he is to push the boulder up to the top of the mountain, just to see it roll down again and again, he will surely be positively relentless about it. It is not that he overcame the absurd, but he just didn't succumb to it, and he turned this "punishment forever and ever" into a life-long event which he gets to decide how to experience it. For Camus, Sisyphus is not just content with this never-ending task, but he is also happy, because if there was a designated end to it, then the absurd wouldn't surface as strong as it did now in front of Sisyphus. Futility and vainness bring a (momentary or everlasting) sense of happiness. For some, this is surely a sad happiness, because no matter how Sisyphus sees his own situation, it is a depressing one, going up and down, knowing that it is already in vain. But it is not depressing for Sisyphus, because that is what he does now. For him, it doesn't matter that the boulder will start to roll back down in a second, he just continues to push it up. In this menial loop where the repetitiveness of the manual labour torments both the mind and the body, it is true that there is an unbearable suffering. But, while some see devastation and destruction of the essence of Sisyphus, some others (Like Camus) see a salvation which Sisyphus can only attain through being exposed to the absurdity. So, the question awaits: "What is the absurd here, the doom or the salvation for Sisyphus?" and/or "Is this (absurd) the damnation of Sisyphus, or the true liberation of him?" For Camus, it is obvious that Sisyphus finds some sense of salvation, because he says we must imagine Sisyphus happy. Camus imagines that Sisyphus looks inside the eyes of meaninglessness, with an attitude of indifference to it, before the absurdity of whole existence, and he (Sisyphus) starts to create meanings within the life which is inherently lack of any sense of meaning. Therefore, from now on, acts of Sisyphus will always be aware of the absurd, and will never be devoid of any meaning, simultaneously.

Now, the questions like "how much does Sisyphus enjoy this endless going up and down?" or "does he really give his best every time he restarts pushing the boulder towards the top?" are not concern for this article. We

also not really interested in the philosophical narrative that connects Sisyphus to overcoming the problem of suicide, even though this narrative was the main theme for Camus. It is true that, at least according to one interpretation, Sisyphus finds a sense of rebellion and meditation in his way of doing the task at hand. There is a passive rebellion because gods tried to condemn him, and he is rejoicing in the very act that was supposed to be his torment. Moreover, in one sense, within his punishment, Sisyphus finds a joyful fate, a personal identity and a definition for himself. In every repeat of the tedious going up and down, Sisyphus gains sublimity and he is exalted by how he deals with the absurdity. Seeing this must've pissed the gods off as they just wanted to see Sisyphus diminish by the task, not the opposite. And there is also a sense of meditation here, because once the mentality of Sisyphus regarding the absurdity is set, then he finds a virtue and (purposeless) purpose in his task. In his mind, there is no more questions of why or how, there is no more questioning or reminiscence. There is only the monotonous work of pushing the boulder up, nothing else. There is just pushing, nothing else. In this sense of singularity, Sisyphus must've found some state of trance or meditation which enables him to construct himself a reality through the absurdity which is already a positive force against suicide. With these senses of rebellion and meditation, acknowledging the absurd becomes the way Sisyphus chooses life. The absurd opens a possibility for Sisyphus to be in charge of his own undoing. The absurd enables Sisyphus to be able to choose. For Camus, this "having the freedom to choose" is the ultimate step that saves anyone from the idea of suicide. But as said before, we are not really interested in this narrative.

What we are interested in lies in this question: "After his punishment started, did Sisyphus really live an authentic life?" For Camus, the answer is a yes as clear as it gets, since for him, being authentic is essentially related to be conscious about the absurdity of whole existence and acting accordingly to this awareness. Sisyphus was stuck in a series of conditions, and he was aware of the meaningless of this situation and he chose to make the best of it. For Camus, this was enough to say that Sisyphus lived an

authentic life, even if all he did was pushing some big rock up on the slope of a mountain with the rest of his remaining time. But still, it feels like, for the relation between authenticity and absurd, there's more than what Camus thought of it. And, in this paper, we aim to present what that is. So, our question turns into this: "Can authenticity and absurd really go together hand in hand?"

Absurdity of Keiko

We will try to tackle this question through a brilliant Japanese novel, titled コンビニ人間 [Konbini Ningen] by Sayaka Murata [Murata, 2016]. The novel was translated into English in 2018 with the title *Convenience Store Woman* [Murata, 2018], and into Turkish in 2019 with the title *Kasiyer* [Murata, 2019]. In this novel, especially through the main character, Keiko Furukura, we can find a way to philosophically problematize the relation between authenticity and absurd.

Through *Convenience Store Woman* Murata projects the shortcomings of the Japanese society by narrating the story of a thirty-six year old unmarried woman, Keiko Furukura. She is a part-timer worker in a convenience store. A middle age unmarried woman working a part-time job seems strange to the society. Because it has its own untold laws firmly engraved in the minds of the people. Generally, women or men are expected to get married at the right age, which differs from the society to society. In *Convenience Store Woman*, the author mentions one exception to this so-called societal law and that is if a woman is highly qualified and earning a handsome salary, she is subjected to get some concession from the society. The people will make their own typical guesses about the unmarried highly paid woman, and the foremost among them are she might be busy in her career or she is unable to get her perfect match. Hence, it is clear as to why the people consider Keiko as a foreign object. She is on the verge of crossing the marriageable age as per the societal rules. And she has to take quick action to avoid the disaster befalling her i.e. she should get married. Keiko has attended university, but she is still working as a part-timer in a convenience store for a low wage. She would have been treated less harshly if she would have at least got a job, which pays her well. Keiko is neither married nor

owns a well-paid job so she is criticized two times more by the society. Keiko is a little different from what we call a normal individual as per the societal rules. From the very young age children develop their ways of acting in the society, which has conformity with the society. After certain age most of the acts carried out by any individual is based on his/her own intelligence, emotions or feelings. Keiko is different because her instinct of acting in the society is different, strange or the best word we can use here is quirky. The people think of Keiko as an abnormal. (Hosuri, 2020, p. 154)

There is something strange with the situation of Keiko. In the novel, it's been mentioned that she's been working as a part-timer for the last 18 years in the same convenience store which was first open 18 years ago. She has a university degree which might be useful in getting a better job with a higher pay, but she shows no interest in quitting her part-time job and look for something else. She doesn't have particularly enough savings that would serve her a comfortable life. Financially, she just gets by, on the verge of hardly making both ends meet. So, to some, at least economy-wise, it might seem that she lives an absurd life. For some, her life seems absurd because her choices might sound meaningless. In a social reality whose values are determined by capitalistic tendencies, choosing to earn less money while earning more money is practically and comfortably within reach surely sounds bizarre. But just because this choice sounds bizarre to some, does it mean Keiko leads an absurd life? Of course not. Just because Keiko's manners, character and disposition don't align with the majority's sense of normalcy, this doesn't mean Keiko lives an absurd life. That's why her mildly implied asexuality and celibacy (voluntary and/ or involuntary) also don't render her life absurd. Celibacy is a path as valid as the intercourse-oriented or marriage-oriented one. Being minority is not an anomaly, and it is surely not an absurdity.

In a reductive sense, for her, society opens up four paths: (1) make as much money as possible, preferably with a good carrier; (2) get married, have kids and be a good mother / wife; (3) just sustain and live your life in any way you prefer, even the chance of being mediocre is not a problem;

(4) commit suicide and die. Keiko clearly chooses the third option and it's more than okay (see, Aruna & Odedara, 2024). It's more than okay because it is a conscious choice and among the first three options, none of them is more (or less) absurd than the others. She doesn't choose the options which are frequently being chosen (one and two), but third one is also as good as the first two. For some, maybe more so. Therefore, she can be bizarre, odd, strange, weird, eccentric, peculiar etc. but she is not absurd. To be more precise, if she is absurd, her being absurd is not because of details above. Then, is she living an absurd life for any other thing?

World that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity (Camus, 1979, p. 13).

So, if the absurdity is essentially related to a sense of separation between human and world, this is the world that one builds with not just being present but with existing (emphasis is on the verb *existere* against *essence*) in every possible aspect of life, then there might be a problem for Keiko. There might be a problem, because from the start of the novel, we see that Keiko has a crucial sense of separation between the life inside konbini¹ and life outside of it.

The Hiromachi Station Smile Mart has remained open ever since that day, its lights on without a break. Sometimes I use a calculator to work out the number of hours that have passed since then. The other day, the store was open on May 1 for the nineteenth time, having been open continuously for 157,800 hours. I'm now thirty-six years old, and the convenience-store-worker-me is eighteen. None of the other workers who did their training with me are here anymore, and we're now on our eighth manager. Not a single product on sale in the store at that time is left. But I'm still here. When I first started here, there was a detailed

¹ Shorter version of コンビニエンスストア (konbiniensu sutoa), Japanese word for “convenience store”.

manual that taught me how to be a store worker, and I still don't have a clue how to be a normal person outside that manual (Murata, 2018, p. 17).

For Keiko, as long as she is inside the konbini, working, there's no problem with the world. The reader doesn't know whether she is happy with her life (or at least content with it) or not, but since she doesn't try to do anything to change the course of her life, we can assume that she at least doesn't see a big problem with the way she lives her life. Surely, her approach to life, in one sense, is the nightmare of all existentialists who have been screaming "existence precedes essence", because even though she doesn't have dogmatic and predetermined traits about herself in her mind, she still lives her life too much in her comfort zone. She doesn't try to overcome herself, only to lose against herself again and again, until not. She doesn't try to destroy Keiko inside, just to build a new Keiko in herself in every new day, just to destroy and build her again and again. It is obvious that she found herself an island wherein she is protected, and she doesn't have appetite for exploring the unknown realities of her own existence. It is as if she's been living the life in a frozen mode for the last eighteen years. She (one can remember Nietzsche here) doesn't live dangerously.

For believe me! The secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is: *to live dangerously!* Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! Be robbers and conquerors as long as you cannot be rulers and possessors, you seekers of knowledge! Soon the age will be past when you could be content to live hidden in forests like shy deer! (Nietzsche, 2008, p. 161).

So, it is not that there is a sense of divorce between Keiko and her life, but it is that Keiko's life is stuck within the boundaries of the konbini. Within the konbini, Keiko has her best sense of life, she exactly knows her place in the whole world, she is exactly where she supposed to be. She doesn't feel alienated at all, as long as she is inside the konbini, working. She has her own little world inside the konbini, and she is okay with it. Inside the konbini, there's no absurd for her, because everything is meaningful and

has order when inside the world of konbini. It almost feels like, there's no world outside of konbini for Keiko. It almost feels like, she doesn't really exist outside of konbini. And this is exactly where it gets problematic. As Keiko herself also openly articulates when she says "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 [...] Think of me as an animal, a convenience store animal. I can't betray my instinct" (Murata, 2018: 102), Keiko is what and who she is, only when she is inside the konbini. At first, if we want to interpret this as a positive situation, we can say things like "she found her inner calling of herself in being a convenience store worker" or "she found her *ikigai* (生き甲斐) in working within konbini" and these would be valid interpretations regarding her situation (see, Chambers, 2023). And it is also possible, from quite an opposite perspective, that her working in konbini is a direct threat for her existence. As the Japanese title of the novel indicates, Keiko is a *konbini ningen* [konbini human] which means that she finds the essence of her true self and existence in konbini. Being a konbini human defines and determinates who and what she essentially is. From an existentialist perspective, someone saying "above all, I'm a Christian and that is the core of my whole being" and "above all, I'm a konbini human and that is the core of my whole being" have the same problematic characteristic regarding the human existence. They are both the results of situations where human existence is reduced to a specific state of affairs and confined within that static state whereas human existence is better off when it is let move freely in a dynamic way between states of affairs to fully develop and realize its own potentials. If meaning of existing is related to the act of constructing a human through failures and successes, ups and downs of life, then one can say that Keiko doesn't really exist, neither inside konbini nor outside of it, because she doesn't open her life to the occurrence of failure and success. She doesn't try to transform who she really is (see, Nicolae, 2018). She doesn't try to open up new paths in life, she doesn't force her luck in anything initiative, she doesn't leap into the unknown that

existence holds secretly within, just for her. It is like Keiko is on the shore of a sea what is called life, and she is just spending her time on the shore, maybe enjoying the view from there, not entering the sea, even though she knows how to swim perfectly. Or as if she is just watching her existence itself from the bench which she left herself there to sit, while she should be the main figure who is just not playing but making all the decisions regarding how the game will be played out. In this sense, compared to Sisyphus as Camus thought of him, she is more like K. in Kafka's trial, not entering through the door which was only meant for him.

The doorkeeper realizes that the man is nearing his end, and so, in order to be audible to his fading hearing, he bellows at him, "No one else could be granted entry here, because this entrance was intended for you alone. I shall now go and shut it" (Kafka, 2009, p. 155).

So, is there indeed a divorce between Keiko and Keiko's life which makes her life absurd? If we follow Camus and his train of thought, since he said that the absurd happens only when there is a confrontation between human and the world (Camus, 1979, p. 33-4), then surely, we can say that, yes, there is an element of absurdity Keiko finds whenever she encounters with the life outside of konbini. Not only this, but she clearly understands that people in her life finds a sense of absurdity in the relation between her and konbini. It is surely something absurd for a thirty-six-year-old human with a university degree to be working in a konbini for the last eighteen years with nothing else in her life to show for it. Keiko knows how absurd she (or her life) is seen from the outside. She might have not a problem with this situation, but she clearly sees the situation and that is an important detail. It is not that Keiko is delusional and she is not aware of the absurdity of herself. No, she is completely aware of the absurd that encircles and infests her life (from outside perspective). She is just an anomaly. But what she doesn't realize is that anomaly is not something that normalcy completely expels and throw out, but on the contrary, they are both each other's peripheries that they are being defined through. They need each other like the mountain and valley need each other if they want to be what

they are (see, Heidegger, 2010, p. 14). She is fully conscious of the absurdity of the world she is living (both her micro-personal world within konbini, and the boundless world outside). This awareness constructs the force in herself that makes her get into relations and connections with the outside world. She doesn't just say "I'm fine with being konbini human, and this is enough for me", but from time to time, she deliberately chooses to interact with the outside world. Is this because she wants to escape from the konbini world she usually belongs to?

There exists an obvious fact that seems utterly moral: namely, that a man is always a prey to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them. One has to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is for ever bound to it. A man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future. That is natural. But it is just as natural that he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator. All the foregoing has significance only on account of this paradox (Camus, 1979, p. 35).

Well, in the case of Keiko, different than the absurd human of Camus, Keiko doesn't really escape from the konbini world, but she tries to see if some sense of regulation can be brought up to the world outside. Through some series of regulations, maybe her world in general can be widen. Camus says that "the absurd mind has less luck. For it the world is neither so rational nor so irrational. It is unreasonable and only that" (Camus, 1979, p. 49), and this is also valid for Keiko. For her, the outside world is, even though it obviously has an inner logicality and consistency, difficult to comprehend. Surely, Keiko's way of dealing with absurdity is different than the way Camus described the absurd mind, because here, with Keiko, we encounter with the passive sense of dealing with life and the things it brings. While for Camus, the absurd human, sometime along the path, needs to transform into some sense of agency; but in Keiko, we encounter with a passive act of bystanding which just goes with the flow. There is almost a philosophy of indifference in Keiko's way of living. It is very wuwei [无为], it is very Zen, it is very Tao, it is very Japanese. Maybe this is one of the reasons why the novel is very popular within Japanese

culture and society. She just lets her own existence and life run its own course without being checked, controlled or directed. Her only stance she takes is being a *konbini ningen*. That's it. Other than that, Keiko deals with absurdity through indifference (until the very end of the novel). Sisyphus of Camus deals with absurdity through reshaping the experience of whole reality. Keiko deals with absurdity through the sense of non-existence of ego and self. Sisyphus of Camus deals with the absurdity through overcoming his self and reaching to a higher sense of self where he bypasses the experience of reality to construct a new one instead, through being superior to his own fate (Camus, 1979, p. 108-9). For Sisyphus of Camus, absurdity is of lucidity. For Keiko, absurdity is of oblivion. For Sisyphus of Camus, dealing with absurdity is almost something ethical. For Keiko, what she goes through when she interacts with the absurd doesn't have anything to do with any ethical take. For Sisyphus of Camus, in the end, one *must* embrace the absurd. For Keiko, there is no true sense of "must" or "should" that hover over her existence. Even though the absurd has a universal aspect, the absurd of Keiko is different than the absurd of Camus.

Surely, one can also find similarities between Keiko and Sisyphus of Camus, regarding the absurd. For both, overcoming absurdity is related to the act of fidelity. For, Sisyphus of Camus, the fidelity is towards pushing the rock up to the summit of the mountain. For Keiko, the fidelity is towards working within konbini. They are both loyal of their own personal, inevitable fates. They are both unable to do a leap of faith (in Kierkegaardian sense), because they don't completely understand the unreasonable world in front of them (see, Camus, 1979, p. 52). While Keiko is talking to her sister, she says: "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" (Murata, 2018, p. 84), we clearly see her not understanding her own situation in her lack of decisiveness and truly asking for guidance. Keiko knows the best when it comes to the inner politics of a konbini as a working environment, but when it comes

to her life in general as a living environment, she is without a single clue, and she doesn't mind. Not having a clue is okay, but not minding is a problem. She says that she doesn't mind either way. This is where her absurdity eventually springs forth. Her purposes are not truly purposive, and this creates a sense of absurd. For an authentic life, the attitude of "either way is fine" usually leads to a cul-de-sac and is destructive in a negative sense. Here, what she is doing is not "choosing not to choose". She just doesn't choose. And if there is something in her way of living an authentic life, it is precisely this manner.

Here we can ask again the question which had put us on our path: "Can authenticity and absurd really go together hand in hand?" Since we now know that Keiko's life is absurd in one sense, we can also ask this: "For the last eighteen years, while working in konbini, has Keiko been living an authentic life?" To answer this, we need to take a closer look at the elements which might create authenticity for Keiko's existence.

Authentic life of Keiko

One can assume that, even from within an existentialist perspective, it is hard to define authenticity in a definitive way. This is not only because the authenticity, to a greater extent, is a psychological experience which is hard to pinpoint in an objective way, but also because it has different phenomenological layers which are constantly being re-shaped through interactions and associations with concepts like purpose, choice, purpose, awareness, anxiety, justification, facticity, intentionality, individuality etc. which themselves are changing. For example, one of the key elements to create a sense of authenticity is through an understanding of freedom, but freedom, when it's dealt with philosophically, is an evolving concept both historically and culturally. Not to mention it doesn't mean the same thing to even the different philosophers who belong to same existentialist tradition.

The one criterion that Sartre offers regarding our choices is authenticity, choosing while recognizing the responsibility of one's freedom. However, this authenticity concerns the state of the acting for-itself, it is not a criterion for pur-

poses themselves. Sartre never denies that one could be an authentic Nazi or an authentic member of the French resistance [...] Heidegger, in contrast, is a more difficult case. In our average everyday living, we do not question our purposes, and thus seem to *prima facie* take them as sufficient and justified. But when in *Angst*, we can come to understand that our purposes are contingent, and therefore presumably unjustified. In response, like Sartre, Heidegger offers only that we can “choose to choose” and form a kind of life (authentic existence) in which we recognize this contingency. But here again, there seems to be no reason to pick one purpose over another, and so it is hard to see how any purpose can be justified or sufficient (DeLancey, 2023, p. 182).

If we loosely define “being authentic” as “living accordingly to one’s own values, desires and being true to oneself”, then we can say that Keiko’s life is as authentic as anyone’s. She spends her time with doing what she thinks suitable for her. Surely, from outside perspective, it can be seen that she is one of those generic, mediocre people who have nothing going on in their lives except working, and her whole life is based on her job. She does nothing other than work-related things and her whole personality is essentially shaped by the work she is doing and nothing else (see, Putri & Agustina, 2023). Surely, she is not a workaholic in the sense that she is working non-stop to reach higher levels in her career (like climbing the corporate ladder) and overcoming every obstacle on her way to gain a sense of accomplishment. No, she just goes to work. She just wants to go to work and do what is required at workplace and that’s it (see, Chotib & Syahnia & Widodo, 2023). She doesn’t have any sense of psychological hunger for success to be called workaholic. She doesn’t overachieve anything, she just achieves what is necessary to be a good employee, that’s it. She is not some slacker who does only the bare minimum to not get fired. She doesn’t shirk at work whenever she finds the chance to (for example when her supervisor is not checking her). She is an exemplary employee in any way that matters. Therefore, it is wrong to think of her as an incurable workaholic whose work is her entire life. It is just that she finds a liberating sense of reality when she is at work. This narrative is very suitable for the modern Japanese work culture, especially with the idea of salaryman (

サラリーマン) who prioritizes the work life over everything else, which is already an established social phenomenon in modern Japanese culture, especially in white-collar jobs (also see, Park, 2014). So, it is obvious that Keiko leads an authentic life, because if she is not leading an authentic life, then at least half of the working population of Japan would not be leading an authentic life, and that would be a purely absurd thought to think.

Surely, there are at least two factors which make Keiko's authenticity a special case. One is that she is working in konbini, not some company where she can build herself some sort of a career over the years. She works in a place where it is almost impossible to be authentic. Working part time in a konbini is more suitable for college students who need some extra money to spend, for young people who are job hunting and in between jobs, for people who want to improve their social skills by practicing and for retired people who want to stay active and not stuck inside their houses all day long. It is a useless, dead-end job if one wants to build a life, financially. It provides an insufficient income, regardless of gender, if one wants things such as buying a house, getting married, having kids, going to holidays in winter and summer, providing a higher standard of living for kids etc. It is just not the job cut out for these kinds of expenses (see, Gaur & Jaseel, 2022). Moreover, it is almost impossible to be authentic while working as a convenience store worker. Because, for example, while working as a white-collar worker for some company, personal traits and strengths of a person might come in handy in getting promotions and moving up within the workplace hierarchy, a konbini worker must be as impersonal as it is possible to be. More Keiko is impersonal, more she fits well within a konbini as a worker. More Keiko is inauthentic as a person, more she belongs to the konbini as a worker. This is the problem of her authenticity. The place she finds the meaning for her existence demands her to be as robotic as she can be. Konbini requires Keiko to get rid of any humanistic and personal features she possibly has. Konbini needs Keiko to be more like a programmed machine and less like a human. This is why being a konbini human has a paralyzing effect on being authentic.

Surely it is easy to extend this narrative of konbini towards a socio-economical criticism of capitalism where konbini is designed to be a dehumanizing place. It is a store where computerization of everything has utmost importance. Different than the supermarkets and markets, there's little to none browsing in konbini, because since store floor has limited space, everything is already optimized. It is a soulless place where commodities are being sold through least amount of human interaction possible. It is a place of transaction where customers don't really care about what kind of day the convenience store workers are having and convenience store workers also don't really care about the personal issues the customers have. Transactions happen with the least amount of eye contact between the convenience store worker and the customer. Surely, there are fake greetings and small talks here and there, as the civilization requires, but the contents of the conversations between convenience store workers and customers are always quick to be forgotten. Convenience stores serve for one purpose, and the cost of that purpose might have a dehumanizing affect.

But this is just a negative narrative regarding the konbini. It is already quite possible to see the positive sides of konbini as well. Konbini is usually the only place in an area which is open twenty-four / seven. This mean that, in the middle of the night, when the streets are asleep, a konbini is the only place which welcomes stray humans. It can be a single pilgrim or traveller who arrived very late to the town, it can be a tired salaryman who is returning from work in the middle of the night and has nothing to eat in his/her house, it can be a sleepless おばあちゃん, just looking for a little human interaction after sitting at home alone all day, it can be some local kids, stopping by on their way home for some ice cream or snacks after a late baseball practice / game, someone who needs to take a leak really badly etc. the konbini might be the very saviour those people need the most. Konbini welcomes everyone at the very hour the rest of the city abandons them. In the middle of the night, where the darkness and silence cover the whole street, whole life, the whole existence feels like a ghost town. But just at the right time, while walking in this darkness, one sees blue and

white light, shining to the ground, at the corner of the end of the street ahead, one can't help but feel a sense of salvation. It almost feels like the konbini is the whole civilization packed, compacted and saturated into one store. The konbini is civil, outside of it is wildness. The konbini at middle of the night represents the whole progress of humanity and civilization, just by being open where every other store is closed and by being not exclusive.

This is of course not the only positive aspect of konbini. Even though it has a dehumanizing affect with transforming customers and store workers into mechanical parts of a transaction, convenience stores are also very popular socializing locations. Friends growing up in the same local area might use local convenience stores as a meeting point. When they make plans, they meet in front of local konbini. So, the location of konbini is used as a gathering point. Other than this, the empty space in front of the entrance of konbini (usually used as a parking lot) is also used as a socialization point, especially for smokers. Smokers, who buy their cigarettes from the konbini, stand in the corner in front of the entrance of konbini and they smoke, even though it is probably forbidden. During these smoking sessions, sometimes strangers meet, have conversations (one can remember the talk between Keiko and Shiraha), and exchange contact information. Konbini also usually have a place inside near the window where customers can sit and drink their drinks purchased within konbini, read their magazines, turn on their laptops and work or study, charge their electronics etc. In this sense, a konbini is between a small grocery store and a café. This feature also makes it a suitable place for socialization. With ATMs, photocopy and faxing machines ready to be used, payment services for bills etc. konbinis are multi-functional stores which have more positive, socio-cultural importance and role than they are normally given credit for.

In anyhow, Keiko, with working in a part time job for the last 18 years, in a job where everybody and everything else is essentially transient, is an authentic person, because she is unique in her working environment. One can travel whole Japan and probably won't find any other convenience worker who's been working in the same konbini (or even different various

ones for that matter) that long (see, Sorrentino, 2020). Her life as a konbini worker is authentic because she is unique and one of a kind in that matter. She somehow manages to be authentic where it is extra hard to be authentic. So, authenticity of her life has extra emphasis. She brings authenticity in one of the places where authenticity is least expected. She accomplishes being unique in a place where it is almost hardest to be unique and different than others. Therefore, authenticity of her life has a special sense.

Second factor which makes Keiko's life authentic is related to the condition of being hikikomori [ひきこもり]. Hikikomori, in short, is the state of complete social withdrawal and voluntary isolation from society. As being a psychological issue, this reclusiveness and social confinement is seen as something negative, as an illness to be cured and treated (see, Tamaki, 2013, p. 9-11). And when we think about Keiko's behaviours, especially the way she lived after she resigned from her job in konbini, surely her situation has some resemblance which reminds hikikomori: "The rice cooker was always left on, and my life revolved around waking up and shoving some rice into my mouth before getting back into my closet and sleeping again" (Murata, 2018, p. 98). The question of "Is Keiko a hikikomori?" is a strange question, because on one side, the reader already knows that she can't be a hikikomori, because Keiko actually enjoys the conversations happening inside the konbini which is pre-defined and structured-by-the-manual. She doesn't withdraw herself from the social interactions within the konbini. She likes being a part of the social organization occurring within the konbini. But at the same time, the reader already understands that the relation between Keiko and being a konbini human is a special one and that, if she is not working in a konbini, then surely, she can easily become a hikikomori. It is not that she doesn't want to work, because she wants to work, but she wants to work only inside a konbini. Does this mean she is a halfway hikikomori? Is she less or more than halfway hikikomori? Either way, it is obvious that Keiko's situation philosophically problematizes the concept of hikikomori towards a further consideration (see, Schreiner, 2021). But what is important for this paper is that Keiko's existential at-

tachment to the konbini. For her, working in a convenience store is much more than just a source for a salary. For her, the convenience store is not any other working place among many others. Konbini is *the* place where she actually *is*. Working in a convenience store is how Keiko existentially is. This is also what the English and Turkish titles of the novel are missing (see, Alzate, 2020). Keiko is *not* a convenience store woman, nor is she a *kasiyer*. This is not what the original title emphasizes. Original title says she is a *konbini ningen*. She is a konbini human. Working in a konbini is the way she exists. That's why when she is working in a konbini, her life is most authentic it can be. After she resigned, there's no authenticity in her life. Only when she goes back to the konbini, her authenticity also comes back to her. The situation is not that her job defines her whole personality and authenticity of her existence, but quite the opposite, that she can become her authentic self only through being *konbini human*, so she works as a convenience store worker. Her special situation does not only enable her to change the power dynamics upside down between a human and working for a salary, but it also opens a possibility where she becomes able to define herself through an unseen, unusual way. This is precisely what makes Keiko's situation philosophically important. Her story is a story where authenticity of existence can be found, rather unexpectedly. Even in her way of finding pride in being mediocre, there's a sense of authenticity. Even in her way of dealing with delusional Shiraha, especially when he was talking about how it was impossible for him to be sexually attracted to Keiko (as if he were talking to some eighty-year-old おばあちゃん, while the reader is sure that Keiko is a beautiful thirty-six-year-old Japanese woman who is looking exactly the same with the way she looked when she was twenty, and her lack of experience in romantic matters might be also seen something positive, to be cherished, contrary to how the author Murata depicted it), there is an interplay between absurd and authenticity in her inviting him to her place, letting him live with her. It was, at the same time, both an absurd and authentic course of events, so much that probably it would only happen in Keiko's life (see, Saladin, 2022).

There is also another, third, factor which makes Keiko an authentic character. It is basically her solitude and state of being an anomaly. No matter from which perspective she is considered, one must always keep in mind that, she is not a normal person (see, Herlina & Muhd, 2022). Even from childhood, she was different and anormal. This difference caused a mild state of exclusion for her whole life. She is not an outcast, but she is also not a solid member of the social circles around her. This kind of exclusion raises the sense of authenticity. More someone belongs to a group, more that person needs to dial down the authentic and personal quirks to fit well and create the sense of hive or the pack. Therefore, this means that, more Keiko is in solitary, more she is authentic. Less Keiko is accepted within a social group, more she is authentic. More she is immersed in individuality, more she is authentic (see, Iskandarovna & Romanovna, 2023). More she is anormal, more she is authentic. One can even connect this situation with the konbini, if working in the konbini is seen as a ritual of passage. This is the transformation of her selfhood. More Keiko is konbini ningen, more she is authentic.

Conclusion

In existentialist philosophy, especially in names like Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre, Heidegger and Jasper, the problem of inherent meaninglessness of existence and notion of authenticity are related to each other. This relation is generally constructed through the awareness of the human condition of being thrown into the meaningless world (*geworfenheit*). Being conscious about the phenomenological difference between human (as the element which can create meanings and values by itself) and world (as the element without any meaning by itself) is being conscious about the absurd this is the source of the possibility of authenticity. Without being aware of the absurd, one can't even begin to be authentic. Even though the relation between absurd and authenticity is obviously there, its phenomenological layers are not examined enough in a way that uncovers this relation's different variations occurring in experience. In Sayaka Murata's

novel titled *Konbini Ningen*, through the main character Keiko's way of living, we find the possibility of understanding the relation between absurd and authenticity in a new way where they are closely intertwined with each other. With examination of the novel, we find a possibility of philosophically widening the experience of absurd and authenticity, by manifesting a close, rather strange, interaction between those two. Through Keiko, we find different senses of absurd and authenticity of which the earlier examinations of existentialist philosophy fall short. With Keiko, we see that the absurd doesn't have to be the source of authenticity, but rather they can each other's counterparts in a phenomenological interplay in between. In Keiko's peculiar individuality and way of thinking, we encounter with the absurd and authenticity occurring at the same time. She is both absurd and authentic. But moreover, she is both absurd and authentic in the same way, because her absurdity is essentially linked to her authenticity and vice versa. Her peculiar existence presents a unique condition where the absurd and the authenticity are in each other's bed. If one goes away, the other also goes away. If one comes in, the other also comes in. It can be even said that her authenticity is absurd and her absurd is authentic, and these are on the same level.

In the end, Keiko's unique situation helps us understand and experience the relation between absurd and authenticity on a philosophically deeper, richer level. Through her existence, we become aware of a new socio-cultural and psychological layer that relation has within itself. In the case of Keiko, we don't even need to imagine, like Camus did with Sisyphus. It is obvious that Keiko is happy and content with life and her existence when she's absurdly and authentically working inside the konbini as a convenience store worker. She is happy with being コンビニ人間.

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