WARNING: COMPLEX FEMALE PROTAGONIST

Redefining Unlikability and Passivity as Feminist Resistance and Female Agency in Millennial Women's Writing

Classic Master's Thesis
Word count: 23.933

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Masterproef voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van Master in Gender en Diversiteit
Academic year: 2021 – 2022
Submitted 15 August 2022

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Abstract

<u>English</u>

In contemporary women's writing, there is an influx of complex, "unlikable" female protagonists. This gives rise to two discourses: one about the genre these novels have established, namely "millennial fiction", and another about the feminist thought they convey, called dissociative feminism. These discourses maintain that the female protagonists are unjustifiably passive and that their behavior is "damaging to the entire feminist movement" (Peyser). This thesis examines these discourses and shows through the analysis of four contemporary novels – Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017), Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020), and Lisa Taddeo's *Animal* (2021) – that the female protagonists do have reasons for their nihilistic attitudes and are not passive but act with agency. In addition, the novels send a feminist message, as they resist normative femininity, highlight the female experience, and discuss taboo subjects related to womanhood.

<u>Nederlands</u>

In hedendaagse literatuur geschreven door vrouwen is er een toevloed van complexe, "onsympathieke" vrouwelijke protagonisten. Dit geeft aanleiding tot twee discoursen: één over het genre dat deze romans tot stand hebben gebracht, namelijk "*millennial fiction*", en een ander over het feministische gedachtegoed dat zij weergeven, het zogenaamde *dissociative feminism*. In deze discoursen wordt beweerd dat de hoofdpersonages onverantwoord passief zijn, wat schade brengt aan de feministische beweging. Deze thesis onderzoekt deze discoursen en toont door middel van de analyse van vier hedendaagse romans – Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017), Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020), en Lisa Taddeo's *Animal* (2021) – aan dat de hoofdpersonages wel degelijk redenen hebben voor hun nihilistische houding en niet passief zijn, maar handelen met *agency*. Bovendien bevatten de romans een feministisch perspectief aangezien ze normatieve vrouwelijkheid uitdagen, de vrouwelijke ervaring belichten, en taboeonderwerpen over vrouwelijkheid aansnijden.

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1. Introduction

"Warning: this film contains an unlikable female protagonist. Viewer discretion advised" ("Not Okay", image 1). With this message, the official teaser of the 2022 satirical comedy movie *Not Okay* begins. While the faux alert is a joke, the movie's writer-director Quinn Shephard shares that during test screenings, audiences were upset and confused by the troubled female lead's behavior (Simon): "We un-ironically and consistently got responses from … people who were quite literally like, 'Why would someone make a movie with an unlikable woman?'" (Bergeson). This exposes a double standard, since detestable men in movies – for example, *American Psycho* – are normalized, even celebrated. They added the meta-joke as "cultural commentary about disagreeable women characters being worthy of a mature-content disclaimer on the order of, say, exploding-head violence or graphic nudity" (Spangler), but Shephard says it also worked: "People were like, 'Oh, I get it – she's *supposed* to be unlikable'" (Simon).

Image 1: *Not Okay*, official teaser

The "unlikable" female character is not a new trope. In recent years, there has been a rise of "flawed, yet at the same time, sympathetic" female characters who do "not obey the conventions of traditional femininity" (Tally 9). Famous examples range from the tv-series *Girls* and *Fleabag*, in which the "unlikable" women are quite normal but challenge "the idea that women should be nice" (Omar), to the novel *Gone Girl* and its adaptation, in which the protagonist plots a convoluted scheme to frame her husband for her disappearance, showing that a female protagonist can be just as "layered, flawed, and downright evil as male characters" (Cole). Again, being annoying or selfish as a woman and being a homicidal psychopath are considered to have the same level of transgression, as both receive the label of "unlikable" protagonist. At its core, what these women have in common is their departure from stereotypical representations of women. As Rebecca Liu writes for *Another Gaze*, we are "in the era of the

‘unlikeable woman’ … The one-dimensional figures of the past … have been replaced by ‘complex female characters’ who … unapologetically reject polite sociality” (Lui). This statement shows how critics often use “complex” and “unlikable” interchangeably and with a negative connotation, while it should be positive that women are now “allowed” to be complex in fiction. Nevertheless, while the general critical reception is often negative, many consumers – especially women – celebrate these protagonists as they shed “light on the human experience by being messy, spiteful, misguided and, above all, *relatable”* (Omar).

This disparity between a negative critical and positive consumer reception is also very apparent in contemporary literature written by women. The novels portray young women who feel alienated from modern life and, as a result, often feel sad, lonely, angry, and self-destructive. The works featuring these “remote avatars of contemporary malaise” (Bergman) belong mostly to literary fiction, with the books of Sally Rooney and Ottessa Moshfegh most often being praised for their “relatable” characters (see Berman et al, Dhar, Rosenfeld). They are connected by their similarities in content and by the publishing industry: “in the nonfictional world, these authors have blurbed one another’s books, and on Amazon they’re algorithmically linked; peruse one title, and another will auto-populate on the homepage” (Bergman). In addition, their rise in popularity is evident on the literary social media platform Goodreads. Many users group together these novels and most of the books in these lists have received an average score of 3.5 stars or more. The most popular lists are titled “women vs the void”, “The Female Malaise”, “She’s Not Feeling Good at All”, “Sad Girl Books”, “Unhinged Women Books”, and “Millennial Books” (Goodreads, images 2-4). This last term caught on in the critical discourse and, in the past five years, numerous articles have been published in the popular press that discuss these novels and the newly established genre they belong to: “millennial fiction” (see Sudjic, Berman et al, Dhar, Jamison, Bergman, Rosenfeld, Holstrom).

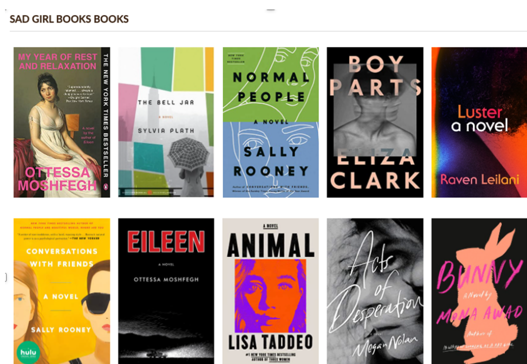

Image 2: “Sad Girl Books” list on Goodreads

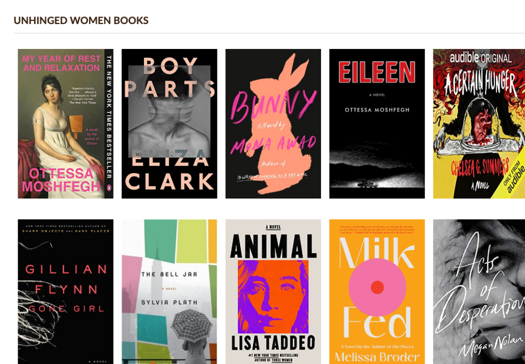

Image 3: “Unhinged Women Books” list on Goodreads

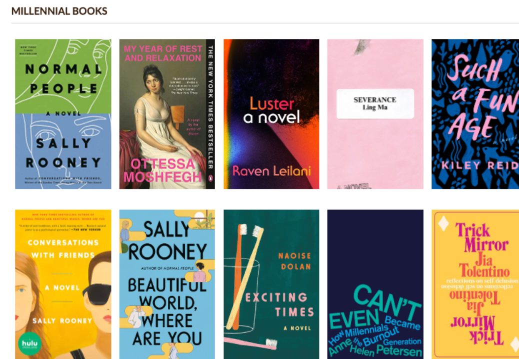

Image 4: “Millennial Books” list on Goodreads

These articles reveal a mixed critical reception. While some praise the novels and their protagonists for “push[ing] against labels” and their “openness to [talk] about what was once taboo” (Sudjic), others regard their “weepy passivity [and] adamant hopelessness” as irritating and as a harmful portrayal of women (Jamison). This second line of reasoning is carried over into a new discourse about the message these novels send about femininity, in which the term “dissociative feminism” is coined (see Clein, Bedrossian, Garland, Peyser). These articles believe the novels and their “fatalistic tone” (Garland) send a dangerous message: they “promote a nihilism that is somewhere between unproductive and genuinely dangerous” (Clein). They maintain the novels are “advocating for passivity” (Bedrossian) and argue that the protagonists – who they view as having “the whole world at their feet” (Keating) because they are “cis, white, pretty, and wealthy” (Peyser) – have no reason to be this pessimistic: they are left “wondering *what the matter is*” (Rosenfeld). In short, they argue that these pessimistic female protagonists are unjustifiably passive and that this passivity – in a time when agency is the buzzword of contemporary feminism – is “damaging to the entire feminist movement” (Peyser).

This is where the problem arises: these novels are rarely discussed in academic contexts. Historically, the works of women writers have been neglected by literary critics and the canon (Kaplan 38), and the same is true here. In other words, at the time of writing, these novels will be remembered by what is outlined in the discourses about “millennial fiction” and dissociative feminism instead of by their aim to push against the normative definitions and representations of femininity. Their complex and nuanced depiction of womanhood are read as “unlikable” behavior, similar to how many other female protagonists who defy standard female manners are perceived in media and literature. This imposition of an interpretation or value judgment on women’s writing has historically been used to “define the feminine only in relation to the masculine, as object or obstacle” (Hirsch 8). As a result, in the (feminist) literature written by

women, there is “a common, female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through the strategic redefinition of self, art, and society” (Gilbert and Gubar 1984, xii). This is what the “millennial” novels do, too: they counter the mainstream narrative on how women should be characterized or behave and, in doing so, offer a dynamic representation of women that undermines the dominant values and traditions of the patriarchy (Hirsch 8). However, the popular press favors a reductive image over a critical one, and their interpretation assumes the misogynistic belief that all women who do not act how they are “supposed to” fall outside of the norms of society and should be cast aside. To prevent the novels from being associated only with the negative, unnuanced picture painted by the popular press, academic research is thus needed on the “millennial” novels.

This thesis aims to fill this lack of academic research on this emerging genre and its female protagonists. First, the theories of “millennial fiction” and dissociative feminism will be explained and contextualized in their broader literary or feminist discourses. This provides insight into how these concepts arose and shows the context in which the authors grew up and the novels were written. Next, a critical, feminist reading will be applied to a sample of novels that feature this supposedly “unlikable” representation of femininity, to demonstrate that the assertion that these protagonists unjustifiably exude passivity is myopic. To refute this claim, this paper will examine what causes the characters’ pessimistic outlook on life and how they exercise their agency, even when being passive. This analysis aims to show that these novels do have feminist value, as they feature active, dynamic female protagonists, offer feminist resistance by challenging normative femininity, show that privilege does not exempt women from discrimination and suffering, and give social commentary on the effects the pressures of capitalism and the violence of patriarchy have on women.

The selected novels are Sally Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* (2017), Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Eliza Clark’s *Boy Parts* (2020), and Lisa Taddeo’s *Animal* (2021). They were chosen based on their popularity[1] and frequent

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[1] On Goodreads, they have received a total of 320.813, 205.480, 15.165, and 21.064 ratings and have an average rating of 3.82, 3.73, 3.99, and 3.73 respectively (accessed on 13 Aug. 2022). *Conversations with Friends* won Rooney the 2017 Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award (Falvey). *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is a #1 New York Times bestseller and “named a Best Book of the Year by The Washington Post, Time, NPR, Amazon, Vice, Bustle, The New York Times, The Guardian, Kirkus Reviews, Entertainment Weekly, The AV Club, & Audible” (Amazon). Boy Parts is Blackwell’s Fiction Book of the Year and Clark was chosen as a finalist for the Women’s Prize Futures Award for writers under thirty-five (Influx Press). *Animal* has not been nominated for awards, but Taddeo also wrote the #1 New York Times bestseller *Three Women*, which won the 2020 British Book Awards (Flood). In addition, all books have been picked up for adaptation. The series of *Conversations with Friends* has already been released (Abrahamson and Welham) and the movie/series for the other books are in the works (Fleming, Finney, Rankin).

appearances in the Goodreads lists (e.g., see images 2-4). The protagonists also all fit the description of being white, cis, attractive, and middle-class. In addition, there are two European authors (Rooney is Irish and Clark is British) and two American authors (Moshfegh and Taddeo). Since they are all from English-speaking, Western countries, the interpretations can be compared because of their similar cultural background. Furthermore, while all books are from the last five years, the difference in time between the publications allows the novels to be categorized into two groups. The first two novels are pioneers of the "millennial fiction" genre and were pivotal in defining dissociative feminism, while the latter two flow from and/or react to what the two theories put forward. For the close textual analysis of these case studies, a critical feminist lens is used, which is informed by feminist literary criticism and the current literary and feminist discourses, including (but not exclusively) those about "millennial fiction" and dissociative feminism.

This brief analysis focuses on the reasons for their subversive behavior and the expressions of their agency, thus cannot and does not encompass a full account of the interpretation of the novels. Rather, the aim is to show the nuance behind the narrative and characters and how a new type of female character and experience is established and represented in literature. In addition, while a feminist lens is used for the analysis, none of the authors claim to have written feminist books. While some of them are open about their personal ideologies (Rooney describes herself as a Marxist) or have written other books related to feminist themes (Taddeo's first novel *Three Women* is a non-fiction work that explores female sexuality), these books are simply works of fiction that explore feminist themes (e.g., PBS NewsHour, Nolan, Waterstones, Schwartzmann, O'Neill, Ashby). In doing so, they do challenge conventional beliefs about normative femininity and the female experience, but they do not claim to (re)define feminism.

Due to their recent publications, the novels have garnished very little academic scholarship. Although some similar research exists on the individual texts, such as on passivity and late-capitalist ennui in Rooney's (resp. Cox, Darling) and Moshfegh's (resp. Strätz, Keeble) novels, there is a lack of research on the similarities between the novels and the genre that is emerging from them. Therefore, this research is valuable as it makes a new contribution to the academic field since it defines and contextualizes a new genre, in addition to providing individual analyses of the novels. Furthermore, it has societal relevance as literature and society influence each other mutually. On the one hand, literature mirrors society's attitudes and beliefs. Since "women's writing [is ground] in the cultural moment of its time and place" (Kaplan 37), the structures of oppression that the fictional characters face are similar to real-

life experiences, thus providing insight into the real feminine experience. On the other hand, society mirrors literature: when novels subvert dominant values and traditions, this can result in real cultural shifts in how the category of women is understood and thus how women can behave without being dismissed as "unlikable". As Toril Moi argues, "literature holds out the hope of overcoming scepticism and isolation" (Moi 268).

The thesis is divided into four parts. The first part focuses on "millennial fiction" as a literary genre and links this to feminist literary criticism. Next, dissociative feminism is discussed and compared to the more established third and fourth feminist waves and the postfeminist movement. For the discussions of "millennial fiction" and dissociative feminism, information from the popular press is used since there are no academic texts on the subjects at the time of writing. However, the information about the theoretical concepts they are linked to does stem from academic research. The third part consists of the separate analyses of the four novels, for which the framework outlined in the first two parts is used, in addition to interviews with the authors and (when available) academic texts about the novel. In the fourth part, the analyses of the novels are compared to each other and the theoretical framework of parts one and two.

2. Literary Context

To understand how the four selected works relate to each other, their similarities are discussed to outline the overarching genre and tradition they belong to. They are all (marketed as) works of literary fiction, which means they do not follow a specific formula, like genre fiction. Instead, they are character-driven, thus emphasizing character, style, and theme over plot, and explore the human condition and psychological complexity of their characters (Kidd et al. 44). However, a new subgroup within literary fiction seems to emerge based on resemblances in plot points, themes, and protagonists, called "millennial fiction". This subgenre consists mostly of novels written by women and about women, including the four selected works. It is peculiar that works like this are so successful and popular – enough to create a new genre – since historically, this kind of writing has existed in a separate, second-rate category from other literature (Moi 268, Kaplan 38). In what follows, the characteristics of "millennial fiction" are discussed and compared to other literary genres. An important part of the genre is the gender of the protagonists and of the author, which is examined next. Lastly, a brief overview of feminist literary criticism is given to provide context for how writing from a female perspective has been theorized and used to subvert dominant, patriarchal discourses in the past. This offers insights into how literature and literary criticism today deal with novels written by and about women.

2.1. "Millennial Fiction"

As mentioned in the introduction, both critics and the publishing industry associate the selected books with each other using the term "millennial". The concept of "millennial fiction" or the "millennial novel" gained traction in (online) magazine discourses in 2019 (see Jamison, Athitakis, Liu), and the topic reached a peak in popularity in 2021 (see Dhar, Holstrom Rosenfeld, Berman et al.). Over the years, the "millennial novelist" has become a buzzword and is used to gain media attention and to market and sell other products – books and authors – to the same audience. While this sales-oriented approach seeks to simplify a collection of works, the varying content of the books makes it hard to describe the category. As Olivia Sudjic points out in her *The Guardian* article "What Makes a Millennial Novel?": "the millennial generation [is] too fragmented to be defined". Still, she – and other cultural critics – find several similarities. In light of this research, it is interesting that most of the "millennial" novels are written by women and feature female protagonists. For example, although Sudjic does not explicitly address the gender of the writers she mentions, only two of the thirteen works she discusses were written by male authors, and four books do not follow a (single) female

protagonist. Others are more explicit, referring to the gender of the protagonists in the titles of their articles with “heroines” (Rosenfeld), “antiheroine” (Omar), “literary sad woman” (Jamison), and “millennial woman” (Liu), writing off the possibility that the main character could be male. This gendered aspect will be discussed later. First, the focus lies on similarities in (superficial) plot points and the overarching themes of the novels. To do this, the aforementioned *The Guardian* article by Olivia Sudjic and the essay “The Making of A Millennial Woman” by Rebecca Liu are referred to most frequently because they most closely align with a scientific method in terms of the use of references and the development and substantiation of an argument.

While there is no consensus on how the “millennial” genre is defined, two elements often recur: the age of the authors, who are mostly born between 1981 and 1996, and the novels’ mood and preoccupations (Sudjic). According to Sudjic, most “millennial” novels contain crushingly self-aware protagonists who are anxiously navigating or avoiding adulthood, while longing for a place to call home. This search for stability is juxtaposed with a tendency towards self-sabotage. On a deeper level, humor – mostly deadpan, irony, or satire – and a reflection on their own privilege create a space to push against labels and speak out about taboo subjects such as nonconformity and mental health. This resistance is the most important element of the books, claims Sudjic. In an interview article for *Time*, Berman et al. argue that the millennial zeitgeist of “living at the intersection of preoccupations both existential and mundane” is reflected in the novels, shown through a detached writing style and themes of existential dread. While these elements are present in other “generational” novels, such as the 1996 novel *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace (see den Dulk), the “millennial novels” are more diverse. They feature more female, queer, and BIPOC characters and tackle social issues such as class and economic anxiety, although these are relative compared to the characters’ privileges (Berman et al.). Jess Bergman shows this tension between oppression and privilege in “I’m Not Feeling Good at All”, an article on “the perplexingly alienated women of recent American fiction”. She opens with a fictitious synopsis that fits several novels published since 2015, which could also refer to one of the selected books:

> The young woman works in an office. Her job is tedious: data entry, or coordinating the logistics for meaningless products, or proofreading niche trade publications with improbable names. She has no friends or resents the one she has. Her boyfriend is distant. Perhaps he’s not even her boyfriend anymore, but still, she thinks of him often. She rarely eats. Absent what you might call drive, her life proceeds by rote until suddenly, by chance or by choice, her routine is disrupted by a speculative twist: a

> purification cult, an apocalyptic illness, a psycho-technological experiment, an elective coma. (Bergman)

This passage shows that while the protagonist suffers from the oppression of the capitalist system, she has the financial means to support herself within this system. In addition, the inciting incident of the narrative often involves her being able to break free from it, which demonstrates her privilege. This highlights the importance of intersectionality when discussing these characters, which poses that different categories – such as gender, class, race, and sexuality – are not separable from each other and that the privileges and discriminations that result from one's position in each category interact with each other (Crenshaw 1244). Because of this, someone might experience some forms of oppression more strongly because of its intersection with other types of discrimination they endure, while another person might suffer less from them because they have more privileges in other areas. This second position is the one in which the protagonists are most often situated. Another aspect this quote refers to is the overarching theme of numbness and pessimism in the novels. As an explanation for this theme, Bergman quotes "the litany of indignities that constitutes this era of American life" alongside the (traumatic) backstories of the characters. Like the argument of Berman et al., she argues that the turbulent political and emotional context in which the authors of the millennial generation grew up has influenced the novels' mood and characters. Similarly, Ashley Holstrom uses the term "slacker fiction" for these self-deprecating, stream-of-consciousness works that represent "the gut feeling of being alive right now", with their focus on self-aware, restless, sad young women navigating modern society. As Annabel Gutterman sums up: "they share a common core: characters grappling with personal crises against the backdrop of a crumbling earth" (98).

The protagonists are often called "unlikable". In *Bad Feminist* Roxane Gay discusses why this word is frequently used to describe female characters in contemporary novels. She explains that when a man does not follow the rules of our (patriarchal) society, he is called an antihero, and he is deemed dark or tormented, but still interesting and compelling (Gay ch. "Not Here to Make Friends"). On the other hand, when a woman is unlikable and does not follow the proper code of conduct, "it becomes a point of obsession in critical conversations" (Gay ch. "Not Here to Make Friends"). Critics demand an explanation for her bad behavior and questionable decisions, often finding it in an armchair diagnosis of mental illness (Gay ch. "Not Here to Make Friends"). Gay rejects this line of thinking and argues that "unlikable" women embody characteristics that might be unpleasing but are entirely human (ch. "Not Here to Make Friends"). Their flaws make them realistic, nuanced, and interesting characters, which Gay

finds more important than whether they are likable (ch. "Not Here to Make Friends"). The focus on likability, she believes, disregards the essence of the stories:

> If people with messy lives are the point of certain narratives, if unlikable women are the point of certain narratives, novels like *Battleborn, Treasure Island!!!, Dare Me, Magnificenc*e, and many others exhibit a delightful excess of purpose, with stories filled with women who are deemed unlikable because they make so-called bad choices, describe the world exactly as they see it, and are, ultimately, honest and breathtakingly alive. (Gay ch. "Not Here to Make Friends")

Since Gay published her essay in 2014, there has been an increase in attention to "unlikable" women. A multitude of nonfiction novels about "difficult" women (see Doyle 2016, Petersen, Mukhopadhyay and Harding, Doyle 2019) was published after 2016, influenced by Trump's campaign and election in the USA. The rise of the #MeToo movement in 2018 was accompanied by an increase in "unlikable" television and movie characters (see Omar, Harris, Tally), who are often described as "strong female leads".

This phenomenon is also reminiscent of the femme fatale archetype, which emerged in the literary and pictorial traditions in the nineteenth century (Doane 1). She is associated with intelligence, deception, fearlessness, confidence, and beauty and often uses these traits to seduce a male protagonist into treading the wrong path, which causes his demise (Grossman 1). Feminist authors took the figure as a steppingstone to "denounce women's subjection to male dominance and challenge patriarchal order" (Roche and Maury ch. "Introduction"). In addition, similar to the "unlikable woman", she embodies normal human characteristics that are deemed inappropriate because they challenge the predetermined (patriarchal) norm. While the character of the "millennial" women in contemporary fiction centers less around men, a similar idea is celebrated: that women can be "dirty, repulsive, mean, cruel, and flawed" (Liu). While this rejection of polite sociality can be powerful, it should not be equated with a feminist victory in the portrayal of women, since the ideal of "likability" is not dismantled, but merely challenged. Besides, not every woman can defy norms in the same way, since vulgarity disqualifies some women from public life: the more privileged a woman is, the more she can afford to defy society without running the risk of being ostracized by it. Furthermore, their subversive behavior should be analyzed more critically, for example by looking at the drive behind it, towards who it is directed, and what ends it serves (Liu). While it may be comforting, satisfying, or thrilling to see anti-heroines represented, the novels must aim to be more than solely disruptive if they are to address social or political issues, which is one of the characteristics of the "millennial novel" often cited.

This approach of addressing social or political issues through the specific lens of a restless, detached female protagonist is what sets "millennial fiction" apart from similar genres. Still, the boundaries between the genres are not fixed, so there is an overlap of characteristics. For example, it resembles chick lit, which became popular in the early 2000s and consists of books such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding (1996) and *Confessions of a Shopaholic* by Sophie Kinsella (2000). Both genres feature "single women in their twenties and thirties navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships" (Ferriss and Young 3). In addition, chick lit discusses issues facing contemporary women, such as race, class, identity, and femininity (Ferriss and Young 2-3). However, the genre more closely resembles contemporary romance than "millennial fiction", which manifests itself in flawed, but generally likable characters, a humorous and lighthearted tone and style, a journey of self-making or self-improvement, and a focus on romantic relationships and female friendships (Thoma). As established, the protagonists of "millennial fiction" are often nonconforming and self-destructive, they have trouble maintaining close personal and romantic relations, and the writing style is detached. In this sense, "millennial fiction" is more similar to domestic noir, a subgenre of crime fiction, which deals with the dark side of relationships and the female domestic experience and is driven by negative affect (Thoma). The genre was introduced by Julia Crouch in 2013 to refer to the "female" thrill dynamic in her novels, which she believes is established through "a subversion of the idea of home as sanctuary. Home can also be a cage, a place of torment, of psychological tyranny, of violence" (Crouch vii). Through the eyes of a female protagonist, these narratives often show that women who are victimized can become the perpetrator (Crouch viii). This results in controversial, unlikable characters, such as the scheming, rage-suffused, manipulative protagonist of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*, which is the most popular novel of the genre (see Murphy, Iannone, Thoma). While the centrality of the female experience, the subjective style of narration, and the transgressive female protagonists are similar to "millennial fiction", the themes of family and motherhood, marriage, love, betrayal, and the destructive power of lust are peculiar to the genre, which is thereby often referred to as "domestic" or "marriage" thriller (Crouch vii, Thoma, Mizejewski 125). When it comes to more recent and literary – rather than popular – genres, Jennifer Cooke has observed that current feminist life-writing is "characterized by boldness in both style and content, willingness to explore difficult and disturbing experiences, the refusal of victimhood, and a lack of respect for traditional genre boundaries" (Cooke front matter), for which she coins the term the "new audacity". She believes this boldness in itself is political even when the text does not engage with politics directly since it defies the norm (Cooke 2),

which can also be applied to “millennial fiction”. The concept of “working-class literature” is introduced by Simon Lee, which is similar to “millennial fiction” in its focus on a particular underrepresented social group tied to a contextual moment (Lee 1, 3), but differs in its emphasis on class instead of gender.

In short, the “millennial novel” does not fit into these existing categories and (sub)genres. While the existence of these other genres shows that the characteristics and style of “millennial fiction” are not new, the particular combination seems to be. As Bernice Murphy and Stephen Matterson point out, there is a “reinvention and reformulation of forms as new anxieties appear” (5), thus leading to the creation of new genres and conventions, such as “millennial fiction”. What anxieties influenced the emergence of this genre will be discussed in part two by looking at the feminist context. Here, the key point is that “millennial fiction” is one of those new reformulations. Thus, the term does not merely refer to all novels that are written by millennials or deal with the millennial zeitgeist but to a new (sub)genre with a specific subject matter, protagonist, audience, and narrative style. In addition, the author’s identity seems to play a role in this classification, as their gender is a main point of discussion.

2.2. The “Millennial” Author

Aside from these thematic and stylistic similarities, the element of gender – specifically femininity – is prevalent. As mentioned, the “millennial” novels mainly follow female protagonists and are predominantly written by women. In other words, the genre that supposedly defines and represents an entire generation focuses on the female perspective. This is rare, as historically, canonical works are written by male authors and follow male characters. For example, from Herman Melville to Mark Twain to F. Scott Fitzgerald, all the way to the Beat Generation – with Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac – and beyond, the American canon has been androcentric (Liska 4). By contrast, the biggest names in “millennial fiction” are women. While in 2016 *The New York Times* claimed that there is no quintessential “millennial” novel or author (Tulathimutte), two years later they greeted Sally Rooney as “the First Great Millennial Author”, three days after the release of her second novel (Barry; see also Holstrom “A Voice of a Generation”, Dhar “The Sensation of Sally Rooney” and Berman et al. “Sally Rooney and the Art of the Millennial Novel”). While some articles tend to overestimate Rooney’s ability to be representative of an entire generation, it is interesting that her novels are so highly esteemed and that, although they focus on the female experience and contain elements of romance, they are not categorized as chick lit.

An explanation for the abundance of female authors, Sudjic suggests, is the assumption that "these authors are attuned to the ways certain types of people suffer more under capitalism" (Sudjic). This quote could refer to the stereotypical gender role division, which assumes that women are more emotional and caring than men (see Blackstone), and therefore more sensitive or sympathetic in dealing with suffering. However, while women have certainly learned these traits through socialization, they are not inherent characteristics of their gender. The quote could also refer to the intersectionality of the authors' identities. According to this interpretation, Sudjic implies that the authors' experiences as women, who face discrimination because of their gender, inform the way they understand and are able to articulate capitalist oppression. This interpretation links back to how women encounter certain things because of their (socially constructed) gender, but it does not presume the deterministic logic of the first interpretation. Following this reasoning, the authors' personal experiences (with oppression) are taken as a source of inspiration for their writing. Because of this, the idea that one author or novel can speak for an entire, by definition fractured, generation becomes improbable. While each writer is a product of the same age, when looking at their stories, it becomes clear that they do not speak to a universal audience but to a specific one. While the novels' overarching premise of scrutinizing society's structures and power dynamics is broad, the lens through which this is done, namely millennial womanhood, is narrow.

When looking at the characters this narrow lens produces, the issue of relatability arises. The "millennial" novels often feature protagonists who are cisgender, young, thin, attractive, intelligent, middle-class, and white, and this type of woman has become the archetype. In "The Making of a Millennial Woman", Rebecca Liu addresses how millennial art has repackaged the protagonist, advertising them as a "relatable" identifier while they are an "aspirational" one. This masks "the uncomfortable truth that she is more beautiful, more intelligent, and more infuriatingly precocious than we are in real life" (Liu) and creates a false promise of universality. Since not everyone resonates with this supposed "relatable" art, the works receive inevitable backlash. The main point of criticism is that the novels portray a privileged reality: "not every woman is in a position to be able to negotiate their degree of pliability when met with patriarchal demands – some of us are excluded from this possibility from the very start, already condemned to some form of 'abjection' by dint of our race, sexuality, gender identity, class, or lack of normative beauty" (Liu). The advantaged position of the archetypical "millennial" woman in society grants them more social power than other women which allows them to "breach the norm of social acceptability" (Gay ch. "Not Here to Make Friends") and

be brazen, self-destructive, and nonconforming. Thus, their subversive behavior becomes acceptable, and their abjections are admired as witty (Liu).

The notion of examining both discrimination and privilege also applies to the authors of the novels. They grew up during the aftermath of second-wave feminism that "relentlessly bombarded … the message that women can do anything and be anything, and especially women like them" and, ironically, they created works that deal with the "malaise" of privilege (Liu). In itself, this is not a problem: art does not have to make a feminist or political statement and using popular culture as a site of political resistance offers little actual change, so this is not expected of the "millennial novels". However, there is a danger in labeling "millennial" novels and their passive, restless protagonists as empowering or self-emancipatory, simply because they feature "unlikable" characters that defy norms. At best the novels reflect the shortcomings of the millennial generation and at worst they overlook privilege. This discussion is reminiscent of Western, white feminism, which elevates "upper middle-class white voices to the level of unearned universalism" (Liu). The "millennial novels" are not yet at this level of exclusion, since they often address the privileges of the "millennial" woman. As long as this is the case, it should not be an issue that while the politics are sometimes limited to "headline-friendly patronising buzzwords on 'generational issues'" (Liu), since the focus of the novels is not politics. Their emphasis lies on individual feelings, not universal conflicts.

This focus on the particular is related to another hypothesis about why many "millennial" authors are women. Sudjic believes the grouping of these novels reveals a gendered bias since male writers are more often associated with writing universal books instead of these category-specific ones. This does not mean that men never write about specific situations. Rather, it means that when men write specific books, they are more often seen as universal *because* they were written by a man. In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir explains how in a patriarchal society, the man is seen as the norm: "man is the universal and woman is the particular" (Moi 264). In other words, she poses that while each gender is correlated with certain experiences and emotions, the things associated with or experienced by men are seen as universal and become the standard. This explains why "millennial fiction" is labeled as specific: not because it does not discuss universal topics (which it does), but because they are overwhelmingly discussed from a female point of view. Following that same logic, similar genres that are dominated by male authors are labeled as universal and are part of the literary canon. For example, the American Beat Generation found its origin in a similar resistance to the dominant cultural and societal beliefs and told stories through the lens of a specific protagonist, the archetype of the hipster (Burdick 554-555). Yet,

their legacy is described as "legend" (Newhouse 1) and they are seen as "serious literary artists who produced important and seminal work" (Theado 748). Even more similar in mood is the Russian "superfluous man", which refers to a type of literature that features a noble, tragic figure who is condemned from society because of their nonconformity (Chances 111). The genre is "praised … for daring to challenge the dictates of society" (Chances 114) and is cited as having influenced contemporary American fiction (Butenina). Both traditions are similar to "millennial fiction" in terms of content and resistance, yet they are valued more highly by literary critics and are discussed in the academic discourse.

"Millennial fiction" is a relatively new genre, which explains the lack of academic writing and discourse about it, so it remains to be seen whether it will receive the same praise and status as these male-dominated genres. However, studies on the perception and valuation of genres show gender discrimination patterns, a devaluation of genres written predominantly by women (by readers and critics), and a limited presence of women in the literary canon (see Weinberg and Adam, Thelwall 2017, Thelwall 2019, Oggins). For example, in *Dit Is Geen Vrouwenboek*, Corina Koolen shows how a gendered bias is present in the reception of popular literature in The Netherlands when it comes to genres that are gendered as female and books written by female authors (51-57). When novels are given a score out of ten, half a point was deducted from the final score when the author is a woman (Koolen 56-7). This perceived difference in quality is tied to the long history of the literary tradition that privileges the male point of view and excluded women from the written discourse (Singley and Sweeney ix, xv). This goes back to the nineteenth century, where an "anxiety of authorship" is observed by Gilbert and Gubar, which refers to the feelings of inferiority and vulnerability women experience when they write in male-dominated traditions (Lazzaro-Weis 16). They are androcentric in the sense that both the authors and the critics are men, thus leading to a primarily male canon that assumes these male experiences and sensibilities are universal (Lazzaro-Weis 16). For years, no serious effort was made to incorporate writings by women or gender issues into the literary practice and theory, except in "the rubric of flawed imitations, or worse yet, secondary genres", making them and their contributions invisible (Lazzaro-Weis 16-17). This symbolic annihilation reinforced the association of the female with the particular and the male with the universal and addressing this was a key feature of feminist literary criticism.

2.3. Feminist Literary Criticism

Looking at feminist literary criticism in the context of "millennial fiction" offers insight into the position of contemporary authors today by providing context on how female writers

have positioned themselves in the literary tradition historically. While the field has evolved over the past fifty years, feminist scholarship still has the same two intentions: "it revises concepts previously thought universal but now seen as originating in particular cultures and serving particular purposes; and it restores a female perspective by extending knowledge about women's experience and contributions to culture" (Greene and Kahn 1-2). In the 1960s and early 1970s, the women's movement was concerned with women's experience under patriarchy, in which they are treated as second-class citizens, and feminist scholars extended this rationale to literature (Rivkin and Ryan 765). They argued that the "great", "universal" texts that literary history has canonized only reflect the dominant male ideology (which was patriarchal, Western, and white) since works by people with a different gender, race, or class were discounted (Greene and Kahn 21). They set on to expose how ideology influences which writings are considered "Great Works" and how this serves the interests of the people – men – in power, by attending to one of the silences of the canon: women's writing (Greene and Kahn 22). By using the same theory that was used to exclude them, feminist literary critics tried to "[alter] standards of literary excellence, [redefine] literary periods and [reshape] the canon" (Greene and Kahn 22). Their aim was twofold: to take an empirical look at women as characters, authors, and readers in the writings of women (instead of the misogynist stereotypes in male literature), and to recover a lost tradition and establish women's writing as part of the canon (Baym 45, Rivkin and Ryan 766). Notable publications from this period include Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own*, which reconstructs a history of female authors to recover a "female tradition", Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader*, which examines how women are represented in the "Great" American works, Nina Baym's *Woman's Fiction*, which documents novels written by women that were undervalued by critics but appreciated by female readers of their time, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which analyzes the recurrent figure of the madwoman in already canonized nineteenth-century novels, which they believe is an expression of the suppressed violent emotions of the female authors (Rivkin and Ryan 766, Kaplan 47, Baym 47). Their search for similarities did not rely on the assumption that the authors' sex determined the stories they wrote, but on the idea that these women's socialization instilled in them a self-awareness about their social confinements, which results in similar topics, themes, and images to be present in their works (Furman 62).

In the mid-1970s, the focus of feminist literary criticism moved from "the criticism of writing by men and the exploration of writing by women to a questioning of what it means at all to engage with or in language" (Rivkin and Ryan 769). This emphasis on the formal and textual aspects of literature was accompanied by the field being renamed "literary women's

studies" (Liska 4). The search for theoretical underpinnings for a female mode of writing developed in two disciplines, one influenced by Anglo-American feminism and another by French feminism. The first is the Anglo-American criticism of the mid-1970s, which explored the specificity of women's writing, for which Showalter coined the term "gynocriticism" (Eagleton 2014, 9). The theory centers around "the essential question of difference … What is *the difference* of women's writing?" (Showalter 185). By studying the female author, character, and experience, the gynocritic developed an understanding of female identity as a struggle toward a realization of selfhood and autonomy (Eagleton 2014, 9). The French theory differs from the Anglo-American thesis in their definition of "woman", "women", and "feminine": "Anglo-American feminism centres on 'women' – real, biological entities who, at this moment in history, are forging a politics based on shared experience and needs. French interest converges not on women but on 'woman' who ... is not a person but a 'writing-effect'" (Eagleton 2014, 9-10). To describe this 'woman' that is established through a specific mode of writing, the term "écriture féminine" is used. It refers to an alternative style of writing that opposes the dominant, masculine one by unsettling fixed meanings and breaking away from coherent meaning (Moi 260; Baym 49; Eagleton 2014, 10; Rivkin and Ryan 767). This results in a female language that is described as "open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body, i.e., the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriented, masterly or 'didactic' languages" (Makward qtd. in Baym 49). In doing so, the language aims to undermine the hierarchical orders of male rationalism (Rivkin and Ryan 767).

While some women writers believed this interest in and theorization of "feminine" writing was liberating and an important tool for self-invention since it reflected their passions and desires in writing, others saw it as a continuation of their oppression (Moi 260, Liska 7). Similar to Audre Lorde's famous assertion that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 105), they believe that by theorizing, categorizing, and trying to canonize "feminine" writings, they were using the same restrictive and elitist techniques as the androcentric critics before them. Moreover, it created a new standard since it established a single "reality" common to all women, that was in reality highly influenced by white, middle-class womanhood (Liska 7). In doing so, it replicates the patriarchal error of viewing the dominant as the universal (Rivkin and Ryan 765). This type of identity politics came under attack, as it "obliterat[ed] the difference between women in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual preference, caste, and so forth" (Liska 8). Furthermore, they argued that the recurring association of femininity and "écriture féminine" with madness and irrationality reinforces

traditional "feminine" stereotypes and the idea that the "common", standard language is masculine (Baym 49-50). In addition, the theories adopt an essentialist approach in their assumption that there is a female "essence" that is present in language (Rivkin and Ryan 766). Women's physical differences, essentialists argue, make them inherently different from men, including the way they use the language (Rivkin and Ryan 767). A constructivist interpretation provides counterarguments, stating that differences between the genders are "merely the product of conditioning under patriarchy, a conditioning to be caring, relational, and maternal that may make women seem more ethical than men, but a conditioning nonetheless" (Rivkin and Ryan 768). While this approach explains how a feminine style can exist without falling back on biology, it relies on the concept of gender being a patriarchal construct, which introduces new complications.

This idea of social constructivism of gender was highly influenced by Judith Butler's book Gen*der Trouble*. They complicate the categories of "man" and "woman" by arguing that gender is performative, meaning that our gender is established or undermined through our behavior and actions (Moi 263). All gender is thus fabricated, which destabilizes the foundations of "literary women's studies" as it becomes impossible to clearly define "women". At the same time, poststructuralism was on the rise, which was highly influenced by Roland Barthes's essay "The Death of the Author" and Jacques Derrida's claim that all literary texts are made up of signs that do not have a connection with the speaking subject (Moi 261). Such theories called into question whether it really mattered if the author is a woman (Moi 261). There are arguments to be made as to why it does matter. If the writings of women are not discussed and recorded, history has shown that they will be lost; thus, it is the duty of feminism to take an interest in women writers and their works (Moi 262). As Cheryl Walker puts it: "to erase a woman poet as the author of her poems in favor of an abstract indeterminacy is an act of oppression" (571). Nevertheless, by the end of the 1990s, the combination of poststructuralist theory, performativity, and the backlash to identity politics had weakened the foundations necessary to theorize about women and writing, and debates about it died down (Moi 263).

Today, (the need for) feminist literary criticism still exists. For example, in 2005 Mary Eagleton published *Figuring the Woman Author in Contemporary Fiction*, in which she discusses the female author as a character in contemporary novels and how she deals with the complexities of ownership and power. In 2021, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, the authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, returned with *Still Mad* to tell the story of the "ongoing second wave of feminism", which they believe spans from 1950 to 2020, with a focus on women's still-present rebellious rage (ch. "Introduction"). However, within the discourse, there is still a

kind of "intellectual schizophrenia", Toril Moi claims, "in which one half of the brain continues to read women writers while the other continues to think that the author is dead, and that the very word 'woman' is theoretically dodgy" (264). To treat this, Moi proposes we need more theory on women's writing and their position as authors (264). Characteristics such as gender and race are still used to exclude certain people from the "universal", confining them to a separate category characterized by said gender and/or race. Moi argues that there is a need to study this separate – here female – tradition without limiting the discussion to the author's gender, laying down requirements for what women's writing entails and viewing one woman's work as generic, rather than highly specific and idiosyncratic (267-268). This study does not involve the mere substitution of one canon for another, since it highlights the marginality and vulnerability of women as people with little power when it comes to authority and authorship (Greene and Kahn 24; Eagleton 2014, 13). Thus, making these experiences visible and theorizing about women's writing is still an important endeavor.

Whether "millennial fiction" will be established as a separate genre remains to be seen, but it has become clear that this group of books share certain characteristics when it comes to both existential and mundane themes that reflect the millennial zeitgeist and the self-deprecating, aloof female protagonists. History shows that these themes and characters are not new: "modern literature brims with women unwilling or unable to reconcile themselves to life" (Bergman). While it is interesting to analyze how the literary works written by women compare to each other, feminist literary criticism shows that these complex experiences are signifying systems that inscribe ideology and constitute reality (Greene and Kahn 25). That is what makes the "millennial novels" different from their predecessors. "Literature is the archive of a culture," Moi writes, "[and] we turn to literature to discover … how men and women experienced life in other historical periods" (268). Thus, the female perspective in "millennial fiction" gives insight into contemporary life, such as how women's writings are perceived and valued, or which themes this decade is preoccupied with. Although the "millennial" authors grew up relatively privileged compared to the feminist critics and writers of the 70s, their texts do not seem more hopeful, and the rage of the protagonists has not died down. The protagonists remain passive and numb; even more so than the overwhelmed, furious characters of the past. To better understand this "millennial" ennui, the next section will examine the feminist context in which the authors grew up and the novels were written.

3. Feminist Context

People and the works of art they create are products of their time (see Mueller). As a result, art – including novels – contains an (indirect and accessible) reflection of society. The same is true for the "millennial fiction" genre and the novels that comprise it, including the four selected works: they are influenced by the context in which their authors grew up. This context is very broad, including political, economic, judicial, and social developments, and involves the backdrop of the author's upbringing and of the moment when the novel was written. In today's ever-changing climate, the difference between these two points in time is considerable, with major events such as the Trump election, the #MeToo movement, Brexit, the BlackLivesMatter movement, increased terrorist attacks and natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic, abortion debates, and the threat of another economic recession following one another in rapid succession in Western society. While all these elements influence the authors and the mood and characters of their novels, the focus will lie on the feminist background and developments, as the novels are analyzed through a feminist lens. Since the selected authors grew up and live in either the US, England, or Ireland, this discussion will only address the Western world and its feminist developments. This is the context in which their novels were created, thus which affected the way they wrote, which message they want their books to convey, and their type of protagonist, style, and mood. First, a brief overview of the concept of feminist waves is given, followed by an in-depth discussion of the third and fourth wave and the postfeminist movement. This is considered the context in which the authors grew up. Next, the recent discourse surrounding "dissociative feminism" is analyzed. It is a reaction to and continuation of postfeminism and serves as a backdrop for the period in which the novels were written.

3.1. Feminist Waves and Feminisms

The metaphor of feminist waves is used to distinguish between different eras and generations of feminism, alluding to the "constancy of the women's movement" which has "ongoing ebbs, flows, peaks, ripples, and swells" but always belongs to the same "larger body of water" (Llewellyn 31). Certain turning points create different eras, and each one is characterized by different struggles, all of which fit into the fight for women's rights and their liberation from patriarchal oppression. Feminist criticism existed before these waves and is called protofeminism because there was no systemic framework or academic resonance of the theorization. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the philosophical movement developed into an international emancipatory protest movement, that strived for formal equality, voting

rights, and access to education. This is considered the first wave. From the 1960s, sexual and financial freedom became the main points of interest of the second wave, and topics such as equal pay, reproductive rights, and autonomy and self-determination were prominent. The wave's slogan "the personal is political" (Hanisch 113) emphasized that women's so-called "personal" issues – such as their suppressed status within the nuclear family – are political, as topical works like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* revealed. Then, in the mid-1990s, a third wave emerged that filled in the shortcomings of the second wave. The advent of neoliberalism influenced debates about self-realization, emancipation, and agency and the increasing globalization and digitalization brought rise to discussions about diversity, inclusion, and harmful cultural practices. In addition, there was more consideration of intersectionality, with issues related to black and LGBTQIA+ people entering the "mainstream" feminist discourse. The previously discussed feminist literary criticism developed in this context, as well as the theories of postmodernism, poststructuralism, and performativity that complicated it. Today, some claim that there is a new, fourth generation of feminists, different from the previous wave because of the rise of online (or hashtag) activism on social media and a repoliticization, which is visible in the increase of (women's) marches and strikes.

There are, however, criticisms about classifying feminist history into different waves. Not everyone is in favor of the metaphor. For example, Jane Spencer argues that it obscures "our recognition of how far we are engaged in a long-standing argument" (302). Karen Offen shares this opinion and believes it ignores the ongoing, often individual, resistance of many women who are bringing about the changes that have been identified as characteristic of the various waves. It simplifies the history of feminism "by imposing on the European past oversimplified 'now/then' or other, more complex but time-bound, categories devised for analysis of the American or British present" (Offen 133). In addition, there is little clarity about how many waves there are and which one we are in now. Some reason that the internet and the accompanying digitization have changed the landscape and methods of organization to the extent that we have to speak about a third and fourth wave. Others claim that we are still in the second wave, as its goals are not yet achieved. For example, in *Still Mad*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar insist that the struggles we are dealing with today – such as the work-life-family balance – are the same tensions faced in the 1950s (ch. "Introduction"). Some critics want to abandon the idea of waves altogether (see Rome et al.). They are not only confusing and unclear but Eurocentric as they use the developments and turning points in the Western world to distinguish the different waves. This erases the efforts of feminists in other parts of the world and falsely suggests that there is one unified history and conceptualization of gender activism

that can be called "feminism". These debates about the wave metaphor and the definition of feminism show that there is not one but multiple feminisms, with different movements coexisting, overlapping, and interacting.

3.2. The Third and Fourth Wave and Postfeminism(s)

The notion of multiple feminisms coexisting also applies to the period in which the authors discussed in this thesis grew up and wrote their novels. Despite the criticisms of the term "waves", it is used here because it provides a clear structure to the theoretical concepts and contextual influences engaging with feminisms during the period. Since the "millennial" authors are generally born between 1981 and 1996, they have lived through two waves – the third and the fourth – and multiple movements, most notably postfeminism. In addition, the authors were born during the era of anti-feminist backlash in the USA. In her seminal novel *Backlash*, Susan Faludi explains that when people in the 1980's noticed that while "the status of women [had] never been higher", their emotional state was at its lowest, they reasoned that "it must be all that equality that's causing all that pain" (Faludi 2). News media, popular culture, and popular psychology created the myth that the feminist movement is women's worst enemy (Faludi 2-3, 7). In reality, this was a response to the success of the women's movement and "the increased possibility that [women] might win [full equality]"; the myth was designed to hinder further progress and stop "women long before they reach the finish line" (Faludi 12). Nevertheless, this backlash-movement impacted the way people thought about feminism and therefore the development of the movement itself.

The third wave, fourth wave, and postfeminism are often confused with each other because they overlap in time and definition. Chronologically, the third wave preceded the fourth, with postfeminism spanning both periods. The distinction between the third and fourth wave is most straightforward. The third wave was established in the 1990s as a rejection of the white, middle-class, heteronormative perspectives and values of the second wave (Rivers 17). They believed that the second wave was a triangulation of essentialism, universalism, and naturalism and wanted to undermine the idea of a fixed female identity and the neoliberal individualist ideology that emerged from it (Gillis et al. xxiv, Spencer 298). Third-wave feminists did so by focusing on difference and multiplicity and by advocating for more inclusivity and diversity within the women's movement (Gillis et al. xxiv, xxiii). At the same time, third-wave feminists benefited from the advances of their predecessors as Western women are nearing equality with men (Lotz 75). This led to an emphasis on "girl power" and the "the revalorisation of all things bright, beautiful and girlie in popular culture", which was seen as

both a liberating force and a surrender to consumerism (Spencer 300-301). While this is where it overlaps with postfeminism, third-wave feminism is enmeshed within a broad field of environmentalism and anti-corporate movements, resisting mindless consumption (Spencer 301).

In the 2010s, the rise of feminist discourse online marked the beginning of the fourth wave (Caldeira 15). The internet allows underrepresented groups to reach a large audience, and feminists used this to address gender-based violence and harassment. This heightened visibility gives the impression of a revival of feminism – "feminism" was chosen as the word of the year in 2017 (Gilbert and Gubar 2021, ch. "Resurgence") – but, in many aspects, "fourth-wave feminism overlaps and intersects with notions of postfeminism(s) and previously established 'waves'" (Rivers 1). For example, intersectionality is now a feminist buzzword, but Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced it in the second wave (Rivers 22). However, Crenshaw used to term to advocate for black women's rights, while it is now used to demand more representation of traditionally marginalized groups – such as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, people of color, and people with a disability – in politics and media. While on the one hand, the fourth wave tries to dismantle gendered norms, neoconservativism, and neoliberalism, on the other it reinforces the advancement of the individual, which centers on notions of 'choice,' 'empowerment,' and 'agency', similar to the third wave and postfeminism (Rivers 24).

Like the third wave, postfeminism emerged as a reaction to the second wave. While it dates back to the 1980s, the last two decades saw an increase in academic publications on the notion (e.g., Gamble 2001, Negra and Tasker 2007, McRobbie 2008, Genz and Brabon 2009, Gill and Scharff 2011, Negra 2014, Rivers 2017). The movement is difficult to define, as multiple somewhat contradictory uses exist in academic scholarship, the popular press, and feminist media studies (Lotz 77). Because of this, there is a tendency to speak of postfeminisms. In its most extreme definition, postfeminists believe that there is no more work to be done and that feminism as a political movement is outdated and obsolete, as "the battle for gender equality was seen as already won" (Caldeira 9). Angela McRobbie uses "double entanglement" to describe the co-existence of feminism being common sense and "fiercely repudiated" ("Post-Feminism and Popular Culture" 255-256). Alternatively, postfeminism is used to "indicate an emphasis on individualism that results from a misallocation of the feminist endeavor for choice" (Lotz 79). The feminist goals are depoliticized and reduced to the individual lifestyle, and actions are considered "feminist" because the woman exercised her personal agency by performing them. Rosalind Gill characterizes it as a "postfeminist sensibility": postfeminism is a cultural phenomenon that allows its discourses to be contradicting and entangled with both

feminist and anti-feminist themes (Rivers 4). Frequently mentioned features of postfeminism are individualism, choice, and agency; the (re)claiming of an identity uncomplicated by gender politics; an avoidance of debates about structural inequality; a focus on (the monitoring of) women's bodies; and an incorporation of the values of corporate or neoliberal feminism and celebrity and style feminism (Negra 2, Gill). Parallel to the rise of the fourth wave, Sofia Caldeira notices a recent re-contextualization of the concept of postfeminism in which feminist discourses are selectively adopted and reworked with neoliberal feminist ideals to emphasize empowerment, choice, and "girl power" (12). This somewhat feminist ethos creates the "simplified image of feminism as a celebration of women" and, in doing so, "disregard[s] the social, cultural and economic causes of gender inequalities, placing instead the responsibility for female empowerment on the individual" (Caldeira 10, 12-13).

Each rendition of postfeminism provokes widespread criticism (e.g., Gill and Scharff, Marston, Phipps, Jonsson). Both McRobbie and Gill argue it is "involved in the undoing of feminism" (Gill). The movement is not politically organized and does little to fight for women's rights or freedoms (Lotz 83). In addition, its individualistic focus fails to consider structural (gender) inequalities, and the emphasis on free choice and agency is rooted in a neoliberal, entrepreneurial ideology. As a result, postfeminist ideology is only a viable option for the privileged few who do not face other systems of oppression (based on class, race, sexuality, dis/ability, etc.), ultimately making it a reproduction of White feminism.

3.3. Dissociative Feminism

During the period of the books' writing and publication – between 2017 and 2021 – a new feminist movement has been detected by the popular press called dissociative feminism. Because it is a recent phenomenon and is informal in nature, the academic literature on it is very limited[2]. The term was first used by Emmeline Clein in her article "The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating" for *BuzzFeed News*, which was published in November 2019. What is interesting about the phenomenon is that many articles refer to the "millennial woman" or "millennial fiction" discussed earlier. For example, Clein uses Sally Rooney's novels and protagonists to define this new feminist movement, and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is often used in articles that add to Clein's text (e.g., Peyser, Bedrossian). In other words, although both novels predate the birth of the (term for the) movement, they lie at

[2] At the time of writing, only two results come up: one Honors thesis published in April 2022 (Flaherty) and one Master's thesis published in June 2022 (van der Woude).

the basis of its creation. A definition of dissociative feminism is given at the beginning of Clein's article:

> I've noticed a lot of brilliant women giving up on shouting and complaining, and instead taking on a darkly comic, deadpan tone when writing about their feminism. This approach presents overtly horrifying facts about uniquely feminine struggles and delivers them flatly, dripping with sarcasm. … we now seem to be interiorizing our existential aches and angst, smirking knowingly at them, and numbing ourselves to maintain our nonchalance. Let's call it dissociation feminism. [3] (Clein)

In other words, Clein notices a pessimistic, nihilistic, passive turn in some women's attitudes. Instead of confronting their grievances, they prefer to interiorize them and tune them out, either by using drugs and alcohol or by simply dissociating (Clein). Sophia Peyser adds to the definition, explaining that it encapsulates a performative "nihilistic attitude toward feminine progress and toward existence in general" (Peyser). She refers to *Conversations with Friends* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and their "aching, submissive heroines" who "desire to wallow in their sorrow, continue harmful relationships, drastically change their appearance to feel pretty again, or put the desires of a man before their own" (Peyser). Beaina Bedrossian talks about a "modern surge of feminine misery" with women "being passive, removed from, or even reveling in [their] own pain" (Bedrossian). She believes media depicting complex and troubled female characters have inspired this nihilistic turn towards disillusionment, cynicism, and passive acceptance (Bedrossian).

The columnists acknowledge that this desolate mood is no new phenomenon. Clein refers to books dating back to 1941 in which women use intellectual detachment, and Emma Garland compares the concept to "nihilistic femininity" and "womanly nothingness". The first refers to Allison Pease's analysis of women's boredom as "a feminist critique of women's enforced social passivity" and "a literary device that asserts feminine will" in modernist literature (Banerjee 119). The second alludes to a reading of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* as a critique of nihilism, in which "the feminine will to nothingness … is paradoxically expressed in the desire for everything, or 'having it all'" (Marasco 43). However, this recent resurgence of a nihilistic mood includes new elements. Clein believes the rise of the internet

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[3] In her article, Sophia Peyser explains that dissociation is "the detachment of consciousness from the immediate bodily and emotional experience. As defined by the American Psychiatric Association, it's an unconscious coping mechanism that usually develops in response to trauma, and it leaves sufferers feeling disconnected from the world". In the definitions of Clein and others, however, they do not use the term to refer to medically diagnosed occurrences of dissociation but to denote the nihilistic attitude they observe (Peyser).

and online communication (reminiscent of the fourth wave) has created a disconnectedness that offers new ways to practice dissociation and results in a general crisis of genuine human connection (Clein). Alternatively, Garland sees signs of fracture between earnestness and bitter irony in the tone of (popular) feminism (Garland). She believes this is a response to "empowerment exhaustion" (Garland).

All in all, dissociative feminism amounts to a reaction to and a continuation of postfeminism. While postfeminists believe that feminism is no longer needed because it has achieved its goals, dissociative feminists seem all too aware of women's persistent struggles and the obstacles they still face, but respond with a similar non-action. Feminism is still needed, but fighting for rights and equality seems too daunting and exhausting. Because they are well versed in feminist discourse, the dissociative feminists understand why lean-in or choice feminism does not benefit them, yet use the same logic of avoiding accountability by assuming feminist efforts are doomed to fail. This makes them even more unproductive than postfeminists, as they do not aspire to achieve anything or (beyond acknowledging their existence) address structural problems. This logic harms all women, including the dissociative feminists, as they internalize their problems, causing them to direct their anger at themselves rather than the patriarchy (Peyser). Moreover, the dissociative feminists are often women who can live comfortably because of the privileges that come with being Western, white, young, middle-class, and attractive. Many of the intersecting forms of discrimination that women face do not affect them, granting them the ability to be passive.

Because privilege is a prerequisite for this type of passivity, dissociative feminism receives the same criticisms as postfeminism: it is based on white, class, and pretty privilege and adopts a neoliberal mindset. The focus on how painful dissociative feminists find the human experience is poorly received, as it is seen as white women capitalizing on their pain and weaponizing fragility, painting themselves as innocent victims (see Burke, Marston, Jonsson). This is a biased picture, as these women often possess the tools needed to improve their lives, unlike other, less privileged women. Thus, like postfeminism, dissociative feminism is only a viable option for the select few, while being harmful to those who are not part of this elite.

To sum up, the authors grew up during a time when feminism focused on gaining equality for women while highlighting internal differences by concentrating on diversity, intersectionality, and inclusion. Some view this as a continuation of the second wave, while others argue this new focus on difference signals a new, third (or even fourth) wave. At the same time, the period is characterized by anti-feminist sentiments (and even a backlash-

movement) that declare feminism is over or no longer needed, namely postfeminism and dissociative feminism. Especially dissociative feminism is an interesting phenomenon, as it explicitly refers to “millennial fiction”, some of the selected novels, and the “Young Millennial Woman” discussed by Liu (see literary context). The popular press condemns the “millennial” protagonists for being needlessly and inexplicably passive, but this assessment lacks nuance. When articles wonder “*what the matter is*” (Rosenfeld) or claim that the books “romanticiz[e] … female despair” (Peyser), they overlook that these novels could be self-aware, contain criticism, or be satirical. That is why, when analyzing these novels, looking at the broader feminist and literary context is crucial to accurately assess how “feminist” they are or which feminist messages they contain.

4. Analysis of the Novels

In what follows, the "millennial" novels will be discussed in light of the assessment that is made about them in the literary ("millennial fiction") and feminist (dissociative feminism) discourses, which claim the protagonists are unjustifiably passive. Following an ascending chronology, Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017) is first discussed, followed by Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), then Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* (2020), and finally Lisa Taddeo's *Animal* (2021). The first two can be seen as pioneers of the "millennial fiction" genre and were pivotal in defining dissociative feminism, while the latter two can be considered flowing from and/or reacting to the two theories.

Each part will start with the official synopsis, followed by a short discussion of the novel and its author. Next, the female protagonist and their behavior are analyzed, first by looking at the reasoning or influences behind their actions and pessimistic mood, then by looking at the power and control they have over their actions. In the next chapter, the novels are compared to each other and to the findings of the two theoretical concepts.

4.1. Conversations with Friends by Sally Rooney (2017)

> *Frances is twenty-one years old, cool-headed and observant. A student in Dublin and an aspiring writer, at night she performs spoken word with her best friend Bobbi, who used to be her girlfriend. When they are interviewed and then befriended by Melissa, a well-known journalist who is married to Nick, an actor, they enter a world of beautiful houses, raucous dinner parties and holidays in Brittany, beginning a complex ménage-à-quatre. But when Frances and Nick get unexpectedly closer, the sharply witty and emotion-averse Frances is forced to honestly confront her own vulnerabilities for the first time.*
>
> (Rooney cover copy)

Sally Rooney is undoubtedly the biggest name in "millennial fiction" (Barry, Barros-Del Río 177). *Conversations with Friends* is her debut novel and has been said to represent the reality of her generation as "the description of a disoriented youth is portrayed with precision and it raises relevant questions about the future" (Fernández 273). At the same time, the novel is distinctly Irish, as its mindset is influenced by the recessionary neoliberal discourse of post-

crash[4] Ireland and engages with questions about political agency and (youth) identity (Fernández 272, Kilroy, Barros-Del Río 177). Moreover, Rooney is "a feminist and a confessed Marxist", and this political consciousness pervades her novel and protagonist (Barros-Del Río 177). This does not mean that *Conversations with Friends* is a "militant novel of an activist" with a "radical agenda for social change" (Fernández 272-273). Rather, it means that the novel questions "the viability of current systems of power" as part of "an active, critical, politically informed literary generation" (Darling 550). In an interview, Rooney explains how, influenced by Marxism, class functions as a fundamental framework of analysis, but that the novel does not have a specific political function (Libman). Rather, she focuses on the politics of "what we're fighting for: … the possibility of happiness and fulfilment" (Libman). In the case of *Conversations with Friends*, this means the story revolves around Frances and the personal, romantic, and sexual relationships she has with the married and ten years older Nick and her best friend Bobbi. Because of the first-person narration, the reader gains insights into how Frances, who is very cerebral and intellectual, deals with this confrontational, emotional aspect of life and the vulnerabilities it exposes.

4.1.1. Adolescent Discomfort, Late-Capitalism and Absent Father-Figure

The main reason for Frances's dissatisfaction with and negative outlook on life stems from adolescent discomfort. As she enters the adult world, she is faced with "the usual negotiations with the complexities of grown-ups" (Fernández 271). While coming of age, she is extremely self-aware, constantly regulating her facial expressions and behavior to appear aloof: "me self-consciously holding my wrist", "it was hard to arrange my face in a way that would convey my sense of humour", "I would enviously practise this smile later in a mirror" (Rooney 3, 6, 11). This constant obsession with how others perceive her makes her fear others will discover "[she] wasn't the kind of person [she] pretended to be" (Rooney 60). These anxious thoughts reach the point of "nihilistic despair" (Cox 421), and she convinces herself that she is "a damaged person who deserve[s] nothing" and "evil and insane" (Rooney 214,

[4] Ireland suffered drastic consequences from the economic recession in 2008. As Barros-Del Río explains, before 2008, the country was "a benchmark for economic success", but the collapse in 2008 "revealed the weaknesses of a fragile boom", which lead to a "financial bailout in 2010" (176). The quick shift from riches to collapse made it difficult to reestablish the economy and this left a "massive void in terms of collective self-identity" with the dominant Irish discourse being one of "personal responsibility and guilt" (Barros-Del Río 177). This influences literature, as "economic contraction resulted in repolarisation of class and gender, both in discourse and representation, with a marked regressive orientation. This phenomenon is particularly visible in the media, with female bodies frequently identified as commodities and the habits and interests of the wealthy presented as universal." (Barros-Del Río 177).

280). Her humiliation is not grounded in any real evidence and only exposes her fragility. In her frantic search to regain control, Frances often has the “sudden desire to harm [her]self” (Rooney 53) as a defense (and grounding) mechanism. These impulses border on being intrusive, but she is aware of this, too: “These thoughts were not unusual for me” (Rooney 30). While she can usually maintain her (self-)image, this is complicated when she is diagnosed with endometriosis. To Frances, the condition affirms her abnormality and makes her previous problems pale in comparison, and she suddenly longs to go back in time and “feel normal again” (Rooney 309). Her outlook becomes even more pessimistic, as she believes she is doomed to a life of suffering.

The second influence on Frances’s disillusionment is related to the late-capitalist society in which she lives, which impacts her financial status and interpersonal relationships. Frances herself is relatively privileged. This is acknowledged when she gets accepted to intern at a literary agency and her college says: “This is how privilege gets perpetuated. … Rich assholes like us taking unpaid internships and getting jobs off the back of them” (Rooney 18). At the beginning of the novel, Frances does not bother getting a job, as her rent and allowance are paid by her father. However, later on, these transactions suddenly stop, and she has to ration her food or borrow it from Bobbi. Frances comes close to experiencing poverty, be it a “particular kind of poverty, … suffered by a privileged citizen of the West” (Fernández 272), but poverty nonetheless. The novel often receives the criticism that it centers on the privileged Dublin elite, to which Rooney has responded, “Yes, she’s read Foucault, but if she can’t afford a ham sandwich, how privileged is she?” (Nolan). Rooney further explains that while on an identity-based level, Frances is privileged (especially because she can assimilate into a higher social class), she is not “especially privileged” when it comes to her material reality (Nolan). From a Marxist perspective, since Frances has no capital or property, she is a member of the proletariat and “still, basically, poor” (Nolan). Because of this incident, she is forced to work a minimum wage job, which – combined with her experience with poverty – confronts her with her lower-middle class status and its corresponding anxieties.

In addition, capitalism is presented “as a vampiric system that breeds disconnect, aggravates historic (gender and racial) inequalities, and forces individuals into moral hypocrisy in order to survive” (Darling 539). While Frances vocally condemns the capitalist system and expresses she does not want to participate in it, in practice, she is forced to do so because of her economically precarious position. Since she has no other choice – considering capitalist norms have predetermined this fate – she experiences this as an “oppressive lack of agency” or “paralysis” (Darling 542). The disparity between her beliefs and actions destabilizes her sense

of identity, which affects her mental health. In addition, the capitalist condition makes it difficult to form meaningful relationships with others. As Mark Fisher argues, capitalist realism has influenced all areas of contemporary experience as it assigns (monetary) value to everything (4). Because of this, even personal relationships become transactional. This initially hinders Nick from helping Frances when she is struggling financially. While he has the money, "the transaction of giving it to you would bother me" (198), as it implies he would get something in return. At the same time, the unconventional, non-monogamous nature of the relationships in the novel complicates this transactional notion. While Frances knows love is not a finite resource, she gets extremely jealous when she sees Nick showing affection to his wife. Frances cannot compartmentalize these envious feelings, which eventually leads to her and Nick breaking up, which makes her even more miserable and triggers her self-destructive behavior.

The monetary theme ties in with her relationship with her parents, specifically her dad, with whom she has a fraught relationship. When her allowance is cut off, Frances is suddenly faced with financial responsibilities and becomes representative of "a generation that has somehow been stranded by its elders" (Fernández 272). However, her father's failure to be present predates this incident. In chapter six, Frances describes her fear-filled attentiveness around her drunken father's "moods" during her childhood, as she "watched constantly for the flicker that meant his good mood was over and bad things would happen" (Rooney 50). She learned that showing any reaction to his aggression "only provoked him", resulting in her default tone being "cold like a fish" (Rooney 49). However, her repressed emotions must come out eventually, usually by harming herself or lashing out at Nick or Bobbi. As Rooney notes, these incidences often "follow directly on from her dad upsetting her, but she's not always able to process the relationship between those things" (Nolan). She has not processed her relationship with her absent and aggressive dad, which manifests in her belief that she is unimportant and disposable. She describes an incident where her father threw a shoe at her face, but it missed and landed in the fire: "I watched it smouldering like it was my own face … I would have let my real face burn in the fire too" (Rooney 49). This image of discard influences her self-loathing and is later used "in her plunges into masochism" (Cox 422): she feels like Nick "screwed [her] up in his hand like paper and tossed [her] away" and sees her "own body as an item of garbage, an empty wrapper or a half-eaten and discarded piece of fruit" (Rooney 85, 93-94). Thus, her pessimistic, insecure mindset is linked to her father, as well as her feelings of helplessness and powerlessness within her relationships.

4.1.2. Personal, Romantic and Sexual Power Dynamics

However, while Frances feels like she has no power over herself and in her relationships, the opposite is true. The internet and social media play a big role here, as they present "a means of fostering an illusion of control" (Darling 538). They allow her to privately construct her persona and responses as she can draft, reread and revise her messages before sending them. This controlled outpouring is not possible in the real world, so, to establish dominance there, she uses her intelligence and wit. At one point, Frances mentions she wants to be "so smart that no one will understand [her]" (Rooney 94) as if her intelligence can protect her from scrutiny and experiencing her emotions. However, throughout the novel, it becomes clear that she does not need these extra tools to gain the upper hand, as she is often already in control of the situation or relationship. The first instance is when she calls Bobbi jealous of her and Nick, and Bobbi gets offended. Frances is surprised by this reaction, as she did not believe "that it was even possible to hurt her no matter how hard [she] tried" (Rooney 82). Another example is her relationship with Nick, which Frances initiates: "I kissed him. He let me" (Rooney 52). While she is often the one who carries out actions, she still believes Nick is in full control, thinking "he has all the power and I have none" (Rooney 134-135). Towards the end, Bobbi calls Frances out on this: "You underestimate your own power so you don't have to blame yourself for treating other people badly. You tell yourself stories about it. Oh well, Bobbi's rich, Nick's a man, I can't hurt these people. If anything they're out to hurt me and I'm defending myself" (Rooney 302). Frances's careless behavior stems from her belief that she has no agency and cannot impact anything or anyone, but, as Bobbi points out, she uses this belief as an excuse for her actions, which, in fact, do leave a mark.

Frances's conviction about her own powerlessness particularly applies to her relationship with Nick, where, as Rooney says, the "power dynamics [are] slightly off equilibrium" (Libman). Nick is advantaged because of his older age and higher financial status. In addition, Frances believes that as an actor, he is better at controlling his reactions to her actions as "he could practise it just as well as any of the others" (Rooney 110). She projects her obsession with regulating how she comes across and believes that Nick uses his acting skills to deceive her, even though nothing about his behavior indicates this. In the first half of the novel, Frances often expresses that she has no control over their relationship: "I felt that I had no understanding of what was happening between us", "I seemed to have no power any longer over what was happening, or what was going to happen" (Rooney 126, 154). Later on, Nick and Frances discuss the power (im)balance of their relationship when they talk about Nick giving Frances money:

… the transaction of giving it to you would bother me.

> You don’t like to feel too powerful. Or you don’t like to be reminded how powerful you like to feel.
>
> He shrugged. …
>
> I think I struggle enough with the ethics of our relationship already, he said. So giving you money would probably push it too far for me. Although, I don’t know. You’d probably be happier with the cash. …
>
> Are you conflicted about our relationship? I said. …
>
> No, he said. Well, yes, but only in the abstract.
>
> You’re not going to leave me?
>
> … Would you miss me if I did? he said. …
>
> I would miss dominating you in conversation, I said. ...
>
> I think you would miss it too.
>
> Being dominated? Of course I would. That’s like foreplay for us. You say cryptic things I don’t understand, I give inadequate responses, you laugh at me, and then we have sex. …
>
> I propped myself up on one elbow and kissed his mouth. He leaned into it, like he really wanted to be kissed, and I felt a rush of my own power over him. (Rooney 198-199)

As Nick confesses that Frances dominates him in conversation, Frances receives verbal confirmation that her attempts to gain the upper hand by using her intelligence have worked. While she knows she has power over him while they are having sex (Rooney 75), but outside the bedroom, she questions her ability to influence Nick. This is the first time Frances becomes aware of her power within the relationship and realizes that she has control over him. However, this verbal acknowledgment is not necessary, as the course of their relationship is already indicative of Frances’s power. Her actions are the ones who push forward the development of their relationship: she initiates the affair by kissing Nick and by being the one who travels to the other person’s house during the early stages of their relationship. She is also the one who ends their relationship twice, and it is her who, in the final chapter, decides to pick it up again, as the book closes with “Come and get me, I said” (Rooney 321).

In other words, if there is a passive character, it would be Nick. When Bobbi learns that Frances and Nick had unprotected sex, she judges Nick for being reckless. Frances defends him by saying it was “probably [her] idea” and that Nick “always follows along with what [she] suggested” and is “actually very passive” (Rooney 178). To this, Bobbi responds, “Maybe he

just likes to act passive so he doesn't have to take the blame for anything" (Rooney 178), which is similar to what she accuses Frances of doing. In turn, Frances is offended as she thinks Bobbi is making him sound calculated. Yet, when Frances later calls Nick passive and says that she feels like she has complete control over him, Nick agrees. On the other hand, he points out that it does not mean he is submissive: "it would be a mistake to assume that meant he was powerless in relationships with women. He told me he thought helplessness was often a way of exercising power" (Rooney 246). Here, Nick shows that his lack of action is indeed calculated. However, he views it as his way of correcting the power disparity between them, making it seem like it is a conscious choice to hand over the control to Frances. Yet, in the last chapter, he confesses the following:

> [After the first time we kissed] I went up to my room and waited for you, right? I mean for hours. … every time I thought of going back down again I would imagine hearing you on the stairs, and I couldn't leave, I mean I physically couldn't. Anyway, how I felt then, knowing that you were close by and feeling completely paralysed by it, this phone call is very similar. If I told you where my car is right now, I don't think I'd be able to leave, I think I would have to stay here just in case you changed your mind about everything. (Rooney 320-321)

On the one hand, this does show the power of passivity, as this revelation persuades Frances to let him "come and get" her. On the other hand, it proves the opposite. It reveals that – at least when it comes to Frances – Nick is not in control of his passivity. In addition, to Frances, his inaction is a source of insecurity as she was unconvinced that he cared about her during their relationship. In this light, her demand challenges him to exercise his agency in their relationship as, this time, she will not go to him, but he must come to her. This could mark the beginning of a new chapter in their relationship, where they both no longer hide behind their vulnerability or passivity.

In this sense, *Conversations with Friends* has a hopeful ending. Frances is able to overcome her obsession with the "analytical position" (Rooney 321) and "takes a risk, committing to a lack of power in defiance of mediation" (Darling 549). As Tim Kreider writes for *The New York Times*: "if we want the rewards of being loved we have to submit to the mortifying ordeal of being known". She realizes that there is no solace in detachment and accepts co-dependency, which is in line with Rooney's personal views: "I don't really believe in the idea of the individual" (Barry).

4.2. My Year of Rest and Relaxation by Ottessa Moshfegh (2018)

> *Our narrator should be happy, shouldn't she? She's young, thin, pretty, a recent Columbia graduate, works an easy job at a hip art gallery, lives in an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan paid for, like the rest of her needs, by her inheritance. But there is a dark and vacuous hole in her heart, and it isn't just the loss of her parents, or the way her Wall Street boyfriend treats her, or her sadomasochistic relationship with her best friend, Reva.*
> *It's the year 2000 in a city aglitter with wealth and possibility.*
> *What could be so terribly wrong?*
> *My Year of Rest and Relaxation is a powerful answer to that question. Through the story of a year spent under the influence of a truly mad combination of drugs designed to heal our heroine from her alienation from this world, Moshfegh shows us how reasonable, even necessary, alienation can be. Both tender and blackly funny, merciless and compassionate, it is a showcase for the gifts of one of our major writers working at the height of her powers.*
> (Moshfegh cover copy)

While Sally Rooney is the author most mentioned in discussions about "millennial fiction", Ottessa Moshfegh and her novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are most referred to when it comes to dissociative feminism. Critics claim the protagonist's desire to slumber away her life "takes … nihilism to the next level" (Bedrossian), and they see it as a "romanticization of self-destruction" (Bedrossian), an "excuse to let pain consume you" (Peyser), and the epitome of passivity (Cavender). Indeed, the 24-year-old unnamed first-person narrator does not seem to desire more from life than to surrender to sleep, which is – by definition – inactive. Her year of hibernation starts with her sleeping through the weekend, but even being awake for a few hours becomes too painful. Increasingly desperate, she decides her hibernation will only be transformative if she is locked inside her apartment, and, from February until June first, she only wakes up to take more sleeping pills and doze off again. Contrary to what critics claim, this desire for nonexistence does not come out of nowhere: "she comes up with her unconventional wellness plan in the fog of detachment that follows the death of her parents, which seems not much different from the fog of detachment that preceded it" (Tolentino). The narrator is "still running from her own pain and vulnerability" (Cutter), which Moshfegh herself

emphasizes in an interview: it is not just a story about a cocky misanthrope but about someone who is processing her grief and is desperate to "connect with something deeper" (Waterstones).

Still, many read the novel as "just … grim" (Morgan 49) and as not "providing any explanation" for the narrator's quest (Rosenfeld). They often interpret the book too literally while, as Moshfegh says, "this is a satire" (Clark A.). *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is not Moshfegh's first publication; she is known for writing "alienating", "repulsive" stories about "existential alienation" (Fallon, Tolentino). While here the "repulsion [is located] somewhere deeper: in effort, in daily living, in a world that swings between tragic and banal" (Tolentino), the novel is a Moshfeghian exploration of – in her own words – "the experience of being a woman" that does not shy away from "representing a woman negatively" (Juzwiak). While her novels challenge gender norms, Moshfegh claims she is "less concerned with gender politics the older I get … I think it's mostly just capitalism" (Allen). In other words, the novel is self-aware, critical, and politically engaged, which reviewers and critics often overlook, leading to misinterpretations and accusations of the novel promoting dangerous practices.

4.2.1. Neoliberal Counterculture, Sudden Orphanhood and Mental Health

In line with Moshfegh's assertion, one of the causes of the narrator's pessimism is capitalism. Many critics have observed that the novel comments on the pre-9/11 New York environment where social liberalism has created an air of delusional optimism, stability, and tolerance (e.g., Keeble, Strätz, Greenberg, Bernt, Cutter). Their analyses range from the novel laying bare the pretenses of social liberalism and optimism in the 90s and its ostensible embrace of "alternative" culture (Keeble 7), to viewing the narrator's sleeping, passive, and immobile body as a subversive instrument that revolts against late capitalism and satirizes constructions of femininity and contemporary notions of self-help (Strätz). The narrator's disdain for the political and social climate is clear in the way she ridicules her best friend, Reva, who embodies the time's obsession with breaking glass ceilings, self-improvement, hyper-consumption, and the "sex-and-the-single-girl lifestyle" (Stoner). In this time of corporate feminism, the narrator has "no great scheme to work [her] way up a ladder" (Moshfegh 35). Her exhaustion is twofold: it is "a metaphor for the exhaustion and fatigue induced by late modern life, … biocapitalism and neoliberal politics" (Strätz 103), and it symbolizes a "cultural exhaustion that is said to have characterized postmodern culture" (Keeble 9). Although she is an Ivy League graduate, the narrator works as a receptionist at an art gallery, where she is hired for her looks, to serve as "fashion candy. Hip decor. I was the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery" (Moshfegh 36-37). She continues: "[it] paid me just $22,000 a year.

Without my inheritance, I would have been forced to find a job that paid more money … I was lucky to have my dead parents' money, I knew, but that was also depressing" (Moshfegh 37). In addition, as a former aspiring artist, the supposed subversive art she sells discourages her even more. The "canned counterculture crap" (Moshfegh 36) makes art into hollow entertainment and "a mockery of its former self" (Cutter 7). While in the past, the narrator saw art as "a sacred human ritual", working at the gallery makes her realize that its value is assigned based on political trends and "what a bunch of rich assholes thought would 'elevate' their portfolios and inspire jealousy" (Moshfegh 183). Already dissatisfied with being forced into the neoliberal rat race, the realization that "everything is determined by the market" makes her feel like "she has no agency, no power to cause any kind of change since everything is determined by the market" and her hopelessness increases (Saramandi).

Her dissatisfaction with capitalism, her job, and the art world is not the main reason for her desire to sleep and be "reborn". As Moshfegh explains, the novel is about the grief the narrator experiences after the successive deaths of her parents during her third year of college, which she tries to process by erasing (the memories of) the trauma that caused it (Waterstones). While she acts like their deaths did not affect her – for example saying about a 500 dollars pair of shoes: "one of many purchases I'd made to mitigate the pain of having lost my parents, or whatever it was I was feeling" (Moshfegh 189), other passages suggest differently. When she describes living with Reva the following year, she states, "I was the vacant, repressed depressive, and she was the obsessive blabbermouth … I spent a lot of time staring at the ceiling that year, trying to cancel out thoughts about death with thoughts about nothingness. Reva's frequent interruptions probably kept me from jumping out the window" (Moshfegh 156). In addition, while her hibernation is designed to leave the past behind, "much of the novel consists of her recitation of the very memories she scorns" (Greenberg 194). From these memories, it becomes clear that she has been grieving the absence of her parents for a long time. She describes her father as "dispassionate" and her mother as "cold", saying "none of us had much warmth in our hearts" (Moshfegh 49). She especially yearns for a loving mother figure "I wanted a mother. I could admit that. I wanted her to hold me while I cried, bring me cups of warm milk and honey, give me comfy slippers" (Moshfegh 147). This longing is more for "a mother [she]'d seen on television" than her own – which explains her obsession with Whoopi Goldberg – as the narrator confesses: "I hadn't loved mine. My mother hadn't been easy to love … I didn't ever really know her" (Moshfegh 135).

The death of her parents and the "psychic costs of having been raised in a cold, unloving family" thus caused her current malaise, and "it takes no special expertise or insight to diagnose

the narrator with depression" (Greenberg 195). Yet, she constantly alternates between admitting and denying her depressive mental state. She acknowledges that she was "the vacant, repressed depressive" during college and when Dr. Tuttle asks her during their first appointment, "What brings you here? … Depression?", the narrator thinks in response, "My plan was to lie" (Moshfegh 21). On the other hand, she often insists her thought and hibernation project are the opposite of destructive: "Not that what I was doing was suicide. In fact, it was the opposite of suicide. My hibernation was self-preservational. I thought that it was going to save my life" (Moshfegh 7). As mentioned in the discussion of "millennial fiction", "unlikable" female protagonists often receive an armchair diagnosis of mental illness as if critics "require a diagnosis for her unlikability in order to tolerate her. The simplest explanation, of [the female protagonist] as human, will not suffice" (Gay ch. "Not Here to Make Friends"). However, in this novel, many signs point toward the narrator's emotional state being unstable: "I was plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to escape the prison of my mind and body", "My favorite days were the ones that barely registered", "I felt nothing … I couldn't even locate where my emotions came from", "I couldn't cry. None of that penetrated deep enough to press whatever button controlled my 'outpouring of sorrow'", "I was stoic. I was numb" (Moshfegh 18, 71, 137, 145, 152). In addition, on multiple occasions, she fantasizes about dying. She mentions a car accident, hypothermia, freezing to death, and jumping out of a window while on Infermiterol[5], preferring the latter three as you would not "feel a thing. That sounded nice" (Moshfegh 204). In addition, she promises herself that if she wakes up in June and "life still wasn't worth the trouble, I would end it. I would jump" (Moshfegh 260). While her therapist claims that her thoughts are "nothing unusual", the narrator knows "she wasn't a good doctor" (Moshfegh 18) and, by saying this, confirms that she also recognizes – on some level – that her malaise and suicidal idealizations are not normal and should be observed as such by a professional.

4.2.2. Sleep as a Source of Happiness and Rebirth

To become immune to the painful memories that cause the narrator's depressive state, she sets off to sleep for a year:

> I was hitting the pills hard and sleeping all day and all night with two- or three-hour breaks in between. This was good, I thought. I was finally doing something that really

[5] Infermiterol is the fictional drug the narrator takes to sleep for extended periods of time, such as during her four-month chemically induced coma.

> mattered. Sleep felt productive. Something was getting sorted out. I knew in my heart – this was, perhaps, the only thing my heart knew back then – that when I'd slept enough, I'd be okay. I'd be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories. My past life would be but a dream, and I could start over without regrets, bolstered by the bliss and serenity that I would have accumulated in my year of rest and relaxation. (Moshfegh 51)

While the activity itself is passive, the narrator actively chooses to hibernate. In some ways, in the neoliberal, capitalist society, "sleep is her only authentic agency" (Saramandi). Some argue that sleep is still a "passive acceptance" of her and society's problems (Bedrossian), while others read it as "powerful powerlessness" (Greenberg 197) or as a revolt against capitalism (Strätz, Bernt). Nevertheless, for the narrator, sleep is simply her source of happiness. When Reva asks her why she sleeps her life away, she responds: "If you knew what would make you happy, wouldn't you do it?" (Moshfegh 58). She calls herself a "somniac" and "somnophile" and explains that she has "always loved sleeping ... it was one thing my mother and I had enjoyed doing together when I was a child" (Moshfegh 46). This connection to her mother could be one of the reasons why she derives such great comfort from sleeping. In her Master's thesis, Iulia Ivana analyzes *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* using Sara Ahmed's theories on happiness. Ivana gives multiple definitions of happiness: the avoidance of sadness, (self-reporting or being perceived as) feeling good, a state of well-being and contentment, and it being end-oriented, "following [the] formula: 'If I do this, then I will be happy'" (Ivana 37, 41, 43, 50). While Ivana claims that these definitions do not apply to the novel, the protagonist's statements indicate otherwise. The purpose of her hibernation is to avoid and heal from her sadness and grief; in the quotes above, she reports that sleeping is one of the few things that feels good to her and makes her feel content and relaxed. It is the thing that she "want[s] out of life" (Moshfegh 16). While her depressive state plays a role in her wish to tune out the world, considering her mental health, sleeping is the least harmful thing she could do. In addition, she is very persistent in achieving this happiness: from lying to a psychiatrist to get prescriptions for pills to locking herself up in her apartment when she notices her drug-induced sleepwalking, she takes all possible actions to ensure her "great transformation" (Moshfegh 54) is successful.

In this light, Ivana's assertion that the narrator's quest for happiness is not end-oriented because "the event that eventually happens turns out to be a widescale tragedy (9/11), which further eliminates any remaining hopes for a happy ending" (52) is the most peculiar. It misinterprets the narrator's end goal, which is to "disappear completely, then reappear in some

new form" (Moshfegh 84). Her hibernation is reminiscent of the rest cures that used to be enforced on depressed or melancholic women. They are famously described by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, to which the narrator even appears to refer: "A woman out of her mind, locked in an apartment" (Moshfegh 266). Similar to the narrator's quest, these rest cures were reserved for the privileged. However, while they were "a gilded prison" (Fallon), the narrator's year of sleep proves to be truly therapeutic. When she wakes up, she declares:

> On June 1, 2001, I came to in a cross-legged seated position on the living room floor. Sunlight was needling through the blinds, illuminating crisscrossed planes of yellow dust that blurred and waned as I squinted. I heard a bird chirp.
>
> I was alive.
>
> (Moshfegh 276)

This is reminiscent of how she described going outside at the beginning of the book: "I was like a baby being born – the air hurt, the light hurt, the details of the world seemed garish and hostile" (Moshfegh 4). However, now, she has a new appreciation for life. Her worldview has been transformed, and while looking at a painting at the MET, she becomes aware of her agency:

> I was too close to the painting.
>
> "Step away!"
>
> The notion of my future suddenly snapped into focus: it didn't exist yet. I was making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air around my body with stillness, trying to capture something – a thought, I guess – as though such a thing were possible, as though I believed in the delusion described in those paintings – that time could be contained, held captive. I didn't know what was true. So I did not step back. Instead, I put my hand out. I touched the frame of the painting. And then I placed my whole palm on the dry, rumbling surface of the canvas, simply to prove to myself that there was no God stalking my soul. Time was not immemorial. Things were just things. "Ma'am!" the guard yelled, and then there were hands gripping my shoulders, pulling me to the side. But that was all that happened.
>
> "Sorry, I got dizzy," I explained.
>
> That was it. I was free.
>
> (Moshfegh 286-287)

She is free because she has shown that the social constructs that dictate life can be broken, but more importantly, because she is ready to let go of her grief and bad memories as she realizes

that she – just like the painter – cannot hold on to her bygone days. The second-to-last chapter ends as follows:

> Pain is not the only touchstone for growth, I said to myself. My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things. This was good. This was my life now. I could survive without the house. I understood that it would soon be someone else's store of memories, and that was beautiful. I could move on.
>
> I found a pay phone on Second Avenue.
>
> "OK," I said into the realtor's answering machine. "Sell it. And tell them to throw out whatever's in the attic. I don't need it." …
>
> Then I called Reva. She answered on the fourth ring, panting and tense.
>
> "I'm at the gym," she said. "Can we talk later?"
>
> We never did.
>
> (Moshfegh 288)

While earlier she could not let go of the house because it was "proof that I had not always been completely alone in this world" and "affirm[ed] that it was better to be alone than to be stuck with people who were supposed to love you, yet couldn't" (Moshfegh 64), she now sees that this logic is flawed and tries to reconnect with Reva. Her hibernation served its purpose: she has let go of what held her back and is ready to be part of the world again.

Throughout the novel, the narrator's motivation for her year of sleep and the underlying trauma, grief and mental health issues that triggered her line of thinking are very clear. While her plan turns out to be effective – as she successfully (and autonomously) completes all its steps and, when she emerges from her sleep, her life is made anew – *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is not a prescription. It explores the degree to which privileged, upper-class people can care for themselves, of which the narrator is also aware: she knows she could not do this without her inheritance. Thus, while hibernating seems "seductive" (Fallon) in a labor-demanding society, the novel does not offer an empowering case for leisure, nor does it claim to do so. However, it is also not a manifesto for passivity, but rather for growth.

4.3. Boy Parts by Eliza Clark (2020)

> *Irina obsessively takes explicit photographs of the average-looking men she persuades to model for her, scouted from the streets of Newcastle.*
> *Placed on sabbatical from her dead-end bar job, she is offered an exhibition at a fashionable London gallery, promising to revive her career in the art world and offering an escape from her rut of drugs, alcohol, and extreme cinema. The news triggers a self-destructive tailspin, centred around Irina's relationship with her obsessive best friend, and a shy young man from her local supermarket who has attracted her attention…*
> *Boy Parts is the incendiary debut novel from Eliza Clark, a pitch-black comedy both shocking and hilarious, fearlessly exploring the taboo regions of sexuality and gender roles in the twenty-first century.*
> (Clark Cover copy)

The main character of Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts* is often compared to Moshfegh's narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* based on both characters being "comically mean-spirited" (O'Neill) and "hypnotically dislikeable" (Kirkbride). However, while the narrator's goal is to "erase her identity" (Waterstones), *Boy Parts*' protagonist is desperate to "leave a fucking mark" (Clark 285). Throughout the novel, the twenty-nine-year-old Irina goes through her archive to collect material for her London exhibition. The anecdotes about her different projects and the related repressed memories that surface reveal that an underappreciation for her art and misjudgments of her agency have led Irina down a spiral of self-destruction and violence. The novel – and Irina herself – tests the limits of what a "consistently underestimated pretty girl" can get away with (Ashby). Because of this, the novel is often compared to *American Psycho* (Ashby, O'Neill, Key). While it seems that she reaches the peak of her violence with "Eddie from Tesco", the climax of the novel reveals that she has murdered one of her models during her master's in London. When the boy attacked her after she tries to let her hit him, she "grabbed an empty wine bottle, from by the bin, broke it on his face" (Clark 214). Fragments of this incident haunt her as she catches glimpses of the boy and broken glass, at first only when she is on drugs, but later also in sober moments.

Irina's tendency to lie and manipulate makes her an unreliable narrator, but these hallucinations make it difficult to know "what is *really* happening at all" (Dickinson). While she controls the half-truths she tells the other characters and the reader, she cannot determine if the dreamy haze of flashbacks is real. When she realizes that the glass she sees on her models

does not show up on camera, she starts to wonder if she is "just filling in the gaps" (Clark 202) in other aspects of her life, too. Because of this, it is more difficult to dissect the reasoning and motivations behind Irina's actions, as she twists and withholds information and cannot make out what is real herself.

4.3.1. Northern Class Identity and Female Trauma

Still, two prominent themes can be detected that influenced her behavior and outlook: her Newcastle roots and her history of sexual trauma. Born and raised in Newcastle herself, Clark expresses her frustration with the associations that come with being from the North in several interviews. In the publishing world, Clark is considered diverse because she is "from the north-east" and has "a regional accent and a working-class background" (Ashby). When Clark moved to London for university, she noticed how "super middle-class and super connected" (O'Neill) people are compared to Newcastle. She became very aware of her class identity "going from that feeling of being fairly middle class, to suddenly [realizing] you have none of the connections" (Dickinson). Irina's experiences of discomfort are similar. She describes going to London as:

> A culture shock, but basically fine. I'm quite posh in Newcastle, practically middle-class up here, but there… State-educated, regional accent, a heavy drinker. The clothing which was fashionable and sexy at home was *so last year* and brassy and showy in all the wrong ways. Someone asked me if my dad was a miner the first day I was there and I wanted to scream. (Clark 99-100)

In "Spatializing Neoliberal Class Consciousness in the Northern Millennial Novel", Chloé Ashbridge describes how the protagonists of British novels and their socio-economic positions "resist neat classification" as they relocate from the North to the South (211). Similarly, Irina experiences instability in her identity as she suddenly shifts from being "quite posh" to being socially classified as "working class". Her reputation receives further damage after she hits a fellow student: "I went from like hot, edgy, novelty-northern girl to weird, fighty, state school chav" (Clark 104). When she is in London for the exhibition, she is reconfronted with these stereotypes. A major donor of the gallery is fixated on her being from Newcastle when he compliments her, pointing out her "*northern charm*" and "dark, northern humour" (Clark 277, 294).

In addition, the arts scene is very London-centric, and the people Irina meets believe that there are no opportunities for artists in the North. When she meets Jamie, the junior curator of the exhibition, Jamie says, "I bet you're so pleased to get this. The opportunities are so…

limited up there” (Clark 265). The donor shares the same conviction: “Don’t you feel like there are no opportunities? No jobs? No arts funding? No money?” (Clark 291). Irina insists that she is doing well and “make[s] loads in private sales” (Clark 262), and she is offended by the condescending comments about Newcastle. Similar to Ashbridge’s analysis, Irina is marked by a simultaneous shame and protectiveness over her roots (Ashbridge 206) as she is proud of the fact she can live off of her art as a norther. As a “self-made” artist, she looks down on people like Remy, with whom she shares the exhibition space, and who got his spot because he is related to the major donor. When he complains that it is not fair that she gets more wall space than him, she thinks, “It’s almost as if life isn’t fair, Remy. It’s almost as if it’s not fair that you’re in this show at all” (Clark 268). This is why, when Irina finds out that she also got her spot in the exhibition because of her connections, she is so offended: “fuck me for thinking I got this on merit, right?” (Clark 263). Irina’s drive when creating art is to prove that she, as a Northerner, can live off her art without help, which is how she can justify going to such extreme lengths to create it. Consequently, when she realizes she did not get the job based on talent alone, she loses this driving force and starts questioning her self-efficacy and power.

The other explanation for her behavior is the sexual violence she has endured as a teenager and young woman. Irina recounts it in “an almost blasé way, almost as though it’s something she, and every woman, should expect” (Lanigan). She talks about how in high school, she used to “get blackout drunk, and wake up with my underwear around my ankles, or my skirt pulled up over my stomach”; she acts like her forty-year-old teacher Lesley did not groom her because she “did like him. I liked the way he made me feel”; and she describes her involvement with her college professor as “a *thing* … An okay thing, too” (Clark 46, 50, 167). She uses the same word when recounting her assault to Eddie: “you know, I had a thing with my art teacher when I was sixteen” (Clark 184). When Eddie expresses his concerns, she responds:

> ‘It was fine. I quite liked it,’ …
>
> ‘I mean, it just happens, doesn’t it? Practically a rite of passage.’ …
>
> ‘Honestly, it’s fine. He got caught, he got fired.’ I shut off the shower. ‘End of story. It has literally never been a big deal for me. It only lasted six or seven months. I’ve had longer relationships with toothbrushes.’ (Clark 185)

After all the sexual assault Irina has endured, she believes it is a normal part of life and acts like it does not affect her. During the novel, she is assaulted two more times: the first time is by her friend, Will, who tries to rape her while she is unconscious, and the second time a man ignores

her when she asks to switch positions and "hurts [her] on purpose" during sex (Clark 135). Afterward, Irina reflects on the second incident:

> did I enjoy that? Did I even properly consent to that? Do I care? I haven't been raped before. Well, I've never been *raped* raped: no bag over my head, no knife to my throat while I screamed and fought. Nothing *traumatic*. Even Will the other week, that was nothing. But it's all the little shit. He wouldn't switch; I passed out; I don't remember it; he's way older than me. *Do you like it rough?* I think so. I think I must. Men *are* rough, aren't they? Have I always had a taste for rough stuff, or did I acquire that? In the back of Lesley's car, on the floor of a friend's house, half-conscious with my underwear around my ankles? Was it my idea to have him hurt me, or did he just let me think it was?
>
> And that gets sewn into them young, doesn't it? Violence. I've had to go to some fairly extreme measures to defend myself.
>
> I used to think about older men, even before Lesley. ... Whether I'm in control or losing it, I've always had a power thing, I think. …
>
> I catch my reflection in the wing mirror. … She's wet concrete gone hard, full of dents, reshaped into this *thing*, …
>
> I look in the mirror and think: who the fuck is that? Who is she? (Clark 136-137)

Irina has a rare moment of clarity where she seems to realize that her traumatic experiences have shaped her into the violent, manipulative person she has become. While when talking to Eddie, she acts like she hardly remembers Lesley, her inner monologue shows that she is aware of how it affected her. However, as Clark points out, her experiences with sexual violence pushed her over the edge and made her more depraved: "Sometimes terrible things happen to you and it does change you for the worse, it makes you less trustful and more violently suspicious of men" (Lanigan). A few pages later, Irina explains how she kept returning to men because she liked the thrill of fear "when it felt like I really might get hurt, when I did get hurt" (Clark 172). She seeks out the danger deliberately, repackaging the sexual violence as the thing she desires, thus making it seem like she achieves her goal when men (try to) assault her. However, she continues: "But that just turned into Tuesdays, you know? You do anything enough, and you can get sick of it – particularly when you're doing stuff to self-destruct, not because you actually like it. It took me a while to work out what I liked" (Clark 172). Forty pages later, Irina reveals what she does like: "The transition from being hurt to hurting was

natural" (Clark 210). She wishes to be the one who intimidates and dominates her sexual partners.

4.3.2. The Power of The Artist versus The Power of a Woman

Thus, Irina becomes an abuser herself. Her main victims are the innocent and physically non-threatening men she scouts from the streets. When she first meets Eddie from Tesco, she describes him as "my favourite kind of boy to shoot, … A *nice* boy. A boy who works a demeaning job and has the subtleties of his beauty overlooked by glamorous women ... The kind of boy who's bewildered, and grateful, and will gaze down the barrel of my camera and do *anything* for me" (Clark 41-42). This power dynamic she craves in the studio seems unrelated to her abuse and exploitation at first. She has a "genuine … interest in transgressive subject matter" and started off wanting to "train a camera on a man and look at him like a man looks at a woman; boys, too, could be objects of desire" (Clark 100, 85). However, throughout time, she realizes the power she holds when she stands behind the camera and she starts to test the limits of consent. She creates a "grey area" by making her models sign a consent form and by asking them if they want to continue shooting when she becomes more violent, but she deliberately picks out "weak" models who she could "physically overpower" (Clark 148, 72). She knows they are intimidated by her beauty and uses it to "push their limits … convincing them to debase themselves in front of her lens" (Lanigan). Because she derives her power from her beauty, Irina goes to great lengths to acquire it: she constantly wears a waist trainer, has a complicated skincare routine, and deliberately skips meals to maintain her alluring appearance. As Clark points out, "people always conflate beauty with goodness" (Ashby), and Irina takes great effort so she can weaponize this.

Her primary target throughout the novel is Eddie from Tesco, who is "clearly uncomfortable" around her but "does everything [she] say[s]" (Clark 126). His obedience pleases Irina, and she breaks her rule about not touching her models and has sex with him, during which she starts choking him. While he shows signs of resistance, Irina says to "just try it" and because "he doesn't fight when [she] start[s] choking him again", she continues (Clark 156). Irina's inner monologue shows that she knows she is passing the line of consent, but she argues that Eddie could try to push her away if he truly wanted to stop. However, she has made it clear that she seeks out men who will not do so, thus having found a loophole to assault men without taking the blame. It works: Eddie apologizes profusely after he asks her to stop hitting him. When they have their next shoot, Irina films it and later describes the footage: without asking, she "pull[s] down his underwear and brandish[es] the wine bottle [she]'d been drinking

from" and watches him "squeal", "flinch", "tremble", "splutter" and "cry" (Clark 239). Yet, Irina reasons that she cannot be blamed because Eddie is a "*Big Boy*" (Clark 240) and could have told her to stop. When the video is shown at the exhibition, an older woman compliments her: "The way you've played with consent here is wonderful … Critical, bold, a wonderful actor, your boy. Discomfort radiates from the screen" (Clark 278). At this point, it is clear that Irina's work does not contain a feminist statement but is "a conduit for her sociopathy … [and] an expression of her preoccupation with male submission" (Disley). The men come across "like a prey animal, pinned, helpless" (Clark 239) because they are.

Eddie is not the only person she assaults. When she is in London, the combination of her hallucinations, the frustration about her class discomfort, and the realization that the exhibition is a "handout" makes Irina desperate to prove that she *is* in control of her life. She invites Remy to her hotel room, where she hits him until he bleeds and cuts him with a letter opener. To her frustration, he does not stop her, and the next day he apologizes "for bolting … I'm not into knife play" (Clark 283). This triggers the climax of her crisis about how others underestimate her agency and intentions:

> What about any of that read as safe, sane or consensual? …
>
> I wonder what the fuck I have to do for people to recognise me as a threat, you know? It's like… am I even doing this shit? Have I even fucking done anything?
>
> Like, do I have to snap the wine bottle inside him to get him to stop sending me sad emails? Do I have to cut his nipple off for him to realise he should probably ring the police? … Do I have to smash a glass over the head of every single man I come into contact with, just so I leave a fucking mark? (Clark 284-285)

Irina wants others to view her as dangerous, but, as Clark argues, people "struggle to compute the idea of a violent woman … People are comfortable with the idea of an 'evil' woman, but not someone who is physically dangerous" (Lanigan). Therefore, people react to her (confessing her) crimes with dismissal or laughter, or attribute it to her "northern charm". Because no one acknowledges her gruesome behavior, she starts to believe she has no control at all. To feel powerful again and to confirm that the things she does truly happen, she starts to be more openly violent, but people continue to "just take it" (Clark 289). This leads to her existential crisis on the last page, where she wonders: if no one notices your actions, "did you even exist in the first place?" (Clark 296).

Because of her hallucinations, it is unclear whether the last chapter is real. Clark says she has not decided whether the last 30 pages of the book happened (O'Neill), because "whether

the crimes are real or just Irina's fantasies, they're still manifestations of a monstrous personality" (Lanigan). Irina pushes the limits of what is acceptable and reconcilable within power and gender dynamics, and by reversing the typical hierarchy, the novel "asks some fundamentally feminist questions about sex, gender and power" (Kirkbride). However, this does not mean that Irina is a feminist icon. Rather, Clark wanted to create a character that is a "hyper, hyper-exaggerated version" of the current trend of

> women that are a bit shit, and often a bit shit tipping into quite harmful, but the way it's framed is just like, "Ah, what's she like? Isn't this fun!" I've always found it a bit obnoxious that we're coming into this new wave of pseudo-feminist media and it doesn't actively engage with feminism at all, aside from the fact that it has a protagonist who's a bit useless. "She's so quirky! That's why it's political." It's bullshit, capitalist feminism-as-marketing-buzzword that has really annoyed me. (O'Neill)

Boy Parts engages critically with the idea of the "unlikeable" female protagonist by ensuring that she is truly unlikable and evil. Irina has no redeeming qualities, uses her agency to violate others, and the novel resists attributing these qualities to a mental health diagnosis. In addition, it challenges the "passivity" attributed to "millennial" novels' protagonists by showing how women will be seen as passive regardless of how assertive and bold they are.

4.4. Animal by Lisa Taddeo (2021)

> *At thirty-six, Joan knows more than most of the price of pleasure, the quotidian horror of being a woman at the mercy of a man. She knows men, too - their penchant for cruelty, the violence she has absorbed over decades that now threatens to burst from her own hands.*
>
> *Reeling from the public suicide of a former lover, Joan abandons her apartment in New York and drives west for California, in search of the one person who might help her unravel the past. It's here, consumed by a familial trauma that slips through the generations, that she finds herself part of a disparate LA community, while coyotes roam the sweltering hills above the city, poised for the scent of fresh blood.*
>
> *In a haunting, visceral novel of women surviving men, Lisa Taddeo has produced one of the most compelling anti-heroines in fiction. Seductive and relentless, Animal draws readers closer to Joan and the brutal mystery of her past, holding them captive until the very last page.*
>
> (Taddeo cover copy)

Similar to Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts*, *Animal* by Lisa Taddeo is compared to the work of Ottessa Moshfegh (Bloomsbury) and to *American Psycho* (Katsoulis, Williams, Pym). However, Taddeo testifies that she "wasn't looking to tell a story about someone going on a killing spree but [she] did want to tell a story about the complexity of feeling" (Pym). In *Animal*, Joan's pessimism stems more from anger than from sadness, as she has suffered through a lifetime of trauma, both sexual and violent. At the age of ten, the night after she is raped, both her parents died: her mother killed her father and then herself after discovering her father had a (pregnant) mistress. In the present, Joan tries to connect with her half-sister, Alice, whom she tracks down so she can help Joan make sense of her past. Simultaneously, her inner journey shows how her past trauma and the cruel acts of men have informed her worldview. Throughout her life and the novel, her grief and anger built and transform her from "prey into predator" (Lou) as her rage reaches its climax when she kills her neighbor, Lenny.

Taddeo calls the novel "an amalgamation of the stories of so many women [she has] known" (Simon & Schuster). Before writing *Animal*, Taddeo did eight years of research on female desire for her feminist non-fiction work *Three Women* and she wanted to explore the darker material that did not make it into her first book in a work of fiction. Taddeo aims to show that "the darkness is there", as she believes we need to "understand the experiences of our

fellow sisters, women, mothers, daughters" to destigmatize female rage (Simon & Schuster Books). In Joan's mother's words, "we are all capable of monstrosity" (Taddeo 154), yet women are condemned much more severely for bad or transgressive behavior. The goal, thus, is "connection, not controversy" as Taddeo wants the reader to understand that there is a logic or reason behind the actions of someone who has gone through as much as Joan (Smith).

4.4.1. Trauma from Childhood Parental Loss and Patriarchal Violence

The novel is set two decades after her parents' death, and Joan is still grieving. The traumatizing imagery of their deaths preoccupy her thoughts and influence her actions, but she is also affected by the events of her childhood from when her parents were still alive. As one reviewer points out, "growing older doesn't seem to dampen her parents' influence on her – it only becomes more poignant" (Commons). Like Moshfegh's narrator, Joan has trouble letting go of her parents, for example, she still has all their things in unopened boxes. While she holds on to the past, she also looks back at it with feelings of betrayal because she now knows her father had a second family. She describes a fond childhood memory of them going out to eat: "It was heaven for me. Why, I wondered, wasn't it enough for him?" (Taddeo 269). Joan used to (and still does) look up to her father, saying, "I thought I would always love my father more" (Taddeo 194). While she longed for her mother's love and attention, she describes her as "an individual apart from me" and says, "she didn't make me feel terribly loved" (Taddeo 194, 199). On multiple occasions, Joan describes her mother threatening her when she misbehaved as a child, and this made her believe "my father loved me so much more. I always thought that. But the tragedy of my life is proof that he did not" (Taddeo 153). For years, she resented her mother as she thought the problem was that "[her] mother couldn't *keep* [her] father" (Taddeo 316) and because her mother killed herself and her husband instead of choosing to live and stay with Joan. In the present, Joan reflects on her attitude towards her parents after their death:

> My father did not become the bad guy for me. Not yet. That day I hated my mother for killing my father, but also for all the reasons you cannot say. Part of my child brain hated her because she wasn't young enough or even beautiful enough. Because she wasn't strong enough. Or because she was too strong. Because she was so complex where my father was not. I hated my mother, in short, for being a woman. (Taddeo 290)

In "The Madwoman and Her Languages", Nina Baym criticizes feminist literature that revolves around mother-daughter relationships in which the mother is not liked because she does not live up to the "revolutionary power" that the daughters endow on them, while it is impossible for the mothers to have done much since they lived in the same oppressive

patriarchal system (56). Joan expresses a similar impossible demand of her mother, but in the excerpt, she realizes she expected too much from her and forgives her. Baym further describes that the literature often portrays daughters longing for their mother, but realizing they seek another, preferably imaginary, mother (such as in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*) and that the "bad mother" is often portrayed as the villain and rendered "so repulsive or ridiculous that the reader must reject her as her fictional daughter does", leading to no sympathy when the mother is killed during the narrative (Baym 56-57). Taddeo subverts this trope by making Joan realize her mother did care for her: "The reason my mother killed my father was because he didn't love her—or me—as much as he claimed to" (Taddeo 311). Having grown up, Joan understands the pressures her mother was under, reevaluates her judgment and shows a renewed respect for her.

In addition to Joan's uncertainties about not being loved by her mother, the memories of the night her parents died have a looming presence throughout the story. Before she reveals she saw the dying bodies of her parents, Joan hints at her past: "A dark death thing happened to me when I was a child", "I was marked at ten" (Joan 7, 38). While not each death of a parent is a traumatizing event, Joan shows clear signs of trauma. According to trauma theory, a key characteristic is that the event becomes traumatic as it is "reinvested in a second moment" (Nadal and Calvo 3):

> the peculiar temporal structure of trauma involves unfinishedness and repetition. Since the survivor experiences trauma "*one moment too late*," s/he is forced to confront the primary shock over and over again, … this repetition compulsion fixates the patient to her/his trauma (Nadal and Calvo 3)

When Joan's former lover shoots himself in front of her at the start of the novel, Joan thinks, "I hadn't seen blood like that since I was ten years old. It opened a portal. I saw the reflection of my past in that blood" (Taddeo 8). She is transported back to the events of her childhood and thus, relives the trauma. This is not a singular experience. Joan often speaks of having trouble sleeping because she relives the traumatic event when she closes her eyes: "I didn't dream; that's not accurate. I closed my eyes and played the reels that couldn't exist in daytime", "all of my dreams were nightmares about my parents" (Taddeo 109, 268). Before recounting the night of the killings, she says, "I can't describe what I saw without going through it all over" (Taddeo 285). Nadal and Calvo argue that "the future is also trapped in [trauma's] grip" (4) and this holds for Joan, as she relives her past (traumas) every day.

Similarly, her experiences of sexual violence were traumatizing. According to trauma theory, there is an "innate causality between trauma and dissociation" as the traumatizing event "directly produces a dissociative consciousness wherein the truth of the past is hidden" (Balaev

5). When telling the story of how she was raped as a 10-year-old, Joan can describe meeting the rapist, but once she comes to the part where she enters his car, she says: “What’s funny is how I remember almost everything up until that point. After that my memories are little blots” (Taddeo 201). About her relationship with her former lover, she states, “Probably out of self-preservation, I can’t remember exactly how it got started” (Taddeo 4). The violence she has sustained makes her devaluate what happened when she is raped on her way to LA: “one could call it rape. It was half a rape, or three quarters of one. Like Alice said, there are rapes for which we shower, put on our nice shoes” (Taddeo 208). The stories Joan tells about her (sexual) relationships with men often involve her having sex with men not because she wants to but because she is “worried he would become more violent” (Taddeo 209) if she told them no. Now, she realizes the effects this had on her: “While it was happening I wasn’t aware of how it was affecting me. I didn’t notice until several years later, when three showers a day were not enough” (Taddeo 3). Joan’s experiences have made her very aware of the power men hold. As a result, she often experiences men’s gazes as violating: “[he] didn’t take his eyes off of me … there are a hundred such small rapes a day”, “I have always wondered why men don’t do a better job of turning off their eyes”, “I saw the rape in his eyes … every man has a degree of rape in him” (Taddeo 11, 113, 260). Taddeo believes that these “rapes” “add up until one day, you ... invariably explode” (Lou). In short, Joan’s rage and lust for revenge are informed by the traumas she has suffered at the hands of men and her own father.

4.4.2. Controlling the Narrative and Female Rage

Animal ends with what many consider an “unforgivable transgression” (Commons) as Joan kills Lenny to steal his watch which is “'worth not only more than his whole life but more than those of his ancestors as well” (Taddeo 303). The novel is written in direct address, as Joan recounts the story to her daughter, who is born in the final chapter. While she tells the story, Joan is meticulous to be in control of the narrative since she is aware of how others will judge her actions. The second chapter opens as follows:

> If someone asked me to describe myself in a single word, depraved is the one I would use. The depravation has been useful to me. Useful to what end, I couldn’t say. But I have survived the worst. Survivor is the second word I’d use. A dark death thing happened to me when I was a child. I will tell you all about it, but first I want to tell what followed the evening that changed the course of my life. I’ll do it this way so that you may withhold your sympathy. Or maybe you won’t have any sympathy at all. That’s

fine with me. What's more important is dispelling several misconceptions—about women, mostly. I don't want you to continue the cycle of hate.

I've been called a whore. I've been judged not only by the things I've done unto others but, cruelly, by the things that have happened to me.

I envied the people who judged me. Those who lived their lives in a neat, predictable manner. … I would bet that most of those people had not been through one percent of what I had.

But what made me lose my mind was when those people called me a sociopath. Some even said it like it was a positive. I am someone who believes she knows which people should be dead and which should be alive. I am a lot of things. But I am not a sociopath. (Taddeo 7-8)

Joan appropriates the language people would use to describe her. She knows she is not the perfect victim[6] but wants others to understand her pain before they make their judgment. Words like mad, depraved, and crazy diminish the experiences of someone as traumatized as Joan because she is not acting out of insanity, she is very calculated. She can only kill Lenny by pretending to be his wife during his episodes. The first time she does this, she makes an active decision:

I heard him through the door say, Lenore, is that you?

I was depraved. I stole from stores. I used men, but I always gave something of myself in return. But plain and mean deceit? Never. Until that moment.

—Yes, I said. It's me, darling. (Taddeo 139)

In multiple interviews, Taddeo talks about the double standard women face when they are violent. Stuck in the Madonna-whore complex, Taddeo believes women are less easily forgiven for their transgressions than men because it is expected that they fight back in the "right kind of way", otherwise it is seen as nefarious or even a "crime against femininity" (Smith, Sisley, Williams). Women are not allowed to be complex, and Joan tries to show that in the context of her trauma and rage, it makes sense that she believes her act was not "vile" but "necessary" (Taddeo 177). Joan also knows not a lot of people would understand this logic:

I'd embraced the madness. And yet I don't believe it was madness. I use the word as shorthand. The world will call it madness. You can't convince normal people otherwise.

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[6] In all Western languages, "victims" is defined as "the sacrificial ones" (Onega 93). However, when survivors refuse "to assume the helplessness, passivity and lack of agency attributed to victims" (Onega 94), the way they are viewed by society is complicated: society 'tend[s] to turn from sympathy into antipathy when victims defy the expected victim role' and refuse to perform their duty to forgive their enemies" (Onega 94).

> There's a simple small line at the mouth of hell. It's not a big deal when you get there. It's just another step is all. …
>
> You must remember that most people don't like to hear when bad things happen. They can tolerate only a little here and there. The bad things must be comestible. If there are too many bad things, they plug their ears and vilify the victim. But a hundred very bad things happened to me. Am I supposed to be quiet? Bear my pain like a good girl? Or shall I be very bad and take it out on the world? Either way I won't be loved. (Taddeo 294)

As she stated at the beginning of the book, she knows people will attribute her actions to madness because it would make them too uncomfortable to face the reality: that killing Lenny was not "outlandish" (Taddeo 240) after everything Joan has seen and experienced. In addition, she addresses the double bind she faces as a victim: she cannot act out without being deemed a perpetrator and she cannot stay silent without being seen as passive.

In addition, Joan shows that she was not born "depraved" but became so *because* of being a victim and having to suppress the accompanying rage for years: "In hindsight, it was obvious. … Every single man in my life staked the path to murder" (Taddeo 177). When she is raped on the way to LA, she says, "the seed of what I would end up doing was planted", but follows this with "of course, it was planted when I was ten years old, but I hadn't been paying attention to how tall it was growing all my life" (Taddeo 209). Her rage was "dormant" (Taddeo 251) for many years and when Lenny starts confessing the horrible things he has done to women during his life, "the female rage that build for decades" (Taddeo 246) fully awakens. Right before she kills Lenny, she thinks about "all the men taking what they wanted and leaving when it was over … All the fingers inside the waistbands of our underwear" (Taddeo 291). Joan makes it clear that men have pushed the limits of her (and other women's) self-control and that killing Lenny is about more than just killing one man or the watch. While Taddeo does not condone violence (Whistles), she wanted to make clear that women "have the same rights to rage as men do … and to have it not be considered something unsavory, but rather something that is born out of pain, as all rage is" because pretending it is not there is dangerous (Simon & Schuster Books). This is shown through Joan: someone can endure only so much violence from men before she starts to believe that "it's the only recourse. Killing men in times like these" (Taddeo 309).

Unlike in *Boy Parts*, Taddeo aims to make the reader empathize with Joan by giving her backstory as the reason for her behavior: "someone that you may think is acting crazy or mad

or angry or unhinged probably has a scar that is finally coming out into the light or has begun to bleed again" (Simon & Schuster Books). It examines to which extent women are "allowed" to express their grief and rage and how easily they are forgiven for transgressions. In both cases, they get less leeway than men. It asks why wounded women need to "be pure" (Chappet) and which consequences abusers should face in times of the MeToo movement (Dockterman). Taddeo believes "art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable" (Rankin) and thinks it is positive that her novel evokes discussions about female rage and trauma. A new, realistic female representation is only possible by changing the script and revising patriarchal narratives on the female experience by providing nuanced accounts of the darker, uglier realities of womanhood (Bhasin, Sisley). In this light, Taddeo views the novel as hopeful, as it opens the discussion about assault, violence, trauma, and rage (Sisley) and humanizes characters such as Joan, who reflect the experiences of real women (Simon & Schuster).

5. Discussion

On the surface, the four novels align with the characteristics of "millennial fiction". They are all listed[7] as literary fiction and are character-driven, although the last two focus more on plot (and suspense) than the first two. The authors are all millennials, with Taddeo, born in 1980, being the oldest and Clark, born in 1994, the youngest. All books have a female first-person narrator who is a millennial, too. Similar to the fictitious synopsis of Bergman[8], most of them do not like their job: Frances has no desire to work, both the narrator and Irina quit their jobs at the beginning of the book, and Joan often relies on men instead of work for her income. Both the narrator and Irina hate their best friend, while Frances has a more complicated (but loving) relationship with her best friend/(ex-)girlfriend. Joan used to hate Alice, but when they meet, they bond and become friends. Frances, Joan, and the narrator all have relationships with older, distant, (and the first two married) men. Irina's relationship with Eddie is different, as she is the distant and abusive one. Lastly, each novel's inciting incident disrupts the protagonist's mundane routine: Frances starts an affair with a married man, the narrator begins her chemically induced coma, Irina gets a spot in the London exhibition, and Joan witnesses the public suicide of her former lover. In addition, the mood of the protagonists is often pessimistic or nihilistic, which is in line with both "millennial fiction" and dissociative feminism, and they have self-destructive tendencies: Frances and Irina self-harm; Irina, Joan, and the narrator take large amounts of drugs to party or be able to sleep; the narrator's hibernation reduces her muscle mass considerably; Irina and Joan seek out dangerous relationships with men.

However, contrary to what "millennial fiction" and (especially) dissociative feminism critics claim, the protagonists are not pessimistic or nihilistic without reason. While discussions of "millennial fiction" mention that the turbulent political and emotional climate in which the authors grew up influenced the novels' mood, they overlook that the characters are also part of the same oppressive systems. Therefore, these systems also affect the characters' negative

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[7] Both the Belgian bookstore Standaard Boekhandel and the Dutch ECommerce company bol.com classify all novels as "literary novels" ("Onze Literatuur and Romans: Literaire Fictie", "Engelse Literaire Romans Kopen?"). On the literary social media platform Goodreads, all four novels are shelved as "literary fiction" ("Literary Fiction Books").

[8] This quote was used during the discussion of "millennial fiction": The young woman works in an office. Her job is tedious: data entry, or coordinating the logistics for meaningless products, or proofreading niche trade publications with improbable names. She has no friends or resents the one she has. Her boyfriend is distant. Perhaps he's not even her boyfriend anymore, but still, she thinks of him often. She rarely eats. Absent what you might call drive, her life proceeds by rote until suddenly, by chance or by choice, her routine is disrupted by a speculative twist: a purification cult, an apocalyptic illness, a psycho-technological experiment, an elective coma. (Bergman)

outlook. The pressures of capitalism – "a ruthless economic system that makes us feel like outsiders to ourselves, a system propped up by ecocide, racism, sexism, the class system and heteronormativity" (Sudjic) – are briefly touched upon in discussions of "millennial fiction" as a reason for the protagonists' pessimism. This holds for the novels: Frances faces poverty and has to find a job, which clashes with her Marxist beliefs, and rely on Nick for money. Joan similarly starts relationships with men (and even kills one) so they can support her financially. As part of the "creative class", Irina and the narrator face economic instability: Irina has to work a day job, even though her parents pay half her rent, and the narrator can only work at her low-paying job thanks to her inheritance. However, the source for their pessimism goes deeper than just the struggles of capitalism. All of them have a fraught relationship with one or both parents that haunts them into adulthood. Both Joan and the narrator became orphans at a young age and they long for the love of their dead mothers, a longing that existed when they were still alive, too, as their mothers were cold and distant. Frances's feelings of self-worth are impacted similarly, but in her case by her absent, alcoholic father. Irina seems the least affected by her parents, but they do feed her insecurity about her art as they do not believe she can make a living off it. While Frances's discomfort stems from more general growing pains, other characters are haunted by more severe wounds. Joan has been traumatized by witnessing the violent and bloody murder of her dad and the suicide of her mother and her former lover. In addition, she endured multiple sexual assaults and other forms of violence by men. Similarly, Irina has been groomed and sexually assaulted. On a different level, she faces discrimination because of her Northern class identity. Finally, the narrator is disillusioned by the realities of the art world which is ruled by the neoliberal meritocracy of pre-9/11 New York, and she shows signs of mental illness. Although the protagonists are all relatively privileged, the analysis shows that they still fall prey to oppressive systems such as capitalism, patriarchy, and classism, despite their long education or the advantages they have by being white and beautiful. Moreover, privileged individuals are not exempt from personal hardship or trauma, which also influences one's (negative) outlook on life.

The second claim "millennial fiction" and dissociative feminism critics make is that the protagonists are passive, which the analysis also disproves. If they are passive, it is because they are containing themselves, for example, Joan repressing her rage for years, or because they willfully submit themselves, for example, the hibernation of the narrator. However, this suppression or acceptance also requires control and agency, like all the other things the protagonists do. While it is true that the protagonists often lash out at themselves to regain control because they feel like they do not have any power (within the oppressive structures they

inhabit), other actions in the novels point towards more constructive uses of agency. While Frances believes she has little influence on those around her, the analysis shows she underestimates her power and that she does have power over others, especially Nick. While the power dynamics are in Nick's favor because of his gender, age, and financial situation, Frances makes most of the decisions in their relationship. Although unconventional, the narrator truly desires to sleep and does everything in her power to make her "rebirth" successful. When it comes to the last two novels, arguing why the protagonists have agency becomes more straightforward as the authors intended to show the cruel acts of women, Clark to "hyper-exaggerate" the trope of the pseudo-feminist "unlikable" character, and Taddeo to make readers empathize and understand the reasoning behind people who act "crazy". Still, these books are classified as "millennial fiction", which in itself shows the inconsistencies of the arguments the critics and journalists make. Irina abuses her power as an artist to violate her male models, but at the same time fails to overcome the association of women with passivity as she struggles to be perceived as actively dangerous. After years of suppressing her rage, Joan makes the calculated decision to kill a man and she controls this narrative by emphasizing that women do not simply "go mad" but are slowly pushed towards brutality.

While the critics can reason that the authors feel pessimistic because of their social and personal circumstances, they do not apply the same logic to the fictional characters. Similarly, they want the protagonists' actions – or the (willful) lack thereof – to reflect feminist values and blame them for the demise of feminism when they do not. While the novels do not contain overtly feminist statements, critics overlook that they do engage with feminist themes: Frances is very aware of contemporary feminist theory, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* criticizes the neoliberalism and hyper-consumerism of postfeminism, *Boy Parts* challenges the postfeminist over-glamorization of agency by showing how female agency is often not recognized as such, and *Animal* engages in the MeToo debate on what should happen to sexual predators. Still, because they do not live up to the idealized expectations, they are called "unlikable" for not challenging femininity and passivity the "right" way. Women face a double bind: whether they resist or accept the socially enforced passivity, they are criticized. Because of this, there is power in both willfully embracing passivity (Banerjee 120) and revolting against it. The discussed novels show a combination of both. Still, several critics condemn the female protagonists for functioning as objects on a higher level. The characters are aware that they have little agency within the context of patriarchy and capitalism, making it difficult for them to fight these oppressive systems. Critics believe that this also means they have no power or agency on a personal level, but this is false: the characters are subjects of their own narrative

and have control over its course. Considering the broader context that condemns women for being subversive, the fact that they challenge the dominant narrative of femininity does hold political potential, which applies to the four novels.

As Taddeo expresses, there is a "desire to keep things the way they have always been, to keep things comfortable" (Sisley), which the novels challenge. They do so by redefining femininity and by discussing taboo subjects such as female sexuality and desire, grief, reproductive health (specifically endometriosis and miscarriages), assault, female rage, polyamory, the transactional nature of sex, and mental health issues. In addition, the novels reconsider how agency is understood in literature. While the "Great Male Works" that dominate the canon center on agency and action and feature the "individual pursuit of one's wants and needs" (Strong), these books highlight the experiences of people with less power and control over exercising their agency. Women cannot always simply act but have to overcome power dynamics to do so. Compared to the "Great Male Works", these novels contain more failures of agency and passivity, but this does not mean that inaction defines them. Instead, the books show the complexity of the female experience and of life ruled by oppressive systems and power dynamics. This redefinition of agency and the discussions of taboo subjects challenge norms (of the novel and of femininity) and lay bare the complexity of the female experience, which makes people uncomfortable. This leads to the characters being labeled as "unlikable" and the narratives being seen as too specific to be relatable, while in reality, they are simply a reflection of women's true experiences.

This all connects to feminist literary criticism, which – as discussed – aims to revise what is seen as universal and showcase the female perspective and experience (Greene and Kahn 1-2). The novels challenge the supposed universality of the "Great Male Works" by highlighting other, equally valid experiences of women. This includes topics such as agency, but also the pressures of capitalism, the violence of men, and the female experience with grief or anger. Because of this, these discussed novels are part of a long tradition of literary works that challenge mainstream representations through "the discovery/recovery of a [female] voice, a unique and uniquely powerful voice capable of canceling out those other voices, … which spoke about us and to us and at us but never for us" (Fetterley 290). The female protagonists these "millennial" authors write about redefine literary representations of women by showing the complexities of the "true" female experience, which contains contradictions such as having agency despite being (made) passive or deserving empathy despite having "unlikable" characteristics. By, about, and for women, the books are thus part of a tradition of works that write "against the grain" of dominant values, labels, and traditions (Hirsch 8), and in doing so,

they have feminist value. They show that the assumptions that women are needlessly passive and that their behavior is "unlikable" are reductive and stem from an unnuanced reading of the books and misogynistic views on women. Alongside traumatizing backstories, class struggles, and mental health issues, the novels show the everyday pressures of being (perceived as) a woman, which fully fleshes out the backstory of the characters and provides context for their behavior, rage, and pessimism. In addition, by using first-person narration, the character can be in full control of these narratives.

While these novels are not revolutionary in their nuanced portrayal of women, what is new is their popularity and widespread appraisal. Because of this, they hold the potential to revise the patriarchal narratives on the female experience and change the dominant image of femininity. Important to remember is that the novels show highly specific and idiosyncratic experiences of womanhood as they focus on one character. Therefore, when the "millennial" novels are criticized for being marketed as relatable, the fault does not lie with the books themselves but with the marketing, as the works aim to reflect a specific perspective, not a universal one. The discussed authors never claim to set a new standard for the general human experience. In addition, their specificity does not take away from their importance. While the analyses only featured white protagonists, as the books were chosen to fit the "white, middle-class, attractive"-observation the dissociative feminism critics made, these privileges do not exempt them from experiencing discrimination on other levels. For example, both Irina and Frances identify as queer, but a lot of critics overlook this because the books center around their relationships with men. In addition, their claim that all the protagonists are white, middle-class, and attractive is false, since there are other "millennial" books – such as *Convenience Store Woman* by Sayaka Murata, *Luster* by Raven Leilani, *Milk Fed* by Melissa Broder, and *The Idiot* by Elif Batuman – that focus on more diverse characters in terms of race and ethnicity.

Nevertheless, the discussed books do focus on relatively privileged women. On the one hand, this shows the shortcomings of this research: its brevity allowed only a select number of novels to be discussed and these were chosen based on their popularity and on their match with the description of the critics. Further research on the representations of women with different identity markers in "millennial fiction" is thus needed to gain more insight into the genre as a whole. On the other hand, the fact that the most popular books feature white women shows that they are indeed more easily forgiven for transgressive behavior. This does not mean that their struggles are not valid, but it does show that their whiteness enables them to test the boundaries of womanhood and femininity without being cast aside by society, more so than other women. At first sight, this suggests that the "millennial fiction" novels hold little political potential, as

it seems to prioritize representations of privileged (white) women. However, the analysis has shown that the supposed privileged protagonists also experience different types of discrimination. Moreover, “when movements bolster and propel women, the privileged often get propelled and bolstered first” (Strong), which means there is hope for further, more inclusive change. The novels resist the existing, reductive definitions of femininity and, in doing so, offer the opportunity to expand (feminist) debates about the representation of women and the female experience. The first steps are now being taken, but for the future, this could mean a more inclusive conversation that results in all women being able to resist stereotypes and to be represented truthfully – as active and complex – without being deemed “unlikable”.

6. Conclusion

In short, this thesis showed that the female protagonists of "millennial fiction" novels are not unjustifiably passive and that the novels are not damaging to the feminist movement. To do so, the theories which make this reductive claim – "millennial fiction" and dissociative feminism – were explained and contextualized in their broader literary or feminist discourses, after which a sample of four "millennial fiction" novels was discussed: Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends*, Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Eliza Clark's *Boy Parts*, and Lisa Taddeo's *Animal*. While the protagonists are at times passive and pessimistic, the analysis showed that there are concrete causes for their negative outlook on life, such as basic insecurities, (childhood) trauma, the pressures of neoliberal capitalism, and experiences with sexual abuse and violence. In addition, their passivity never crosses over into inaction: they are either in control of their actions, relationships, or narratives, or they willfully submit to (socially enforced) passivity. Moreover, the third and fourth books showed that the assumption that all "millennial fiction" protagonists are passive is flawed at its core since these two novels are agency-driven. Finally, the books have feminist value and potential in their nuanced portrayal of characters as they defy normative depictions of womanhood and address taboo subjects related to womanhood, such as grief, rage, and desire. While the novels do not contain explicit calls to action or solutions to the problems they raise, this does not mean they are not political. With their nuanced portrayal of femininity and emphasis on the female experience in the patriarchy, they resist the dominant representations of women through their expressions of agency, violence, sexuality, and – at times – passivity. However, these novels never advocate for the type of passive nihilism described by the popular press. Instead, they use this passivity – among the protagonists' other actions and qualities – as a form of feminist resistance to the dominant discourse of womanhood.

This raises the question of whether the concepts of "millennial fiction" and dissociative feminism are useful at all when discussing these novels. While most of the characteristics pointed out by "millennial fiction" critics apply to the novels, one wonders if these novels truly represent a new genre, or if it is simply the result of the androcentric impulse to group works by women authors as the antithesis of the canon and, in doing so, it detracts from the originality of the individual works. Similarly, dissociative feminists' reductive interpretations of "millennial" art echoes the misogynistic inclination to discount female expressions of suffering as "unlikable" behavior instead of taking them seriously. In addition, most of their claims do not resonate outside of the online discourse, which prompts the question of whether dissociative feminism exists or is merely an online phenomenon. The answers to these questions lie beyond

the scope of this thesis, which is why further research is highly encouraged, ranging from the need to add more diverse authors and protagonists to the analysis of "millennial fiction" as a genre, to studies on how the novels represent side-characters and themes not included in this study, to research on the reception of these works beyond online discourses. The impression that these books leave based on the discussions by the popular press is negative and simplified and does not do the authors or their words justice, which is why more nuanced academic research is needed that highlights the complexity and political potential of the novels and their protagonists.

Finally, the fact that these books evoke such polarizing reactions, from being labeled as "unlikable" to being seen as "damaging to the entire feminist movement" (Peyser), demonstrates the need for them to exist and be normalized. This is not to say that all women should go on killing sprees or start to hibernate, but it does mean that fictional women should be able to act just as vile as fictional men do. It means that literary representations of women should reflect the complexity of real womanhood, which includes discussing taboo subjects such as miscarriages, assault, and parental trauma. To censor these darker subjects means to exclude the female experience from literature and, consequently, from existence, since literature is "the archive of culture" (Moi 268). Moreover, fiction should reflect society since society mirrors fiction. If, even in our fantasies, we lay restrictions on how fictitious women are allowed to act, behave, and feel, what does this mean for our vision of what women are allowed to do in real life?

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