



**Universidad  
Zaragoza**

Undergraduate Dissertation

**ACTIVE PASSIVENESS: SLEEPING TO ESCAPE  
TRAUMA IN OTTESSA MOSHFEGH'S  
*MY YEAR OF REST AND RELAXATION***

Author

Malena Beamonte Fernández

Supervisor

Dr Silvia Martínez Falquina

FACULTY OF ARTS

June 2022

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation is based on Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) to analyse trauma, both personal and societal. Through an unlikable and unnamed main female character, the author represents the desire to escape one's troubles by carrying a complete physical and mental separation from society. Her plan of sleeping for a whole year with the help of a plethora of medication proves to be her way of escaping the trauma that haunts her. What the novel confirms is that both as a society and as individuals, we need a connection with what surrounds us. Positive and negative aspects of interpersonal relationships are essential for the care of the psyche and in the case of the protagonist of the novel, to work through what keeps traumatizing her since childhood.

**Key Words:** Trauma – North American literature – Isolation - Connection

## **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo se apoya en la novela *Mi año de descanso y relajación* (2018) de Ottessa Moshfegh para explicar un análisis del trauma, tanto personal como colectivo. Por medio de un personaje femenino sin nombre hasta cierto punto desagradable la escritora representa el deseo de escapar los problemas a través de la separación física y mental de la sociedad. Su plan de dormir durante un año entero con la ayuda de una plétora de medicación demuestra ser su intento de escapar el trauma que la persigue. Lo que la novela señala es que como sociedad y como individuos necesitamos la conexión con lo que nos rodea. Todos los aspectos, tanto positivos como negativos de las relaciones interpersonales son esenciales para el cuidado de la mente y en el caso específico de la protagonista de la novela, para superar lo que la traumatiza desde la infancia.

**Palabras clave:** Trauma – Literatura norteamericana – Aislamiento – Conexión

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“How much better is silence; the coffee cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake. Let me sit here for ever with bare things, this coffee cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself.”

*The Waves*, Virginia Woolf

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Women's existence in literature has always been a complicated one. We can find the representation but the problem on many occasions is how they are viewed or most importantly by whom. Because of that lack of agency, women's voices have been silenced and their role has been downgraded to that of an object, not a subject. A period that is representative of this misrepresentation is the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In many cases in Victorian novels written from a male perspective, we could see female characters that had no autonomy, no authority, and no respect, which left them fainting and in constant need of help. With the passing of time, more women were able to write themselves and what they feel in a more complex, diverse, and accurate way. But even though women have more freedom, the world is becoming more complicated and capitalism oppresses and asphyxiates everyone, leaving them tired and hopeless. As a result, nowadays,

[depression and anxiety] are the most common mental disorders in the general population (Kessler et al. 2011) and have been invoked in various forms by social theorists from Marx (2007) to Durkheim (2014), Sartre (2004) and Sennett and Cobb (1972), reflecting on the impact of capitalism on the psyche. (Prins et al, 1354)

That is why we are now seeing a different trend, that of the assertive tragic female character. She is tragic because she wants to be, not because she is weak. She just feels tired of life. This emerging figure is normally (although not always) a white woman who even though she has privileges and faces less discrimination than women of colour, still suffers, wallows, and allows herself to be imperfect. As Mary Wang says,

[t]he word *sad* traces to its roots to the Old English *sæd*, which means sated and full. It also relates to the Dutch word *zat*, which at once means having enough—of things like money—and having had too much—of constraints and demands. Sad white women have enough *and* too much: too much ambition, too much desire, too much beauty, too much privilege, and yet, too much suffering. (128)

It is not that the women in these novels do not have any real struggles. As we will see in this analysis, some of these women go through severe trauma. The protagonist of the novel we will be looking at has lost both her parents and continuously feels the pressure of societal expectations. But she is conventionally attractive, skinny and she has money to support herself without the need to work. She is, all in all, a privileged woman. However, there is something attractive about reading about these characters. They are tragic, they represent certain problems that are prevalent in western countries but at the same time, you know things will be alright. Wang accurately describes this figure by saying, “Sad white women wear their sadness as a garment, a silk robe that slinks around their body, dangling off of their shoulders” (126). This sadness has become a certain type of aesthetic. The writer herself is not white, so it is not that she created a woman like herself, but she knew this character would have the capacity to connect or create tension or enrage the readers. It simply makes you continue reading. We can name several best-sellers with similar prompts apart from *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, like Sally Rooney’s novel *Beautiful World, Where are You* (2021), or *The Pisces* (2018) by Melissa Broder.

It could also be argued that the fact that the protagonist of the novel under analysis is a traditionally beautiful and privileged woman, as we have said, builds a stable base to make her an unlikable character. We can see that she is incredibly dismissive of her suffering friend Riva and she criticises everything that surrounds her. All in all, her attitude is just despicable. Throughout the reading of the novel, one quickly realises that they cannot like her, which makes the experience of this novel even more complex. As Ivana elaborates, authors who create these types of female characters are not looking to create sane women, “[t]heir intention, rather, was to create characters that are unhindered by the gendered representations imposed on women, by portraying female characters that

do not filter their socially unacceptable behavior, nor do they apologize for it” (4). And at the end of the day, it does not matter how cynical Moshfegh’s character is, because she might be correct about her criticism. You cannot help but feel compelled to listen to her. Why care about anything when capitalism is an always looming figure? Why work if everything is meaningless? Why live if being a woman is a never-ending task that involves constant work and the endurance of so much pressure? These questions can only be asked by someone who is privileged and can take the time to stop and think about them, but they are still worth asking.

Otessa Moshfegh (1981), the author of this fascinating novel, is a Persian-American writer. She has written a great variety of works. Throughout her work portfolio, we can find a short story collection named *Homesick for Another World* (2017), a novella titled *McGlue* (2014), and four novels, *Eileen* (2015), *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), *Death in her Hands* (2020), and *Lapvona* (2022), the first novel she wrote becoming the recipient of a Man Booker Prize and several other of her works being best-sellers. One of her defining features is her very particular style. She creates odd characters, ones that you know you do not like but somehow become enthralled by. Her style is decadent and it brings a great sense of humour to her weird, even sometimes dirty and disheveled worlds. Benjamin Nugent describes her writing best when he says that “first-person narrators were in charge, speaking for themselves. The author never protected them or forced them to make sense. As a consequence, they were funny” (Nugent). There is a certain freedom that we can see in her words.

*My Year of Rest and Relaxation* deals with an attractive white woman in her mid-twenties who, after being fired from her desk job at an art gallery, realises her disillusionment with the world and herself and decides that she will hibernate. This nameless protagonist plans, with the help of several drugs provided by a sketchy doctor

named Tuttle, to sleep for a full year. Her idea is that once that year is up she will have become a completely new person ready to tackle life. As the author herself describes, “[s]he does this because she convinces herself that if she can only sleep long enough her cells will have regenerated the number of times it would take for them to have forgotten whatever trauma or memory or past had been lodged in her body or mind” [Moshfegh “Reading”, 7:09-7:34]. This is an escapist novel, one where the protagonist does not have to go very far to run away from society, she just has to stay in her New York apartment. However, one of the drugs that she starts taking, Infermiterol, will make her go on three-day blackouts in which she will be unable to control her actions. As I will argue, these days will be the moments in which she truly shows her desires and herself without any inhibitions.

This dissertation will explore the way the protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is desperately trying to escape from her trauma, both cultural and personal, by completely separating from society, and how in the end it is actually necessary for her—and in extension, for all of us—to stay connected to society and to a community of people around her. In this essay, we will first see the origin of the protagonist’s troubles. On the one hand, there is the societal trauma that she presents, because of her condition as a woman and the subsequent pressures and pains that come with it in a capitalist world. On the other hand, we can see her personal trauma, she had a troublesome childhood, being neglected by her parents, who later died while she was in college. These occurrences, added to her being fired, make her establish the aforementioned plan of sleeping for a year. After that analysis, we will see how her anguish will make her want to disconnect from the world or, to put it differently, dissociate from society physically (by staying indoors) and mentally (by condemning everything around her, thinking she knows best). We will use theorists like Freud to analyse that distancing that she craves. Lastly, we have



the reality of her situation, which is that she cannot actually escape as she plans to. The Infermiterol that she takes, as we have said, makes her go on little three-day escapades that she will not remember later on. On these forgotten days, her activities vary from partying and buying without control to attending the funeral of her friend's mother, which she had claimed she did not want to go to. This drug that she used in order to escape or disappear will actually prove to be what makes her stay grounded. As I will later argue, this signifies that she needs to stay connected to people around her and society in general.

## 2. GO BACK TO THE BEGINNING: ORIGIN OF HER TRAUMA

Psychological trauma can be defined as “a response to any event [that a person] finds physically or emotionally threatening or harmful” (Leonard). We can see the protagonist of this novel reflected in this definition. She has not suffered a specific event that has created that traumatic state but rather a series of events throughout her life. The first thing that is important to analyse when regarding this topic is the way she remembers her parents and most importantly, the way she talks about them. Her father was, to her, a stoic professor who never showed much interest in her. As she describes, “[m]y father was joyless, too, at home. He was dull and quiet. When I was growing up, we'd pass each other in the hallway in the morning like strangers. He was serious, sterile, a scientist. He seemed much more at ease around his students than with me or my mother” (Moshfegh *My Year*, 136-137). She never felt like she connected with him or that she could confide in him. There was a distance that she could never overcome. Her mother, on the other hand, is described as a more mysterious and important figure in the protagonist's life. She also felt neglected on her part, but she was much more fascinated by her. Her mother was a beautiful woman who got pregnant at nineteen and had to drop everything to get married and live life as a housewife. This way of living ultimately made her resent her husband

and her child and fall into a sleeping pill addiction. She is in a way the same type of tragic woman that our protagonist will become years later. She, like her father, never showed love to her daughter as this quote shows:

My mother hadn't been easy to love. I'm sure she was complicated and worthy of further analysis, and she was beautiful, but I didn't ever really know her. So the sadness in the room felt canned to me. It felt trite. Like the nostalgia for a mother I'd seen on television—someone who cooked and cleaned, kissed me on the forehead and put Band-Aids on my knees, read me books at night, held and rocked me when I cried. My own mother would have rolled her eyes at the thought of doing that. "I'm not your nanny," she had often said to me. (135)

The only way in which she could connect with her was by sleeping. Her mother, as we said, was very discontent with her life, which led her to depression. As a result, she stayed in bed for long periods of time. Our character felt that if she wanted to be close to her mother, to be able to understand her, she had to sleep next to her. She recalls that,

[w]hen I was in the third grade, my mother [...] let me sleep with her in their bed because, as she said, it was easier to wake me up in the mornings if she didn't have to get up and go across the hall. I accumulated thirty-seven tardies and twenty-four absences that year. Thirty-seven times, my mother and I woke up together, bleary and exhausted at seven A.M., tried to get up, but fell back into bed and slept on while cartoons flashed from the small television on her bedside table. (46)

In this way, sleep became a safe space for her, a comfortable state in which she felt closer to her mother. All of the problems at home were gone, and the disdain from both her parents vanished. It was just her, her mother, and the relaxing feeling of nothingness that sleep gave them.

But these times together were not the love and attention that a child should be receiving. And so, through this neglect, we can see how it made her become a very unadjusted daughter. She became insecure and most importantly, she learnt to not get very close to others (like her parents were with her). She followed their footsteps and mimicked them, her own mother tells her that she resembles her father, that “we were both ‘stone wolves.’ But she herself had a cold aura, too. I don’t think she realized it. None of us had much warmth in our hearts” (Moshfegh *My Year*, 49). Apart from that, as we said, she also internalized her mother’s tragicness which involved her liking of pills. This consequence is also very commonly linked to the abandonment she felt, since “[c]hildhood maltreatment involves an act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent [...] that results in potential or actual harm to a child [...]. The adverse consequences of childhood maltreatment can persist throughout the lifespan, including depression and substance use disorders” (Semsar et al. 1). And that is what we see in her, an abandoned child trying to get a hold of this world. Moreover, it is not just that she had indifferent parents, but that they both died when she was in college. First, her father died of cancer. And not that much later, her mother died of an overdose. This left our main character orphaned at twenty. She learnt to be alone. As we said, she thinks everyone will abandon her so she just decides to separate herself from the rest of the world, or in her words, “I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything” (Moshfegh *My Year*, 17). She puts up a barrier of hate and animosity toward the rest. Grief deeply affected her, because “[it] is a powerful experience that cracks us open and leaves us immensely vulnerable” (Granek 61). Our protagonist is vulnerable, but she refuses to look at that past and feel that pain, so she just closes up more and more, leaving everyone else behind.

Even though she seems like a very distant character that desires no type of human contact, for a while she did try not to be like that. She desperately attempted to fit in. She had wanted that assimilation. She copied what her environment was telling her to follow, the American way of life. In Granek's words,

North Americans are distracted from their unhappiness and sadness by being encouraged to fill up on various diversions that can be purchased. The sheer amount of things that people consume, from food to people [...], to goods (such as antidepressants), to images, all contribute to the smooth running of the economy. (63)

She went to college, studied for a degree, and got a job in an art gallery, which did not pay much but was apparently good for making connections (essential in the capitalist market). She had put a lot of effort into her appearance. She was always going to the gym and buying the most expensive clothing. Going out became her only escape from that unfulfilling life. All in all, she became a capitalist product, a busy woman that made it look like she was better than everyone else, selling the image of success, she "tried being one of those blond women speed walking up and down the Esplanade in spandex, Bluetooth in my ear like some self-important asshole" (Moshfegh *My Year*, 28). This type of life slowly starts to wear her out, until she realises she has become a shell of a person. That is when she starts to make a change, which, as we know, will end up in her hibernation. But the first step she takes is to start criticizing everything and everyone around her. First, she takes a dislike to the world of art. She starts viewing it as a meaningless money machine. Art is seen many times as the epitome of capitalism. A place where the market itself is what decided what anything is worth, and as long as the market likes it, it is art. She criticises this notion many times throughout the novel, as when she describes a piece from her gallery thus: "Annie Pinker's *Cling Film* series consisted of clumps of small objects wrapped in Saran Wrap. There was one of tiny

marzipan fruits and rabbit-foot key chains, one of dried flowers and condoms. [...] The artist's baby teeth, or so she claimed, and Christmas-colored M&M's. Cheap transgressions going for \$25,000 a pop" (38). She despises that capitalist greed that makes, in her eyes, meaningless things worth so much. She wants to change, she wants to create a new reality for herself. She is not talking to anyone about these problems, so they keep piling up. She starts sleeping at work because it is the only moment where she does not have to think. She is in such a deep state of discontent that she cannot function but she still does not rationalise her issues. Regarding her parents, she also does not want to remember them or the reality of her past. She has her childhood home for rent, which she does not even have to manage herself, for she has someone that does that job for her. Hence, she does not face her life and her problems. She first tries to adapt to a capitalist life as society told her to, but when that does not work, she resorts to sleeping. The safe space reminiscent of her mother and the happy moments in her childhood come back to her. Naps and long hours of unconsciousness, as we will analyse next, became her safe space in which she does not have to think about her baggage.

### 3. THE RUN: ESCAPING THE PAIN

Our main character thinks she is independent, she thinks that she does not need anyone, and her superiority complex makes her desire that space with everything that surrounds her. But the distance, quietness, and dreamless existence that she is looking for are very difficult to achieve on her own. She knows that she cannot manage to actually sleep for a whole year without a little bit of extra support. So when she decides to carry out the plan of her year of rest and relaxation as she likes to call it, she looks for the most dubious doctor imaginable to help her. That doctor she ends up finding had been, "the only psychiatrist to answer the phone at eleven at night on a Tuesday" (Moshfegh *My Year*,

18). This description manages to describe Dr. Tuttle perfectly. She is utterly unprofessional, she seems constantly distracted and she does not pay attention to anything that is said to her, the main example of this being that she asks up to six times how the protagonist's parents had died, and follows by her not even reacting to the answers, not even when the patient's answer is "I killed her" (234).

But this negligence is unimportant, entertaining, in a way, to our protagonist. She is not looking to get better by visiting Dr. Tuttle. She does not actually desire closure on her parents' death or to acquire better coping mechanisms for living in society in a more comfortable and balanced way (without it being overwhelming as it seems to be for her). If she had gone to a good therapist, she would have had to improve her being and that is not her aim. The crucial factor is that the psychiatrist lets her have all the drugs that she would ever need. To obtain them, she tells Dr. Tuttle a number of lies, among them, that she is not sleeping, that she has weird dreams or nightmares, and that all in all, her treatments are not working. As a result, Dr. Tuttle gives her stronger medication. One of the pills that she prescribes and that will become a pillar in the story is the aforementioned Infermiterol, a made-up drug that has the very odd side effect of making her have blackouts that last for three days. This drug, although very powerful, is making her do whatever she was avoiding at all costs, like going out at night or seeing people. Yet, this pill is sometimes the only thing that can finally make her fall asleep and disconnect. And even though she does not like what she does while unconscious (it defeats the purpose of her plan, the fact of not being awake or at least not conscious), being asleep for three days is a positive factor for her: "One Infermiterol had taken days of my life away. It was the perfect drug in that sense" (Moshfegh *My Year*, 120). However, the result of her taking the medication is that she ends up developing this double personality, she becomes two different women, and that double life in a way is what we define as dissociation.

According to an article entitled “Dissociation in Trauma” by Nijenhuis and van der Hart, dissociation can be defined as “entail[ing] a division of an individual’s personality, that is, of the dynamic, biopsychosocial system as a whole that determines his or her characteristic mental and behavioral actions” (418). The Infermiterol becomes the producer of that dissociation in a way. As we said, it is the strongest medication that she takes, as a result of which she forms two personalities without being aware that she is doing so. This can be related to what Sigmund Freud describes in his book *Study on Hysteria* when he says:

the splitting of consciousness which is so striking in the well-known classical cases under the form of ‘double conscience’ is present to a rudimentary degree in every hysteria, and that a tendency to such dissociation, and with it the emergence of abnormal states of consciousness[...] is the basic phenomenon of this neurosis. (Freud and Breuer 12)

As a consequence, in the novel we have on the one hand, personality A, who stays home, has her daily coffees, and watches the same five taped films repeatedly until the VCR finally breaks. She is mean to everyone, a narcissist, and her activity and personal relationships are reduced to a minimum. And on the other hand, there is personality B, who goes out to parties, socialises with models and artists (the people she normally despises the most), spends exorbitant amounts of money on clothes, especially lingerie, and invites her ex-boyfriend Trevor over to have unsatisfactory sex. Thus, while taking this medication, she is two completely opposed versions of herself: the one that isolates and the one that socialises. Or, said in another way, the one that rejects social conventions and norms and the one that follows the life that capitalism mandates.

It is interesting to analyse why these two extremes are portrayed the way they are in the novel. One option, the easiest one to approach, is that this split is related to her

trauma as dissociation normally is. In an article based on Freud's theories, Mambrol explains that "[t]rauma is thus defined in relation to the process of remembering and as an event harbored within the unconscious that causes a splitting of the ego or dissociation" (Mambrol). Trauma is deeply and intrinsically connected with dissociation. When one cannot process information, the mind tries to reject what is negative. It can be seen as the brain trying to protect itself. Our character cannot function correctly, that is already established. But she wants to do what cannot be done, which is to not think about her traumatic past, but also to distance herself from her traumatic present. There is a need for protection that she has to provide for herself.

Even though her body is desperately trying to go back, to process, to not run away, she is still absolutely determined to complete that inactive year. So she forces the dissociation to work for her. She finally cuts ties with Reva, letting her have all her clothes which Reva so deeply desires. Reva is the last person that connected the protagonist to the outside, the last bit of humanity in her. And then, she makes a deal with artist Ping Xi. She throws out most of her furniture, locks the door, and decides that she will take one Infermiterol every three days. Given that the door is completely sealed to everyone except for Ping Xi, she will not be able to go out, get something delivered or call Trevor. She wants to keep what she considers to be the good aspects of Infermiterol. She will wake up from her long blackouts, spending the minimum amount of time in the remainder of the year awake. Her routine is described thus:

[e]ach time Ping Xi came over, he was to mark off the days on a calendar hanging on the door to my bedroom. Every three days, I'd wake up, look at the calendar, eat, drink, bathe, et cetera. I would only spend one hour awake each time. I did the math: for the next four months, 120 days total, I would spend only forty hours in a conscious state. (Moshfegh *My Year*, 265-266)



Ping Xi will have to bring her the pizza and clean the apartment in exchange for doing whatever he wants with her for an art project. She succumbs completely to the lack of being that she wanted. Her body is not conscious for the majority of the time and it feels like it does not even belong to her. While unconscious, the artist is using it, but she does not mind, even when he tells her that he will take footage of her, she simply thinks, ‘I don’t care. As long as I’m on the drug, I won’t remember.’ [...] It didn’t worry me that he could make sex tapes” (263-264). She does not preoccupy herself with what happens to her body, she wants to finish up the year so she can emerge a brand new person.

#### 4. HOPELESSNESS: IMPOSSIBILITY OF CARRYING OUT HER PLAN

We have seen all throughout the analysis of this novel that our complicated main character is doing everything in her power to maintain herself as far away as possible from anything and anyone. But as it is evident while reading the novel, she cannot do so. Even most importantly, it seems like subsequently she also does not really want to, either. Ultimately, she needs to participate in society, with all the good that comes with it but also the bad. We all need to act in the same way, for “[a]s a species we survived largely because we developed as social animals for mutual protection and this social nature of human beings is grounded in our need to attach to other human beings from cradle to grave” (Bloom 2). We need connection to survive in this world. Hence, our character is not as special as she wants to convince herself that she is. She deeply craves care, but because she never got it in her childhood, she assures herself she actually does not need it. In this last section, we will analyse all of the instances in which we can see her making those necessary connections, both positive and negative. It is important first to note that most of these things she does take place while she is under the influence of drugs. This might only

indicate that she needs that help to dig into her psyche, she cannot do it out of her own sober volition.

One interesting character in the novel that we have briefly mentioned is her ex-boyfriend Trevor who appears sporadically. He is described as an older man who works in finance. He is completely self-obsessed. He seems to care very little about the feelings of the protagonist or anyone else for that matter. But she keeps coming back to him, irrespective of the many times that he has disrespected her. This slowly makes her resent herself: “The thought stung. I still couldn’t accept that Trevor was a loser and a moron. I didn’t want to believe that I could have degraded myself for someone who didn’t deserve it. I was still stuck on that bit of vanity” (Moshfegh *My Year*, 76). As it happens with so many other women who are seemingly very aware of patriarchy and are assertive (as our character appears to be), they still end up in relationships with men that are not in any way desirable. Those men do not know how to please them (or simply do not care to do so) and they show no respect for them. This is the figure of Trevor. One of the purposes of the protagonist’s self-isolating is to take control of her life, and so Trevor has to go but it does not matter how bad a person he is or how disrespectful; when our main character is not responsive for three days, she still calls him:

[S]o I got up off the sofa and took an Infermiterol, brushed my teeth, went into my room, took off all my clothes, got into bed, pulled the duvet up over my head, and woke up sometime later—a few days, I guessed—gagging and coughing, Trevor’s testicles swinging in my face. “Jesus Christ,” he was mumbling. I was still adrift, dizzy. I closed my eyes and kept them closed, heard the crackling of his hand jerking his spit-covered penis, then felt him ejaculate on my breasts. (213)

She ends up going back to that sex she does not seem to enjoy with a man she resents. He is not even willing to buy her the VCR she wants. She still falls into the same patterns

that many other women do, because as we have established, we are told that our value as people is dependent on our body, our youth, and our ability to keep a man. She just wants that feeling of connection with someone. She tries desperately to stay with Trevor, to make him care, and most importantly, to make him love her. In one instance they are having an argument and when she tells him “I love you, I was angry enough to say,” he answers, “How is that relevant?” (102). She knows that relationship is not sustainable, but she still has to try and fix him, to be with a man, no matter what, even though it is clear that she will not change him.

The character of Reva is one of the most crucial ones in the novel, and the relationship that is portrayed between the two friends seems to be extremely complicated. Apparently, the two met in college when our protagonist still cared about fitting in in a more mainstream or obvious way. They had similar interests—those of women in their 20s in the late 1990s—they went shopping, partied, and worried about their physical appearance. However, as our girl became more cynical, she started rejecting Reva and her tastes. She thinks Reva is stagnated in the past, and their tastes and goals do not align anymore, Reva is now too superficial for her. But the real reason for her rejection is the fact that they do still possess the same aspirations. Reva is just a reflection of her, and that is what is truly terrifying. She, as Reva, is fixated on her appearance. She spends time contemplating in the mirror while reassuring her beauty. She states it nonchalantly, trying to convince herself that she is not faced by this superficial aspect about herself. But she refers to her attractiveness one too many times for it not to be an obsession, as in, “I still looked good. I looked like a young Lauren Bacall the morning after. I’m a disheveled Joan Fontaine, I thought” (Moshfegh *My Year*, 235); or “But I was tall and thin and blond and pretty and young. Even at my worst, I knew I still looked good” (27). There is a constant fixation with her image, which is just another sign of that connection with

society. She is not taking care of herself during this year, so she keeps checking herself to make sure she still fits into those parameters of beauty. One cannot escape those ideas and perceptions so easily, no matter how hard one tries.

Another aspect that is important to analyse about Reva is her mother. We know from the beginning that she is dying of cancer. This fact reminds our protagonist too much of her parents. She does not feel ready to face that trauma as we have established so she just dismisses Reva and all her comments about her mother, she even thinks that, “Her mother was dying of cancer. That, among many other things, made me not want to see her” (Moshfegh *My Year*, 6). She fakes being asleep when she is talking about her, interrupts her, or answers in an aggressive manner. When, finally, Reva’s mother dies, our protagonist rejects that death, she does not want to hear anything about funerals or losing a loved one. It could be argued that this is her distancing from that past. But one of the times in which she takes the Infermiterol, she wakes up on a train on the way to Reva’s hometown to go to the funeral. She realises she has “betrayed” herself: she cares about Reva and her pain, and her subconscious knows she has to be there for her. She knows she loves her friend and that she has to be there to console her when losing her mother, but she needed the Infermiterol to be able to give that support. In another instance in the novel, the two of them are sitting on the sofa, our main character is falling asleep after taking some pills and she says: “‘I love you Reva,’ I heard myself say from so far away. ‘I’m really sorry about your mom’ Then I was gone” (177). She needs the pills in order not to do all of these things but she still does them. She takes care of Reva because she knows she needs her, her friendship, and her support. In other words, in spite of herself, she needs human connection. She has been through a lot and a friend is what is actually going to help her go through it all, for as this study on friendship and trauma

explains, “[p]erceiving strong friend support can help women fight the development of adult psychopathology and depression” (Powers et al. 51).

The last important element in the novel that relates this opposition between what she consciously and subconsciously wants is her dreams. The concept of dreams is very important in the novel. Our protagonist does not want to have them, one of the things she likes about sleeping medication is that it leaves you in a dreamless state. This is so because dreams might make her relive certain experiences. A couple of them still slip through and she describes them throughout the novel. But the most fascinating one occurs almost at the end. She is already locked in her apartment, her only connection with the outside world being the artist Ping Xi. She is taking Infermiterol every three days. It is actually the last pill she will take before the year is up. Her plan of rebirth is almost complete. She falls asleep and describes:

I felt I was being lowered on pulleys [...] I imagined, and then by the electric casket lowering device they used at both my parents’ burials, and so my heart quickened at that thought, remembering that I’d had parents once, and that I’d taken the last of the pills, that this was the end of something, and then the ropes seemed to detach and I was falling faster. [...] I tried to scream but I couldn’t. I was afraid. The fear felt like desire: suddenly I wanted to go back and be in all the places I’d ever been, every street I’d walked down [...] But I knew that even if I could go back, if such a thing were possible with exactitude, in life or in dreams, there was really no point. And then I felt desperately lonely. So I stuck my arm out and I grasped onto someone—maybe it was Ping Xi, maybe it was a wakefulness outside myself—and that other hand steadied me somehow. (Moshfegh *My Year*, 274-275)

This is the end of her journey. She has managed to survive that year of rest and relaxation. But this dream reveals a lot of information that is very relevant about herself. This is her

finally working through her trauma. She faces the death of her parents, her past, and the most important thing, her loneliness. She feels lonely because she cannot live life without love and care, as Ramos and Mahé beautifully express as follows: “When one is not listened to, they do not exist. If love is excluded, what’s left?” (365). She needs that hand that will help. Even if it is her own, she needs to face her problems, and it seems like, through this dream, she has finally done so. She is ready to go back into society.

## 5. CONCLUSION

After having analysed the novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and its protagonist, we can confirm the thesis that was established at the start of this essay. That is, we find a character that, because of several factors like the childhood negligence and lack of support she received from her parents, or the feeling of being overwhelmed by capitalist society (that mandated her how to act as a woman and to be constantly productive, selling an image of success that she could translate into constant consumption), decides to abandon life. She becomes a recluse in her own New York apartment and takes a diverse amount of drugs to be able to sleep for the duration of a year, this way she will be able to emerge a completely new woman, free from all previous complications. But her own body fights the isolation by becoming dissociated. It manages to create a second personality that will do everything our protagonist is avoiding at all cost.

In short, we can draw the conclusion that in the face of traumatic disconnection, it is impossible to run away from society and the company of others completely. However painful it might be, one has to go through life, and this involves “the ties we have to others” (Butler 22). Our protagonist has to think about her parents and accept their indifference toward her, which resulted in her lonely childhood to be able to form new relationships. She has to accept everything that society has to give her, both good and

bad. She needs to realise that she craves the love that Reva can give her and that she is addicted to the disdain that Trevor offers. The Infermiterol is just a gateway drug into her subconscious, it helps her to finally open up, go through her past and finally be able to face her future. Because even when she completely isolates herself at the end of the novel, her dreams show her the same message, she has to keep living, however painful that might sound. But if you have a hand that steadies you, it becomes much more pleasant to endure that pain.

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