

## **The Commodified Eco Lifestyle in *A First-Rate Material* by Sayaka Murata**

Sayaka Murata's short story *A First-Rate Material* follows Nana and her fiancée Naoki, who consistently argue over objects made from human remains. These arguments become the points of conflict throughout the story and show how the rich will always gain from the commodification. It's also a comment on the growing anxieties of an aging society.

The story goes into detail about all the different objects that are within the story. For example, "the shinbone chair or the rib-cage table or the finger bone clock or the dried stomach lampshade," (Murata, Takemori, 2022: 9), just to name a few. These are seen as lavish and a way in which to flaunt your wealth, Aya - Nana's friend - claims that "Expensive clothes are not meant to simply decorate your closet," (Murata, Takemori, 2022: 2), implying that Nana should use her human-hair sweater to flaunt her wealth. Clearly, human bodies are now commodities, just like animals are treated. The characters justify the cost and reason to buy such as a way to reduce waste. Nana, trying to convince her fiancé that it's okay to use these products, says, "There are so many parts that can be reused as furniture, and it's a waste to throw them away," (Murata, Takemori, 2022: 7). This is how she justifies the use of human remains as commodities for her gain. Whilst this seems out of reach of reality, using eco products already requires a larger amount of wealth. A study conducted by Kearney, found that "sustainable products, which provide more environmental and social benefits than conventional products do, are an average of 75 to 85 percent more expensive, with the markups varying widely depending on the category." (Gerhardt, Plack, Drost, 2020: online). Whilst objects using human remains and the sustainable products that are found today are different in many respects, both give "environmental and social benefits." (Gerhardt, Plack, Drost, 2020: online). The use of objectification and commodification shows how this 'eco' lifestyle is not within reach for any below a certain pay.

Furthermore, the arguments the characters make for and against the use of human remains also reflect real-life rhetoric and psychology. Miho, a furniture store owner, argues that animals also do similar things in nature, “the female praying mantis eats the male, doesn’t she? It totally makes sense...there are some animals that know how to make good use of their dead.” (Murata, Takemori, 2022: 10). Miho fails to see the irony in her statement. Praying mantises are known for their cannibalistic mating ceremonies however the females do it for nutrition, not for wealth, a man-made concept. Nana also justifies the objects as follows, “It’s no different from your hair, or mine. It’s more natural for us than hair from any other animal - it’s a material really close to us.” (Murata, Takemori, 2022: 6). Naoki then rebuttals, “Yeah, that’s exactly why it creeps me out.” (Murata, Takemori, 2022: 6). It’s easier to dehumanize an animal. A study conducted in 2008 found that when animals are “compared to humans, animals were seen as lacking higher cognitive powers and refined emotion,” (Halsam et al., 2008: 248). Therefore, it’s easier for Naoki to have a cashmere cardigan made out of goat fur, as he - like most people - sees animals as lacking emotions and cognitive powers. As humans, animals are often othered into a group outside of people. Many would argue that ‘we are humans, not animals’ and therefore it becomes uncomfortable when those lines begin to blur.

The lines are further blurred when one considers the implications of a body becoming a commodity. Nana sees her own body as a commodity, regardless of the fact she is not yet dead. “I would never stop caring for my body, knowing it would someday be converted into furnishings.” (Murata, Takemori, 2022: 12) She takes great pride in what she will become after death, almost as if that’s her life’s purpose. Naoki - the only person who is vocally against the use of human remains - also accepts his fate as a object. Towards the end of the story, after having his beliefs rocks, in the car, he “was leaning back in the seat, his arms hanging limply, as if he’d become a material object.” (Murata, Takemori, 2022: 19). Again, the implication here is that Naoki has realized he also will become an object after death, although he doesn’t accept this as well as Nana does. Another implication of this could be a growing anxiety of Japan’s decreasing population. As of 2021, the population above 64 years old is at 28.7% and the

population between 15-64 is at 59%. If you contrast this, with the percentages from 2011, with the population above 64 at 23.16% and the population between 15-64 at 63.54%, you can clearly see an aging population. An article in the Japan Times stated that “the population decline puts the sustainability of Japan’s society and economy in danger,” (Kato, 2018: online) and that “because of the myopic character of national politics due to the periodic cycle of elections, lawmakers’ interest in the population decline might be lower compared with day-to-day economic and social matters.” (Kato, 2018: online). This short story could be interpreting the idea of dead bodies as a positive in order to cope with the anxiety of a decreasing population. Making the “skull quote” a part of everyday life will prepare the reader for the eventuality that the population is dying.

Overall, *A First-Rate Material* is a powerful insight into commodification and anxiety in Japan. “One of Murata’s greatest skills is how neatly her tales escalate, and their uncanniness isn’t in their details, it’s in their logic,” (Freeman, Murata, 2022: online) which is keenly observed throughout her work and in *A First-Rate Material*. The uncanny feeds into the anxiety in Japan. Murata’s work continues to deliver intricate commentary on Japan and the political and social systems.

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