



RECLAIMING THE VOID: NIHILISM AND LIBERATION IN CONVENIENCE STORE WOMAN

BY ALMUDENA MAHOU

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH



*'Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.
[Traveler, there is no path, the path is made by walking.]'*¹

Antonio Machado (1998, p.152)

In Sayaka Murata's *Convenience store woman* (2019), Keiko Furukura's life seems to present a contradiction: she lives detached from societal norms but is deeply embedded in a mechanised capitalist system that sustains them. Her story invites readers to reflect on nihilism, liberation, and identity in modern Japan. Using Keiji Nishitani's framework (1983, 1990), Keiko's journey can be viewed as an existential crisis caused by her confrontation with the 'nihilism of death' that ultimately results in her moving towards the 'nihilism of life', where she reconstructs herself. Her solution, which involves grounding her identity in the routines of the convenience store, challenges pre-theoretical ideas of liberation. The 20th century Japanese feminist philosophers Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō saw women's liberation as achievable through creative expression or motherhood (Heisig et al. 2011, p.1133). However, Keiko departs entirely from these frameworks, becoming a new type of character that challenges the kinds of classifications we live by.

EDITED BY ASHER ROSE, COPY EDITED BY JULIETTE PEPIN,
REVIEWED BY CONNOR ADAMS, ART BY ELISE ADAMS

According to Nishitani (1990, p.1), nihilism is not an intellectual issue — a problem that can be tackled from the outside, as an observer — but an existential crisis that radically transforms the connection between the self and the world. It occurs when the self becomes a problem to itself, and when one's foundation — the social structures and horizons that give the self a meaning — crumbles and a deep sense of groundlessness emerges (Nishitani, 1990, p.1). Nishitani argues that '[i]f nihilism is anything, it is firstly a problem of the self, and it becomes such a problem only when the self becomes a problem, when the ground of the existence called the "self" becomes a problem' (1990, p. 1). This constitutes a form of existential awakening that reveals the self's unfamiliarity to itself, forcing it to confront the void that lies beneath the meanings constructed through the unreflective repetition of social norms. However, simply recognising this void without engaging with it leaves the self separated from it. Detached observation perpetuates the nihilism of death,² for as long as the self stands apart from nothingness, it cannot transform its ground of being and move toward the nihilism of life. As Masao Abe explains, Nishitani situates this transition in the movement from nihilism to emptiness itself:

In order to stand in a truly free and truly subjective standpoint, one must take a step beyond such a standpoint of nihilism and stand in a place that lies even closer to the side of the self than the self's ordinary being does. This is the standpoint of emptiness as distinguished from nihilism [...] 'What we have called the abyss of nihilism can only be constituted in emptiness.[Nishitani, 1983]" (Abe, 1992, p. 61).

I argue that Keiko's confrontation with the void parallels this step beyond despair, towards a proximity to emptiness. For this reason, Nishitani insists that we must 'think with passion' to 'stop observing and start becoming' (1990, p.1).

Nishitani's framework of nihilism is more accurately understood as a two-step process, rather than a structure including two contrasting varieties of nihilism. The first phase is what he terms the 'nihilism of death', signifying an initial recognition of the universal fact of groundlessness (Nishitani, p. 4). This is followed by the 'nihilism of life', where this recognition serves as a basis

for constructing a new horizon of meaning — not a replacement of meaning, but a transformation in how it itself appears within the field of emptiness (Abe, 1992, p.66). The nihilism of death reveals itself when an individual realises that the foundational elements of their existence — societal conventions, personal morals and principles, through which their very sense of identity is formed — have disintegrated, leaving an overwhelming void of nothingness (Nishitani, 1983, (p.4). Nishitani describes it as 'that which renders meaningless the meaning of life. When we become a question to ourselves [...] nihilism has emerged from the ground of our existence' (1983, p. 4). This encounter with the abyss causes despair and existential stagnation, as the self becomes unmoored from all it once relied upon. Nishitani, nevertheless, emphasises that what first appears as profound negativity — the collapse of all fixed meaning, felt as existential disorientation grounded in the negation of the being itself — is not the conclusion of nihilism but the start of a journey of transformation (1983, p.93). To overcome nihilism, one must pass through this stage of self-negation: to deny the false ground of the self given by history, and to let its being become a question mark. Notto R. Thelle (a student of Nishitani's) describes this transformation as one that 'takes place when nihilism becomes the very place which opens up for a transcendental reality. [...] Abandoning oneself to the abyss, the old ego-centred world crumbles and a new universe comes into being. The flower blooms on the cliff's edge' (1992, p. 133). Keiko's renewal likewise arises within her own descent into the abyss. This voluntary negation is not destruction but the condition of renewal — a movement of becoming rather than being. The nihilism of life begins as soon as one realises this and reframes their perspective towards the abyss, perceiving it as an open cosmos with infinite possibilities rather than a cul-de-sac. In Chapter 5 of *The self-overcoming of nihilism*, Nishitani draws this conclusion from a rereading of Nietzsche, who wrote that we are:

illuminated by a new dawn [...] the horizon seems free again, even if it is not bright; at last our ships can set sail again, ready to face every danger; every venture of the knowledge-seeker is permitted again; the sea, our sea, lies open again before us; perhaps there has never been such an 'open sea'. (Nietzsche, 2018, p. 226).

This bittersweet journey of reevaluating one's life and values entails discarding those values that no longer give meaning, and consciously reclaiming those that might.³

Overcoming nihilism does not consist of eliminating it but incorporating it as one's grounding — transforming it from within by realising that its void is the very field on which meaning emerges. One must put nihilism 'behind him, [...] beneath him, no longer part of him' (Nietzsche, 2017, p. 7), in order to reach the standpoint of the 'consummate nihilist' — one who has passed entirely through nihilism and has come to see that the nothingness once experienced as negation is also the ground on which life itself may be affirmed anew (Nishitani, 1990, p. 77). This entails accepting the transience and nothingness of existence — the recognition that, as Nishitani explains, nothingness is not opposed to existence but is its very ground, the field in which being and non-being unfold together (1983, p.38). This means accepting that the world of all finite things and transcendent essences is seen to be essentially null — a 'double negation', in which both the finite world and its supposed metaphysical ground are emptied (Nishitani, 1990, p. 174). They are like waves and the ocean: each appears distinct, yet neither exists apart from the other (Nishitani, 1983, p. 103). When their separateness dissolves, the movement of water itself — without fixed form, yet giving rise to all forms — reveals the ground in which finitude and eternity converge. From this standpoint, finitude and eternity no longer oppose one another but are understood as mutually arising within the framework of nothingness, where the transient and the eternal disclose each other as aspects of the same emptiness. As Abe explains, '[i]n contrast to Heidegger,' this standpoint of emptiness 'establishes "Being" as "Being" from its bottomless depths' (1992, p. 54). This allows all things to be known as they are, which restores them to their own ground (Abe, 1992, p. 54). Everything that exists arises and passes away, yet this very movement of arising and passing takes place within a deeper openness that does not itself come or go (Abe, 1992. p.61). This is what Nishitani calls 'nothingness' (1983, pp. 34, 200, 224, 252). It does not erase meaning — instead, it is the background that allows things to appear at all, like the silence that makes sound possible or the blank page that makes writing visible. Seen from this perspective, transience and continuity are two sides of the same

reality: impermanence itself becomes the condition of continuity. Nihilism, therefore, is a process of self-redefinition. It does not necessarily require discarding all of one's life structures, but repossessing them and taking them up again from a transformed standpoint.



At the start of *Convenience store woman*, Keiko's existence is characterised by nihilism, where her estrangement from societal values leaves her seeking purpose and stability. Like Dante at the beginning of his journey (1321), Keiko gets lost in the cement forest of Tokyo, experiencing isolation, loneliness and alienation. She is unable to adopt the expectations that surround her, facing the disintegration of all external meanings and becoming forced to seek a foundation within herself. Sartre claimed that 'man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does' (2007, p. 29). He argues that when transcendence and divine order collapse, 'life itself is nothing until it is lived; it is we who give it meaning' (Sartre, 2007, p. 51). Meaning, then, is not deferred to some external source — it is always self-given, arising from one's own choices and actions. Nishitani's position, however, diverges from Sartre's; for Nishitani the problem is not that meaning must be chosen, but that the self that chooses must itself be transformed. In Nishitani's field of emptiness, meaning does not stem from assertion or decision, but from the dissolution of the self into the openness that allows being and nothingness to arise together. Keiko's surrender to the store's order is not a choice but a lived enactment of that dissolution, a way of becoming at home within groundlessness. Nishitani agrees with Sartre that meaning cannot be deferred to an external order; it must arise from within. Yet for Nishitani, the self that gives meaning to it must first undergo transformation (1983, p. 32). Whereas Sartre begins with freedom as the defining feature of the human subject, Nishitani sees the dissolution of that very subject as the precondition for genuine freedom (1983, p.4). Only when the self passes

through the abyss of nihilism and awakens to emptiness can meaning arise.



At the beginning of the novel, Keiko's lifestyle exemplifies a profound nonconformity to societal conventions. She feels no positive connection to society's social norms or moral imperatives — the roles of wife, mother or ambitious professional — yet she also lacks any alternative frameworks that she wishes to engage in through which her existence could be meaningfully grounded. This absence of any framework — the nihilism of death — sets in motion Keiko's transformation. Keiko, in a manner reminiscent of Dante, is existentially and physically disoriented; it is this state of confusion that initiates her metamorphosis. At the start of her transformation, Keiko discovers a method to navigate the emptiness she experiences: her work at the convenience store. The store becomes a temporary sanctuary — a place where the rigid rules displace her attention from the existential lack of clarity that she feels. Keiko refers to the store as an 'aquarium' (Murata, 2019, p. 13), a place that provides protection from the chaotic expectations and uncertainty coming from the outside world. Like water muffling noise, the store creates a peaceful and predictable space that allows Keiko to immerse herself in its repetitive rituals. Although considered worthless in society's terms and stigmatised precisely because she finds fulfilment in it — much like service work which is simultaneously looked down upon as insignificant and shameful — these habits enable Keiko to build her identity, acting as currents that guide her life and keep her flowing, transforming what others perceive as mundane into the very process through which her sense of self is created.

Keiko's connection to the store can be explained by Nishitani's conception of religion as a means to overcome both the nihilism of death and of life, resulting in the cultivation of self-reflectiveness: 'Religion encompasses both the transcendence of nihilism and its deepening toward self-reflectiveness, even though religion has not yet awakened to this. Its nihilism remains, as it were, unconsciously self-reflective' (1990, p. 77). Keiko's devotion to the store mirrors Nishitani's account of

religion (1983, 1990): it both transcends and perpetuates nihilism, providing her with order while unconsciously sustaining the void it seeks to overcome. As Abe notes, Nishitani situates the modern crisis of meaning precisely 'at the extreme point of the mechanisation of the human through science', where 'nihilism is opened up at the foundation of the human and the world', and where 'humans can be truly autonomous and free only by standing decisively in the abyss of nihilism' (1992, p. 61). For Nishitani, 'science' is the modern, non-teleological picture of the world that reduces life to a mechanism; it is the frame that renders nature, society, and even the self as systems to be optimised. When that picture is carried to its limit, it exposes the abyss of nihilism. Keiko's barcode beeps, uniform, and scripts stage exactly this threshold: the world as a procedure, and a self that learns to dwell within it. This echoes Nishitani's own demand, as understood by Jan Van Bragt, that the 'religion of the future' must 'dare to think existentially of science' and 'accept the universe with its feature of bottomless death as the place for the abandoning of oneself and the throwing away of one's life' (1992, pp. 34-5). Keiko's disciplined immersion in the mechanised rhythms of the store accepts this condition. The human becomes part of the machine, yet within that very mechanisation she discovers a paradoxical freedom — the ability to dwell consciously within the void it reveals.



For Keiko, the convenience store is a sacred space. It is both the question and the answer — it asks how one might live after the collapse of inherited meaning, and answers through the revelation that stability and purpose can be found in the smallest acts of routine. Within this space, she experiences a paradoxical form of identity — she is alienated from society, yet remains in the store's mechanical harmony, where the self attains coherence within the very structures that rendered it void. In a manner reminiscent of Nishitani's understanding of religion as a double force that both negates and affirms life, Keiko's deep engagement with the store becomes the locus of her confrontation with the abyss, where she transforms nihilism into a mode of being — an affirmation that arises from, rather than resists, the void (understood not only as negation, but

also as the field in which being and nothingness coincide). This affirmation is not an expression of existential authenticity, but rather a response that can only arise through one's own encounter with nihilism — unique, not in its essence, but in the unrepeatable way in which each self comes to face nothingness.

As the weight of societal expectations intensifies, mainly through the figure of Shiraha — who personifies conventional gender roles and societal expectations — Keiko finds herself compelled to grapple with the notion of transforming her existence in pursuit of social validation. Yet, Keiko's ultimate dismissal of Shiraha stands as an act of defiance. It symbolises her determination to resist the imposition of external definitions upon her sense of self, and to ground her existence in the meaning she derives from the store, even in the face of social disapproval — thus committing to overcoming nihilism. Keiko's final act of constructing her identity is expressed in her realisation that 'for the first time, I could think of me in the window as a being with meaning' (Murata, 2019, p. 97). This shift demonstrates that her connection to the store has evolved from refuge — an escape from the anxiety of groundlessness — to a deliberate affirmation of her own way of 'being in the void'. What was once a shelter of avoidance becomes a sanctuary of dwelling and affirmation. It no longer represents the paralysing nihilism of death, but the awareness of emptiness that marks the nihilism of life — shown through how she redefines herself as a 'convenience store worker'.

Keiko's overcoming of nihilism stems from her ability to look into the abyss and accept her own way of being. She finds meaning through dwelling within the store's repetitive order, a mode of being that affirms her identity without succumbing to societal pressures. For Keiko, this overcoming does not require rejecting her old ways, but reclaiming them from a transformed standpoint — repeating the same gestures and rhythms consciously rather than being determined by them. This transformation is what Nishitani describes as moving understood as a movement from what I described as the nihilism of death (where meaning has collapsed, and a void opens within the self) towards what he calls the nihilism of life (where the void becomes an immanent plane of possibilities) and thus overcoming

nihilism (1990, p. 174). As she finds personal satisfaction in what most would perceive as mundane or even constraining, Keiko demonstrates that overcoming nihilism does not come from seeking transcendence beyond it by appealing to a higher or external meaning, but rather from transforming her immediate world into the ground of meaning itself. The store becomes not a source of external value, but the very form through which her existence is realised, thus creating purpose in a way that is entirely her own. This uniqueness does not imply a fixed or authentic self; rather, it reflects the singularity of her encounter with nothingness — an unrepeatable way of living meaningfully within emptiness that arises from her specific facticity.



Yet the void Keiko inhabits is not only metaphysical; it is also social and gendered, exposing her to the competing visions of womanhood articulated by figures such as Yosano Akiko and Hiratsuka Raichō. To understand the full significance of her transformation, it is necessary to consider how her way of living unsettles dominant feminist models of liberation. Keiko's way of being gestures towards a different conception of liberation: she challenges conventional gender and societal roles, as well as the paths to liberation that these feminist thinkers defended. Through her rejection of traditional expectations and her adoption of a lifestyle based on the routines of the store, Keiko realises an affirmation of existence grounded not in individual self-expression, but in the acceptance of her existence as it unfolds within nothingness. She echoes the concerns of Akiko and Raichō, but ultimately reaches a radically different conclusion.

Raichō, in her early essays for the journal *Seitō*, envisioned liberation as a return to what she called an 'authentic self', which she conceived as a primordial, genderless state of being, free from social constraint: 'an authentic person is not a man and not a woman... we

need to come back to our true self' (Kimura, 2019, p. 623). In her later writings, however, Raichō's thinking shifted towards an emphasis on motherhood as the spiritual centre of womanhood and the moral foundation of society. Raichō moves away from a vision of gender transcendence and towards an affirmation of womanhood, with motherhood conceived as the basis of identity (Davis, 2014, p.618). Raichō writes that the year she became a mother was the year she 'began to reclaim [her] selfhood,' realising through motherhood that 'social problems relating to women, mothers, and children could never be solved by individuals alone' (2006, p. 286). Her later philosophy thus re-centred the maternal experience as the site of renewal. Keiko's character reflects certain elements from Raichō's early writings, particularly those emphasising the rejection of gender roles: 'Once we donned our uniforms, we were all equals regardless of gender, age, or nationality — all simply store workers' (Murata, 2019, p. 23). Like Raichō's 'authentic self', Keiko not only rejects the categories of 'wife' and 'mother', but refuses womanhood altogether. Raichō described her concept of an 'authentic self' as 'women's first declaration of their status as human beings,' explaining that the movement 'encompassed the totality of things' and urged women to recover their 'human beingness' (*ningensei*) by their own efforts (2006, p. 316). Raichō reported that the genesis of this call for liberation came from her own spiritual awakening, claiming that through the years of Zen practice she had 'freed herself of preconceptions and reached the realm where there is no Self' (2006, p. 316). For Raichō, women's liberation is a spiritual transformation inseparable from social awakening. Although Keiko's detachment from conventional femininity is consistent with Raichō's early writing, her devotion to the convenience store recalls Raichō's later ideal of maternal care. Keiko tends to the store like one might care for a living being — feeding it, cleaning it, and protecting its order. Murata thus transforms Raichō's spiritual motherhood into a form of maintenance, in which care and purpose can exist even without love, family or gender. Murata does this by retaining the gestures of care, traditionally associated with maternity — feeding, cleaning, protecting — but emptying them of gender: Keiko performs them not as a woman, but as a convenience store worker. This transformation parallels Raichō's own later thought: 'Given my views on the importance of motherhood and

my hopes for an economically autonomous society based on cooperative organisations [...] [women] have risen again to build a new self-governing society and create a new civilisation based on maternalism' (Raichō, 2006, p. 308). For Raichō, motherhood becomes the ethical foundation of collective solidarity, not simply a biological role.

Keiko challenges conventional ambitions of 21st century Japan such as marriage, motherhood, or intellectual success. She characterises herself as a 'convenience store worker', finding meaning in the store's rigid, rule-bound structure. This detachment from societal norms challenges Yosano Akiko's philosophy of liberation through creative self-expression and social participation. For Akiko, independence is the necessary condition for women to realise their individuality through art, emotion, and intellectual engagement; freedom is inseparable from creativity. Keiko, in contrast, finds meaning in her repetitive, ritualistic routines. She transforms our understanding of the meaning of being: 'I've been reborn, I thought. That day, I actually became a normal cog in society' (Murata, 2019, p. 12). For Keiko, her individuality is reduced to a function, and her meaning arises not from artistic or intellectual creation, but from disciplined conformity. Whilst for Akiko, being 'just a cog' in society's machinery would be an act of submission, for Keiko it is a form of belonging that provides her with a sense of grounding. In Murata's novel, identity is not compromised by belonging but formed through it — through participation in the ordered rhythms of the store that give Keiko's life coherence and purpose. Although such rigid conformity should suppress identity, Keiko's self is not negated by following the store's rules. Her obedience is autonomously chosen, transforming regulation into the ground of meaning.

Raichō and Akiko's philosophies are reflected not only in Keiko herself, but also in Keiko's sister, named Mami, and Shiraha's sister-in-law. Mami initially supports Keiko in accordance with Raichō's early vision of liberation beyond prescribed gender roles. However, after Mami becomes a mother, she urges Keiko to pursue marriage and social conformity, reflecting Raichō's later belief that motherhood is the foundation of womanhood. Shiraha's sister-in-law embodies Akiko's vision of a

pragmatic, financially independent woman — educated, assertive, and secure in her freedom — but she nevertheless urges Keiko to conform to social expectations of marriage and stability. Keiko ultimately dismisses both frames, instead constructing a life of her own characterised by the repetitive routines of the convenience store — cleaning, restocking, and greeting customers — which provide her with stability and a sense of purpose on her own terms. Ultimately, Keiko's journey brings about a form of self-consciousness — an awareness of what gives her existence meaning. Keiko shares Akiko and Raichō's aspiration for liberation but attempts to obtain it not through creative expression or motherhood, but through acceptance of the void. By rejecting the methods of liberation envisioned by these feminists, Keiko forges her own path and finds her own form of fulfilment. She identifies completely with the store's order: 'the voice of the convenience store won't stop flowing through me. I was born to hear this voice' (Murata, 2019, p. 95). This suggests that Keiko's sense of self is sustained through the fusion of her identity with the structure of the store.

Keiko Furukura's trajectory shows what Nishitani calls the passage through nihilism — a fall into groundlessness that becomes the site of renewal. Her movement from the nihilism of death to the nihilism of life unfolds not through a dramatic rupture but through the smallest rhythms of her daily work, revealing that the transformation Nishitani describes can occur in the very places where meaning first seems to evaporate. By turning away from the liberatory models proposed by Akiko — creativity, self-expression, and maternal identity — without succumbing to despair, Keiko inhabits a form of life shaped neither by resistance nor by conformity, but by an attentiveness to emptiness itself. Her way of being suggests that meaning may re-emerge not through asserting the self, but through allowing it to be reconfigured within the void it encounters. *Convenience store woman* thus invites us to reconsider how a life might take shape when the inherited coordinates of identity fall away, and to ask what other possibilities open when — as Nishitani urges — we learn to begin again from the emptiness at the heart of existence.

Footnotes

1. My translation.
2. The distinction between the *nihilism of death* and the *nihilism of life* is explored below.
3. Here Nishitani disagrees with Nietzsche.

Bibliography

Abe, M. (1992) "What is religion?", *The Eastern Buddhist*, 25 (1), pp. 51-69.

Davis, B.W. (2014) *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese philosophy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Heisig, James W, Thomas P Kasulis, and John C Maraldo. *Japanese Philosophy*. University of Hawaii Press, 2011.

Kimura, S. (2019) 'Hiratsuka Raichō: feminism and androgynous sexuality' in Kopf, G. (ed.) *The Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy*, Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 617-33.

Machado, A. (1998) *Campos de Castilla*. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva.

Murata, S. (2019) *Convenience store woman*. Translated by Takemori, G. T. New York: Grove Press.

Nishitani, K. (1983) Religion and nothingness. Translated by Bragt, J. V. Berkeley: University of California Press.

——— (1990) *The self-overcoming of nihilism*. Translated by Parkes, G. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Nietzsche, F. W (2018) *The joyous science*. Translated by Hill, R. K. London: Penguin Books.

——— (2017) *The will to power*. Translated by R. Kevin Hill and Michael A. Scarpetti. London: Penguin Books.

Raichō, H. (2006) *In the beginning, woman was the sun: the autobiography of a Japanese feminist*. Translated by Craig, T. New York: Colombia University Press.

Sartre, J (2007) *Existentialism is a humanism*. Translated by Macomber, C. London: Yale University Press.

Thelle, N. R. (1992) "The flower blooms on the cliff's edge", *The Eastern Buddhist*, 25 (1): pp. 130-7.

Van Bragt, J. (1992) "Nishitani the prophet", *The Eastern Buddhist*, 25 (1): pp. 28-50.