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## Feminism and Female Desire in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

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### ABSTRACT

Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) presents a radical critique of modern femininity, autonomy, and desire through the lens of an unnamed protagonist who embarks on an experimental period of drug-induced hibernation. This paper examines the novel from a feminist perspective, exploring how Moshfegh challenges conventional narratives about female agency, desire, and societal expectations. By rejecting both consumerist feminism and patriarchal structures, the protagonist seeks a form of self-possession that is paradoxically achieved through self-erasure. The novel interrogates contemporary feminist discourses, particularly those concerning bodily autonomy, self-care, and resistance to social pressures. Through a close textual analysis, this paper argues that Moshfegh's protagonist embodies a radical, if nihilistic, form of female desire that subverts traditional feminist paradigms.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Female Desire, Agency, Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Bodily Autonomy, Self-Erasure

### Introduction

Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a novel that simultaneously engages with and resists feminist frameworks. The protagonist, an affluent, beautiful, and deeply depressed young woman living in early 2000s New York, embarks on a quest for total oblivion through pharmaceutical sleep. While her actions might initially appear to be a retreat from the world, they can also be understood as an act of radical defiance against neoliberal feminism and consumerist self-improvement culture. Feminist discourse has long grappled with the tension between personal autonomy and societal expectations of femininity. In this novel, Moshfegh challenges these ideals by crafting a protagonist whose primary desire is negation—a striking contrast to contemporary feminist narratives that emphasize empowerment through self-actualization. This paper will explore the ways in which *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* complicates our understanding of female agency, bodily autonomy, and desire.

### Female Agency and the Rejection of Self-Optimization

Traditional feminist narratives often emphasize empowerment through career success, romantic fulfillment, or self-improvement. The protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, however, rejects these paradigms entirely. Her descent into chemically

induced sleep is not just an escape but an active renunciation of the expectations placed upon young women: to be productive, to be attractive, to be emotionally available. Moshfegh presents a protagonist who is, on the surface, privileged: she is young, beautiful, and financially secure. However, these advantages do not translate into happiness or fulfillment. Instead, the novel critiques the hollowness of a world where self-care is commodified and therapy is a means to maintain productivity rather than genuine well-being. The protagonist's resistance to these norms is encapsulated in her assertion that "I wanted to sleep for a year. I wanted a pause. A hiatus. I didn't want to be alive anymore but I also didn't want to die." (Moshfegh, 46). This ambiguous desire—not quite suicidal, yet not conventionally life-affirming—illustrates a mode of female resistance that defies easy categorization.

Feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir famously stated that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex*, 1949). The protagonist's rejection of societal expectations aligns with this notion by refusing to perform the roles dictated by gender norms. Similarly, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) suggests that femininity is constructed through repeated behaviors rather than inherent qualities. The protagonist's refusal to engage in these performances illustrates a radical disengagement from normative gender roles.

### **Female Desire and the Search for Oblivion**

Desire, particularly female desire, has traditionally been framed within the binaries of fulfillment and lack. Women are often depicted as either yearning for romantic or sexual satisfaction or seeking professional success as a means of self-actualization. The protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* complicates this narrative by expressing a desire not for pleasure or success, but for non-existence. Her use of drugs to achieve prolonged sleep is not a passive escape but an active pursuit of a state beyond desire itself.

Philosopher Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror* (1980), explores the concept of abjection, where individuals reject parts of themselves that society deems unacceptable. The protagonist's pursuit of self-erasure echoes this abjection, as she attempts to rid herself of all social expectations. Her actions also reflect Lauren Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" (*Cruel Optimism*, 2011), which describes how individuals cling to dreams of self-improvement even when they lead to disappointment. By choosing obliteration over self-optimization, the protagonist rejects this form of optimism altogether.

### **Capitalism, Femininity, and Self-Erasure**

The novel is set in the early 2000s, a period marked by consumerism, the rise of self-help culture, and postfeminist ideals that equate empowerment with consumption. The protagonist's best friend, Reva, embodies this ethos, seeking validation through dieting, romance, and career ambition. In contrast, the protagonist refuses these pursuits,



seeing them as hollow performances of femininity. "Reva wanted to be loved," the protagonist observes, "She wanted to be a woman in the way she thought a woman should be. I wanted to be nothing." (Moshfegh, 73). This stark contrast underscores the novel's critique of neoliberal feminism, which often reduces female empowerment to individual achievements within a patriarchal structure rather than challenging that structure itself. Angela McRobbie, in *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), critiques how postfeminism co-opts feminist ideals to reinforce traditional gender norms. The protagonist's rejection of these norms aligns with McRobbie's critique, highlighting the limitations of a feminism that prioritizes personal success over structural change.

### Conclusion

*My Year of Rest and Relaxation* presents a provocative exploration of female desire, agency, and resistance. Through the protagonist's radical rejection of societal expectations, Moshfegh critiques the limitations of both patriarchal and neoliberal feminist discourses. While the protagonist's pursuit of oblivion may not offer a traditional model of empowerment, it challenges the assumption that self-actualization is the only valid form of female agency. By embracing self-erasure, the novel forces readers to reconsider the boundaries of feminist liberation and the ways in which contemporary culture conditions women's desires.

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