

**SLEEPING THROUGH THE PATRIARCHY: GENDER, APATHY,
AND LATE-CAPITALIST RESISTANCE IN OTTESSA MOSHFEGH'S
*MY YEAR OF REST AND RELAXATION***

¹ Sharanya Ramachandran and ² Dr. X. Disalva

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, VELS University.

² Research Guide, Department of English, VELS University.

Abstract: This paper uses gender studies to analyze Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, exploring the protagonist's extended sleep as a passive rebellion against postfeminist societal gender roles. The protagonist escapes emotional labour, physical upkeep, and social expectations through pharmaceutical sedation. Rejecting the postfeminist ideal of self-sufficiency, she defiantly embraces apathy and withdrawal. This paper claims her descent into sleep is symbolic, not just pathological; a protest against the commodification of femininity and mental health. Utilizing the ideas of Susan Bordo, Angela McRobbie, and Sara Ahmed, this paper analyses gendered exhaustion, neoliberalism, and the anti-heroine. This study unpacks Moshfegh's critique of empowerment rhetoric in late capitalism by analyzing the protagonist's resistance to societal roles. The novel's dark satire forces a reconsideration of the politics of rest, the attractiveness of detachment, and the revolutionary possibilities of inaction.

Keywords: Gender Roles, Post Feminism, Apathy, Withdrawal, Neoliberalism, Commodification and Detachment.

Moshfegh's novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, analyzes the challenges feminist resistance faces against the appropriation of empowerment by capitalist values of productivity and appearance. This novel, published in 2018 and set in New York City in the early 2000s, recounts the story of a young woman who, using prescription medications and under the care of an uninterested psychiatrist, sleeps for an entire year. Instead of healing or self-discovery, she strives for erasure: a total shutdown of physical and emotional response to escape societal expectations.

This paper claims that the protagonist's year of sleep represents a symbolic rejection of postfeminist ideals and neoliberal femininity. Apathy, silence, and detachment embody her passive resistance. Her rejection of emotional labor, self-care, and relationships undermines traditional views of successful women. Moshfegh's critique of postfeminism and the novel's portrayal of rest as resistance, not self-care, are analyzed in this study through the protagonist's behavior.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative literary analysis approach, employing close reading techniques to examine key narrative elements, character development, and thematic structures in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Feminist literary theory underpins this analysis, with a specific focus on postfeminism, neoliberal critique, and affect theory. The analysis centers on how the protagonist's actions and internal dialogue connect to broader cultural discussions of gender, productivity, and identity.

Angela McRobbie, Susan Bordo, and Sara Ahmed's research into gender performance, emotional labor, and body politics provides the theoretical framework for interpreting Moshfegh's novel. Connecting the novel to contemporary debates on feminist resistance and the commodification of wellness, this study examines the symbolic and political implications of the protagonist's year-long sleep. Integrating textual evidence and scholarly discourse, the paper presents a sophisticated reading of the novel as a critique and a subversion of dominant gender norms.

Postfeminism and the Neoliberal Woman

According to Angela McRobbie, postfeminism, a discourse suggesting feminism's objectives are met, centers on individual empowerment via consumerism. The ideal woman in this instance is a successful, attractive, independent woman who always seeks self-improvement. Capitalist values are promoted through feminist language, recasting beauty routines, fitness regimes, and therapy as self-improvement tools.

Moshfegh's central character is the embodiment of a postfeminist image—conventionally beautiful, thin, affluent, and highly educated. Despite appearances, she is utterly devoid of fulfillment. Her emotional distance reveals unhappiness with a seemingly perfect life devoid of purpose. She selects self-erasure over self-care and self-improvement. Her experience sleeping for a year challenges the wellness culture and its claims.

In stepping back from life, she defies the neoliberal emphasis on productivity and emotional openness. Her refusal of work, therapy, and social norms challenges the idea that women can be truly independent in a system that profits from all aspects of their lives. Her response to participation is complete disengagement, rather than claiming empowerment.

Sleep as Feminist Resistance

Within a culture fixated on constant activity and presence, the protagonist's sleep becomes an act of defiance. Inert and withdrawn, she rejects the emotional, physical, and artistic labour expected of women. She fights using sleep as her weapon. It lets her escape the burden of emotional labour, especially when dealing with Reva, her best friend. Reva's need for validation and self-doubt exposes the pressures faced by women in a postfeminist world. The narrator's refusal to offer comfort or participate, despite its cruelty, highlights the societal assumption that women should manage their emotions.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed highlights how feminist work often necessitates feeling what others would prefer not to feel (171). Moshfegh's main character is incapable of feeling. Her emotional detachment exposes the unreasonable emotional expectations placed upon women. As an act of rebellion, she seeks refuge in the stillness and slumber.

Her hibernation acts as both a self-destructive and subversive act. It rejects the neoliberal expectation of constant self-improvement, availability, and emotional productivity. Her stillness, her inaction, and refusal to perform constitute her resistance. Within a framework where action defines agency, her passivity constitutes resistance.

The Anti-Heroine and Emotional Detachment

Selfish, unkind, and emotionally detached, the protagonist is an unapologetically unlikeable anti-heroine. This rejection of palatability constitutes a feminist action. Traditional feminine ideals are challenged by her resistance to being the caring, selfless woman.

Reva, conversely, finds validation in beauty, diets, and relationships. Societal expectations heavily influence her. The narrator undermines postfeminist ambitions by ridiculing her attempts. Moshfegh notes, “Reva was obsessed with being seen, and I was obsessed with disappearing” (Moshfegh 154). The narrator’s rejection of performative femininity is reinforced by this contrast.

Moshfegh leverages this dynamic to examine the necessity of ambition or self-improvement as the sole expression of agency. Instead of weakness, the protagonist’s passivity is a display of power. She’s purposefully refusing to care as an act of resistance. This subversion of heroism questions the anticipated narrative structures and morality in stories about women.

Mental Health, Medication, and Commodification

The novel examines how mental healthcare is increasingly tied to commercial interests and medical diagnoses. Dr. Tuttle, the protagonist’s psychiatrist, embodies a system prioritising medication above genuine care. These medications, frequently prescribed without sufficient care, only mask the problem instead of solving it.

In *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo contends that eating disorders, such as anorexia, mirror societal pressures on women to manage their physiques (185). In the same vein, the narrator’s drug-induced sleep symbolizes a wish to escape gender roles. Her desire for oblivion stems not from weakness, but from the lack of authenticity in her assigned roles.

Her behavior is better understood as a philosophical stance than a cry for help. By withdrawing, she criticizes the commodification of healing and uncovers the illusion of choice within the medicalization of femininity. Discipline and rebellion are both found within the body in this instance. Instead of conforming, the narrator uses drugs to actively challenge the values of wellness they are supposed to promote.

Conclusion

My Year of Rest and Relaxation challenges common ideas of female agency, wellness, and empowerment; this is the conclusion and what the future holds. Postfeminist culture and its neoliberal demands on women are critiqued in the novel through the lens of its apathetic, self-abnegating protagonist. In this instance, sleep is not an escape; rather, it is a protest against emotional labor, beauty standards, and social expectations.

The narrator’s choice of passivity, emotional numbness, and isolation highlights capitalism’s constraints on empowerment. Moshfegh’s novel challenges the understanding of resistance and the radical nature of refusal. Assumptions about female empowerment are challenged by the protagonist’s inaction, which suggests a feminist approach focusing on absence, emotional distance, and indifference.

The intersection of Moshfegh's aesthetic of negation with trends in autofiction and the contemporary anti-heroine warrants future scholarly attention. Works like Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy and Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* can be compared to this and they could expand the discourse on gendered apathy and resistance. Furthermore, this framework can investigate how narratives of rest and withdrawal challenge current models of feminist activism within the context of digital burnout and wellness capitalism.

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