FACULTY OF ARTS
AND PHILOSOPHY

“Tall and Thin and Blond and Pretty and Young”: Subverting Postfeminist Culture in Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Word count: 19.143

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A dissertation submitted to Ghent University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Comparative Modern Literature

Academic year: 2022-2023

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Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Wibke Schniedermann for her guidance during the process of writing my MA thesis. At the beginning of the academic year, I approached Dr. Schniedermann with an interest in explorations of feminism in contemporary literature. After sharing my excitement about Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, she agreed to help me formulate a research topic that combined these interests, which brought us to the subject of postfeminism in Moshfegh's novel. During my writing process, she continued to provide me with valuable feedback, always sharing her enthusiasm. Therefore, I would like to share my appreciation for Dr. Schniedermann's supervision of my thesis.

I moreover want to thank my parents for their unconditional support, not only during the course of my master's degree, but also during my entire academic career and beyond. Their confidence in my academic abilities helped me through the previous years whenever I doubted myself. Besides, I would like to thank my friends and brother for helping me unwind and relax when feeling overwhelmed. Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my partner for supporting all my goals and dreams. Thank you for reminding me to take a deep breath sometimes.

Abstract

This MA thesis analyses how Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) subverts postfeminist culture. After introducing the topic of this thesis, I will provide an overview of the various definitions and understandings of postfeminism, in which I will demonstrate that the term is characterised by ambiguities and contradictions. Then, I will situate postfeminism within its historical context, discussing its emergence as a backlash against second-wave feminism within a neoliberal context in the 1980s, and its development into its current forms. After this historical overview, I will touch upon its interconnectedness with neoliberalism, as well as introduce the characteristics of postfeminism that will be relevant to my analysis of Moshfegh's exploration of postfeminism. I will then illustrate that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* challenges postfeminist culture by criticising the postfeminist characteristics previously discussed. More specifically, this thesis argues that Moshfegh's novel questions postfeminism's neoliberal agenda; uncovers that postfeminism's entanglement with popular culture results in a lack of meaningful political engagement; exposes how the active postfeminist consumer of feminine culture is not an empowered icon of postfeminism, as she cannot find any agency within this culture; challenges postfeminism's celebratory sentiment towards expressions of sexuality, femininity, and beauty culture, as these values are not solely liberating but might likewise evoke internalised sexism, self-sexualisation and self-objectification; and, finally, Moshfegh criticises postfeminism's makeover paradigm, suggesting that it does not provide a successful transformation for the novel's characters. Therefore, this thesis argues that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* criticises postfeminist culture based on my analysis of the aforementioned subtopics of postfeminism.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction..**1**

2. The postfeminist framework..**5**

2.1 Definitions of postfeminism..*5*

2.2 Historical context...*9*

2.3 Characteristics...*13*

2.3.1 Popular culture...13

2.3.3 Sexuality, femininity, and postfeminist beauty culture...17

3. Postfeminism in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* **19**

3.1 Neoliberalism...*19*

3.2 Popular culture and politics...*24*

3.3 Activity and passivity..*31*

3.4 Sexuality, femininity and postfeminist beauty standards..*34*

3.5 The postfeminist makeover paradigm..*40*

4. Conclusion..**43**

5. Works Cited..**48**

1. Introduction

In recent years, a new trend has emerged within the literary field: the "unhinged female character" who is the anti-heroine of the so-called "sad girl books" has taken over social media. Novels featuring "unhinged women" as their protagonist appear all over social media platforms such as BookTok and Bookstagram; on Goodreads there exist list upon list recommending books starring complex female characters struggling with, among others, mental health issues along with feeling out of place within society, named something along the lines of "The Female Malaise: She's Sad, Mad, and Bad", "Unhinged Women Who Self Destruct" or "Unhinged Female Manipulator Girlboss Books". Exemplary of the popularity of this trend among young women are recent bestsellers such as *Gone Girl* (2012) by Gillian Flynn, *Bunny* (2019) by Mona Awad, and *Convenience Store Woman* (2016) by Sayaka Murata, but likewise classics, including *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath and *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, have been remarketed as "unhinged women books". Ottessa Moshfegh's 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is the most well-known sad girl book, being an essential novel at the top of all of these Goodreads lists. In Moshfegh's novel, an unnamed protagonist attempts to hibernate for a year with the help of an abundance of sleep medication prescribed by her psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle in order to retreat from the New York City of the early 2000s. In other words, Moshfegh's unnamed narrator is a prototypical unhinged female character.

In an interview, Moshfegh even commented on and questioned the literary unhinged women trend, of which her novel is the example par excellence:

> One thing that I have noticed about the new attention to *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is that it seems to have this one fan group of, like, people that call themselves sad girls. And that concerns me, just as someone who was a younger woman with depression. When my older sister read it, she said, this should come with a warning label on it. Maybe it should. Because guys, this is a satire, this is not real. And we live in an age where everything is so distorted that I don't want anyone overdosing on Ambien because they read my book. (Clark, "My 'Sad Girl' Fans Concern Me")

Moshfegh criticises the romanticisation of female mental illness that is characteristic of the sad girl trope, noting that mental illness should not be reduced to an aesthetic on social media. Instead, she contextualises her novel as a satire, implying that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* does not attempt to reinforce harmful gender norms relating to female mental health, but rather proposes a commentary of the condition of women in our contemporary society.

In an article published in *The Irish Times*, Bea Setton has similarly pointed out that the trend concerning female madness must be carefully approached. Setton observes that the novels following this trend are often reduced to books dealing with superficial "girl problems":

> [U]nder the Messy Millennial Sad Girl umbrella, all these works become kitchen dramas, flavours of the same stuff: silly and sad, variations on "girl problems", and not really, you know, deep, not even really *literature*. When a man writes a coming-of-age story, it is treated as a *Bildungsroman* in the tradition of the *Catcher in the Rye*, *Great Expectations*, the *Sorrows of Young Werther*. When women write a coming-of-age novel, it's another "hot mess millennial story" about girls "figuring stuff out". ("Girl Problems")

As opposed to novels written by male authors about characters who are dissociated from reality, books starring an unhinged female character are perceived differently, namely as a superficial trend or trope rather than a more serious existential literary journey through the uncertainties that many women face in our contemporary society. Setton remarks that "[i]n fact, the Messy Millennial and the Unhinged Woman and the Sad Girl are just cover-up names for complexity in women" ("Girl Problems"). Similarly, Moshfegh's nameless narrator is not merely an odd, unhinged woman, but rather a complex character who attempts to find agency in a world governed by a neoliberalist consumer culture as well as a postfeminist popular culture that highlights formerly deemed sexist and anti-feminist images of sexual and feminine women.

Within the literary field, there has thus arisen a tendency to foreground unhinged female characters – new anti-heroines who suffer from mental health problems and live in a state of alienation. In this thesis, I will make sense of this trend in which female stereotypes of madness and passivity are appropriated and consequently perceived as figures of empowerment challenging the patriarchal and capitalist status quo by analysing it through the lens of postfeminism. More specifically, Moshfegh employs the narrative of the mentally unwell main character navigating her

life through the New York City of the early 2000s in order to attack the societal gender norms put forward by postfeminism. In this thesis, I will therefore argue that Ottessa Moshfegh challenges postfeminist culture in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by criticising several characteristics emblematic of postfeminism, including its neoliberal agenda, its favouring of popular culture over politics, the figure of the active consumerist heroine, its celebration of sexuality, femininity and beauty culture, and its affiliation with the makeover paradigm. I will conduct my analysis by doing a close reading of Moshfegh's novel.

After I have introduced the topic of this thesis, I will explain the term "postfeminism" in the second section, offering a literature review in which I focus on the contradictory nature and the various definitions of the concept. Here, I will discuss the development of postfeminism from its initial meaning as an anti-feminist backlash in the 1980s to a more nuanced approach that considers the coexistence of feminist and anti-feminist features. This second section moreover explores the plurality of postfeminism, as the concept functions within a variety of different – oftentimes supposedly opposing – frameworks and contexts. I will then follow through with an exposition of the historical context and development of postfeminism, as well as discuss its interrelatedness with neoliberalism. Thereafter, I will introduce postfeminism's most relevant characteristics for my analysis of Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, namely its interconnectedness with popular culture and its celebratory attitudes towards expressions of female sexuality, femininity, and beauty culture. It is important to note that I am only focussing on those characteristics that are most prominently present in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. As follows, this thesis does not include an exhaustive description of postfeminism and its characteristics, but concentrates on the aspects that are relevant to my analysis of postfeminism in Moshfegh's novel.

In the third section of my thesis, I will analyse how Moshfegh challenges postfeminist culture in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Moshfegh's novel comments on and questions several postfeminist characteristics and tropes – more specifically, the features introduced in the previous section – which I will explore in the following subsections on (3.1) neoliberalism, (3.2) popular culture and politics, (3.3) activity and passivity, (3.4) sexuality, femininity and postfeminist beauty standards, and (3.5) the postfeminist makeover paradigm. Importantly, these characteristics that I will be discussing in relation to Moshfegh's novel are functioning on different levels: neoliberalism, for instance, is an ideology that functions on a broader, global scale, while I have also selected features that function on a smaller, and more societal or individual scale, such as gender-related

behavioural patterns like women's active or passive positioning within society or within their personal sphere, or individual expressions of sexuality and femininity within postfeminist culture. Once again, the postfeminist components considered are decided upon based on their prominence in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, and consequently on their relevance to my close reading of the novel's exploration of postfeminism.

Postfeminism serves as a valuable framework for my analysis of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* because of its contradictory nature that blends both feminist and anti-feminist aspects, as the characters' behaviour and the novel's statements are not overtly feminist or anti-feminist, but rather ambiguously combine both. However, certain critics are convinced that postfeminism has become outdated when taking into account that feminism has become increasingly present on social media nowadays, causing some to believe that a fourth wave of feminism is happening right at this moment (Gill, "Post-postfeminism?" 613). Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, on the other hand, illustrates that postfeminism remains a relevant framework that can be adopted to discuss female subjecthood within our contemporary society. Rosalind Gill similarly defends postfeminism as a critical concept, arguing in favour of "the continued relevance of postfeminism as an analytical category" ("Post-postfeminism?" 612). She moreover notes that postfeminism's contradictory character allows the framework to provide a useful tool for a nuanced analysis:

> One of the strengths of postfeminism as a critical concept is that it attends to and makes visible contradictions. Critical uses of the notion neither fall into a celebratory trap of seeing all instances of mediated feminism as indications that the media have somehow "become feminist", but nor do they fail to see how entangled feminist ideas can be with pre-feminist, anti-feminist and backlash ones. ("Post-postfeminism?" 622)

Following Gill's argument, postfeminism offers a valuable framework for my analysis of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, as the concept's contradictions and blending of different ideas similarly comes to the fore in the novel's exploration of the postfeminist culture of the early 2000s.

In my analysis, I will even go one step further and examine Moshfegh's sceptical approach towards this culture. I will argue that Moshfegh challenges postfeminist culture through commenting on postfeminist tropes and characteristics, which are especially embodied by Reva, the narrator's only "friend". The narrator continuously condemns and ironically comments on her

friend's postfeminist behaviour, although she is clearly influenced by postfeminist and neoliberal culture herself. The narrator's inability to escape this culture is also ironically criticised. Furthermore, similar to Gill, I will employ postfeminism "critically as an analytical term [in which] postfeminist media culture should be an *object of analysis*, not a position or a perspective […] rather it is an analytical category, designed to capture empirical regularities in the world" ("Post-postfeminism?" 621). Given that Moshfegh thoroughly investigates the postfeminist culture of the long 1990s and extrapolates her critiques of this culture to our contemporary society, she likewise adopts a critical position towards postfeminism, as will be demonstrated by my close reading of the novel.

2. The postfeminist framework

2.1 Definitions of postfeminism

The concept of postfeminism is characterised by contradiction and debate. In *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*, Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon emphasise that postfeminism functions within a wide variety of contexts, noting that it "has emerged in the late twentieth century in a number of cultural, academic and political contexts, from popular journalism and media, to feminist analyses, postmodern theories and neoliberal rhetoric" (23). As a result, postfeminism cannot be reduced to a single, unambiguous definition, and is therefore generally understood in contradictory terms, including definitions of the term as "an anti-feminist backlash, pro-feminist third wave, Girl Power dismissive of feminist politics, trendy me-first power feminism, self-branded celebrity feminism; corporate/neoliberal feminism and academic postmodern feminism" (35). In other words, postfeminism can be understood in various, sometimes opposing manners.

Because of the concept's contradictory and plural nature, postfeminism remains a contentious subject for a lot of critics. Especially critics who adopt a feminist and/or activist approach often challenge postfeminism. For instance, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, editors of *Interrogating Postfeminism*, have structured their book around questioning various aspects of postfeminism such as its close ties with popular culture. Despite the debate surrounding the term, Genz and Brabon argue in favour of its relevance "as a multilayered analytical category that is dynamic in its capacity to change and absorb cultural, political and economic messages, without being amnesiac about previous articulations" (5), embracing postfeminism's plurality of meaning

and contradictory nature, which ultimately sums up the essence of the concept. Postfeminism, with its fluid and opposing connotations, offers a useful framework for my analysis as it lays bare the ambiguities that are to be found within Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

Since postfeminism's emergence in the popular media culture of the 1980s, a myriad of definitions have been attributed to the term. A first, and significant, comprehension of postfeminism defines it as "a time 'after' feminism" or as "the passing of feminism" (Genz and Brabon 26), indicating "the 'pastness' of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated" (Tasker and Negra 1). More specifically, this understanding of postfeminism is historically contextualised as a departure from the second wave of feminism (Gill and Scharff 3). Jess Butler explains that "[p]opular cultural depictions – for instance, the 1998 *Time* magazine cover story – often define postfeminism as linear or as a logical endpoint in a historical trajectory from 'pre-feminism' through 'feminism' and into the current 'postfeminist' moment" (42). This *Time* cover wondered "Is Feminism Death?", thus indeed implying that after the second wave of feminism, feminism became a movement of the past (Butler 38). Genz and Brabon remark that this interpretation of postfeminism is often tied to conservatism and anti-feminist sentiments, as exemplified by the reactionary historical political climate of the 1980s (26). To sum up, the definition of postfeminism that perceives feminism as something belonging to the past is based on the concept's origins as an anti-feminist response to the second wave.

Consequently, postfeminism is usually understood as an anti-feminist backlash against the so-called outdated second-wave feminists (Butler 42; Genz and Brabon 26). In her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, published in 1991, Susan Faludi clarifies her backlash argument, in which "postfeminism not only declares feminism over, but also accuses feminism of spawning an entire generation of miserable, burned-out, confused women" (Butler 42). Exemplary of the backlash thesis are for instance those postfeminists who want to oppose the old-fashioned, second-wave image of female sexuality as something that needs to be repressed, and instead promote a celebration of sexuality (Butler 43). The most well-known understanding of postfeminism therefore reduces the concept to a backlash reaction against second-wave feminist norms, which are deemed too dogmatic and dated.

Postfeminism's definition, however, entails a much broader scope, including other understandings as well. While Genz and Brabon acknowledge the relevance of the anti-feminist backlash within postfeminist thought, they nevertheless criticise understandings of postfeminism

that reduce it to this single definition (29). They refute this reductionist interpretation by pointing out that feminism – analogous to postfeminism – has never been a unified movement with only one shared agenda (27, 29, 34). Moreover, Genz and Brabon highlight that this reduction presupposes a rigid separation between feminism and postfeminism, in which feminism is perceived as "authentic", while postfeminism is characterised as "suspect" and "commercialised" (29). They likewise criticise this simplified understanding, as it merely focusses on the anti-feminist tendency of postfeminism, and also call into question the equation between postfeminism and an anti-feminist backlash for ignoring the contradictory nature of the concept (29). Butler similarly argues that

> while the concept of backlash is certainly important for understanding the emergence of postfeminism, it does not adequately capture the complex, and often paradoxical, character of this contemporary discursive formation, particularly the ways in which postfeminist discourses offer up an "entanglement" of feminist and anti- feminist ideas (McRobbie 2004, 255). Not simply a rejection of prudish, militant mothers, postfeminism also draws on a vocabulary of individual choice and empowerment, offering these to young women as substitutes for more radical feminist political activity. (43)

In other words, Butler advocates for a more nuanced understanding of postfeminism, taking into account its historical connection to an anti-feminist backlash in addition to its interconnectedness with feminist ideas (43). Consequently, postfeminism incorporates both feminist and anti-feminist ideas.

The combination of two opposing discourses within postfeminism causes it to be ambivalent and difficult to grasp, and especially its relation to feminism remains complex. Angela McRobbie's influential notion of a "double entanglement" (28), in which "feminism is both 'taken into account' and repudiated […] facilitat[ing] both a doing and undoing of feminism" (Gill and Scharff 4), highlights the complicated relationship between feminism and postfeminism. Additionally, Butler observes that postfeminism "simultaneously rejects feminist activism in favor of feminine consumption and celebrates the success of feminism while declaring its irrelevance" (44). As a result, postfeminist positions towards feminism vary, as some celebrate what the feminist movement has achieved, while others mainly reject its old-fashioned viewpoints on women's emancipation that excludes individual expressions of femininity and female sexuality.

Recently, more critics understand postfeminism not merely as an anti-feminist backlash, but have taken into account that the framework has had a rich history and has developed into a complex concept combining various ideas. Genz and Brabon likewise adopt this nuance in their analysis, noting that the "post" prefix suggests that postfeminism is "part of a process of ongoing transformation" of the feminist discourse instead of a straightforward "rejection and eradication" of that discourse (26-27). According to them, this contradictory aspect does not mean that postfeminism is structured in binary terms: "Postfeminism is both retro- and neo- in its outlook and hence irrevocably post-" (32). Furthermore, they explain that since the 1990s critics have increasingly embraced this broader, contradictory understanding of postfeminism in which both feminist and anti-feminist aspects are combined (26). A more nuanced and kaleidoscopic interpretation of postfeminism prevails nowadays.

As demonstrated, postfeminism is characterised by contradiction, ambiguity and debate, which is even more complicated by its presence within multiple widely varied contexts and frameworks. In that sense, postfeminism could be perceived as a sensibility, as suggested by Rosalind Gill, "made up of a number of interrelated themes [and] emphasize[d by] the contradictory nature of postfeminist discourses and the entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them" ("Sensibility" 147, 149). As a result, postfeminism consequently appears within a variety of different contexts and frameworks – oftentimes ones that are recognised as incompatible – including popular culture, neoliberalism, consumer culture, brand culture, academia, postmodernism, and politics (Genz and Brabon 23, 28). Genz and Brabon argue that, although certain fields might be perceived as being essentially contradictory and binary, for instance politics and popular culture, these frameworks in fact frequently intersect and influence one another (43). The wide scope and blending of contexts of postfeminism means that it offers a rich theoretical framework for my analysis of Moshfegh's commentary on postfeminist culture in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

Besides, the complexity of the concept proves to be ideal for investigating a novel as intricate and diverse in its exploration of gender norms within the modern world as *My Year*. Genz and Brabon similarly suggest that this complexity and multiplicity, in which postfeminism resists a straightforward definition or positioning within a single, aligned field, is one of its most valuable as well as problematic qualities as an analytical category: "What makes the postfeminist phenomenon so conflict-ridden but also compelling and resilient is precisely that it does not conform to our

definitional frameworks and our preconceptions of where the boundaries of academia, politics and popular/consumer culture should lie" (34). This explains why certain literary texts affiliated with or thematising postfeminism are marked by ambiguity regarding feminist politics and postfeminism itself (34), as is the case in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

2.2 Historical context

Postfeminism came into view in the 1980s within a Western and neoliberal context. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon situate postfeminism within a neoliberal and late capitalist landscape, noting that "postfeminism has been anchored within neoliberal society and consumer culture that cultivates individualistic, competitive and entrepreneurial behaviour in its construction of a self-regulating and enterprising subject whose consumption patterns come to be seen as a source of power and choice" (23). The reactionary, neoliberal politics that prevailed during the '80s gave an incentive for a more conservative reaction to feminism: the postfeminist backlash (26, 34, 65). According to Genz and Brabon, as postfeminism has been developing ever since the 1980s – a development of thirty years when their book was written, but now already of forty years – the concept has had a rich history and development in its own right (34). They mark the backlash of '80s as the starting point of an evolution in which the '90s proposed a more nuanced, diverse and moderate understanding of the concept and after which postfeminism was heavily influenced by 9/11 and the following recessionary period in the 2000s (34). Up until now, postfeminism has thus continued to develop.

The first appearance of the term already emerged earlier than the 1980s. Genz and Brabon refer to Nancy Cott, who notes that despite postfeminism's origins in the '80s, the term was already used after the first wave of feminism:

> Already in 1919 a group of female literary radicals in Greenwich Village… had founded a new journal on the thinking, "we're interested in people now – not in men and women". They declared that moral, social, economic, and political standards "should not have anything to do with sex", promised to be "pro-woman without being anti-man", and called their stance "postfeminist". (Cott qtd. in Genz and Brabon 35)

In this passage, postfeminism designates a period after which feminist thought has developed as well as continued to be relevant, whereby the feminist movement is perceived as successful (35).

Genz and Brabon furthermore mention that, after this first use of the term, postfeminism was unable to develop any further because it was prevented by the two world wars, but then reappeared in the 1980s in the popular media after a second feminist wave (35, 43). This historical account thus shows how postfeminism cannot be reduced to a single, uniform definition, but has, similar to feminism, already had a rich history in which it has developed and in which it was given multiple interpretations. It is nevertheless agreed upon that postfeminism always entails a reaction to feminism, albeit a reaction that might differ strongly in its sentiment towards and judgement of feminism.

The origins of postfeminism in the late twentieth century are closely intertwined with the sex wars that appeared in the 1980s as well (Butler 38-39; Showden 170). During these sex wars, feminists questioned whether the expression of female sexuality is liberating or restrictive and oppressive, as it was argued by the majority of the second wave (Butler 38-39; Showden 170). Jess Butler summarises the discussion of this issue: "Centered on the issue of pornography, a division emerged during this time between those feminists who emphasized the need to *protect* women from sexual objectification and those who emphasized the importance of women's sexual *liberation*" (38). For that reason, the sex wars were perceived as a binary discussion in which some feminists and postfeminists radically favoured the expression of sexuality, while other feminists strongly condemned it as an anti-feminist practice.

The debate surrounding the sex wars is also linked to the opposition between victim and power feminism, power feminism being related to a postfeminist sense of empowerment. Power feminism accuses the second-wavers of adhering to an old-fashioned victim feminism, in which they do not perceive women as independent, freely choosing agents but rather reject the celebration of traditional femininity and female sexuality, which might be liberating for certain women (Genz and Brabon 105, 110-11). As a result, postfeminism is frequently criticised for representing feminism, especially the second wave, as a uniform movement, stereotypically and simplistically characterising the second-wave feminist as "the iconic figure of the humourless and drab 'bra-burner'" (Genz and Brabon 37). The origins of postfeminism, including its development of thought deriving from the "pro-sex" and "empowered" side in the sex wars as well as the encouragement of power feminism as an alternative for a dated victim feminism, thus illustrate how the term was marked with debate right from the beginning.

The debate surrounding postfeminism is often contextualised as and reduced to an unnuanced generational clash. In this debate, the daughters blame their second-wave mothers for promoting a strict and outdated feminist doctrine while the latter accuse their daughters of disregarding the societal changes that they have achieved for women (Genz and Brabon 39-40). In addition, Genz and Brabon indicate that these feminist mothers' criticism likewise entails an objection to postfeminism's inability to function as a critical concept that is capable of challenging the status quo and instead reinforces patriarchal gender norms because of its interconnectedness with an individualistic-centred neoliberalism (40). Despite the frequent depiction of postfeminism as conservative and anti-feminist in nature, as the above citation illustrates, Genz and Brabon highlight that certain postfeminist positions nonetheless praise the feminist movement for their achievements (37). The so-called generational conflict regarding postfeminism is therefore more nuanced than it is oftentimes implied.

As follows, the notion of a mother-daughter conflict must be carefully approached. Nicola Rivers, for instance, argues that the feminist waves or periods of intensified activism – and in addition postfeminist periods – are generally reductively depicted, but moreover acknowledges that there is usually a certain degree of "truth in the stereotypes" (31). Jo Reger also notes that the generational divide between women is frequently used in order to amplify misogynistic ideas of women bickering, "characterizing feminism as a 'cat fight'" (194). The mother-daughter imagery's evocation of a rigid sense of conflict and debate between feminism and postfeminism is therefore regularly connected to misogynistic ideas.

The portrayal of a harsh generational battle that is supposedly characteristic of postfeminism and its relation to feminism is, as a result, more complex. Genz and Brabon propose a more accurate understanding of the historical context of postfeminism, which attempts to undermine the stereotypical and redundant perceptions of both feminism and postfeminism:

> As Julie Ewington (1994) suggests, "it is not feminism that we are 'post' but one historical phase of feminist politics" (119). […] the term "postfeminism" is employed to describe a critical position in relation to the feminism of women's liberation, signifying both the achievements of and challenges for modern feminist politics. Postfeminism's interrogative stance could thus be read as a healthy rewriting of feminism, a sign that the women's movement is continuously in process, transforming and changing itself. (36)

In that manner, Genz and Brabon opt for a comprehension of the term in which feminist political activism is followed by a period characterised by a less activist stance on women's position within society, but nevertheless a continuation of the legacy of the feminist movement (36). This entanglement with feminism differs in its sympathies for the movement, which might be rather condemning, affirming, or a complex combination of both (36). Therefore, the debate must not be reduced to a rigid opposition or clash between postfeminism and feminism, but must rather be understood as an evolution of ideas.

One of the reasons why postfeminism is often criticised for being anti-feminist and for its affiliation with conservative gender politics, as opposed to the more nuanced understanding that I have set out, is its interconnection with individualism and the emergence of neoliberalism at the end of the twentieth century. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff define neoliberalism as follows:

> [I]t is understood as a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by privatization, deregulation and a rolling back and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision that rose to prominence in the 1980s under the Reagan administration in the US and Thatcher's premiership in the UK. It expanded its economic reach globally through international organizations such as the IMF, the World Trade Organization and the World Bank. Equally significant as its geographical reach, however, was its expansion across different spheres of life to constitute a novel form of governance. (5)

Gill and Scharff already mention that neoliberalism does not only influence the global political-economic sphere, but has also spread across different contexts, including postfeminism (5). As an example, they connect neoliberalism to postfeminism based on their shared individual agenda (7). Postfeminism is inevitably linked to the neoliberalist impulses and consumer culture that became increasingly pervasive in the reactionary 1980s, demanding its consumers to be "self-reliant and self-governing" (Butler 40), and that, for that reason, generated an atmosphere which is based on individualism. According to Gill and Scharff, especially women are expected to be responsible for elevating their own status in a neoliberal climate, as they, "[t]o a much greater extent than men, […] are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen" (7). They conclude that neoliberalism is thus "*always*

already gendered" (7). Postfeminism's interconnectedness with neoliberalism therefore clarifies its individualistic gender politics, which especially shape the way in which women are expected to act.

With postfeminism being characterised by an individualism put forward by neoliberal politics, the notions of consumerist agency, choice and empowerment function as important values within this framework. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra refer to the empowered "figure of the active or action heroine" as the embodiment of postfeminist consumer culture: being able to freely consume towards a self-transformation and self-improvement is key within the postfeminist framework (20). Genz and Brabon explain that these themes have been a part of feminist thought before, for instance during the second wave, but have transformed into individualistic principles within postfeminism: "Empowerment and agency – goals that both second-wave feminists and postfeminists claim – are envisaged differently, whereby second-wave notions of collective, activist struggle are replaced with more individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule" (50). In other words, postfeminism does built on feminist values, but adapts them in order to conform to a consumerist, neoliberal framework.

Critics have debated whether postfeminist assertions of agency and choice actually provide empowerment for women from all walks of life. They question whether there are "more opportunities for individual choice and agency" or whether neoliberalism, with its "increased individualism and autonomy[,] reinstate[s] hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, and class" (Butler 41). Therefore, some critics challenge this postfeminist celebration of an individualistic empowerment for excluding women who do not adhere to a white, Western, heteronormative and upper- or middle-class image, as they do not have the same economic and, by extension, socio-political agency or freedom (Genz and Brabon 33, 72; Showden 175). Accordingly, being intertwined with consumerist and neoliberal premises, one of postfeminism's greatest points of critique is its elitism and focus on empowering the most privileged and economically independent women as opposed to those who are most urgently in need of agency and empowerment within a pervasive consumer culture.

2.3 Characteristics

2.3.1 Popular culture

Postfeminism is strongly entangled with popular culture. Postfeminism namely came into view in the popular press of the 1980s, signifying the close relation between postfeminism and popular

culture (Genz and Brabon 43). As opposed to postfeminism, the second feminist wave did not have a positive or productive relation to the popular media, as they tended to depict the feminist movement rather negatively and stereotypically as "mannish" women opposed to femininity and beauty culture (Whelehan qtd. in Genz and Brabon 48). This stereotype originated because the second-wave feminist movement decided how feminists should be perceived, namely in opposition to the superficiality of "the feminine anti-heroine" (Hollows qtd. in Genz and Brabon 49). The popular media then expanded this image into an overly stereotypical depiction of the feminist movement, upon which postfeminism attempted to reject this unattractive image of what it means for women to be empowered and liberated by employing popular culture as a source of empowerment (47-49). Postfeminism thus rejected the image of the anti-feminine feminist by suggesting the feminine consumer to be the new, empowered heroine who is closely intertwined with popular culture.

Furthermore, postfeminism had a much better relation with the media than feminism did. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon explain that postfeminism proposed a renewed relationship with popular media culture:

> In years to come, new (post)feminist voices would emerge to support a rearticulation of femininity and popular culture that takes into account their complex interactions with feminism. […] While negative readings of the popular are still prominent, […] there have also been efforts to reimagine popular culture as a potentially liberating and innovative site that puts forward the possibilities of active consumption and the popular consumer as a creative and productive agent. (49-50)

In other words, postfeminism opted for an understanding of popular culture that utilises it as a platform to freely speak one's mind and reshape the feminist identity into a more fashionable and feminine one. In their rejection of the unattractive, old-fashioned feminist movement, postfeminists thus no longer avoided popular culture connected to feminine images of women but rather employed it as a means of empowerment.

Because of postfeminism's affiliation with popular and consumer culture, as well as its related individualism, it is often criticised for its apolitical nature. Several critics believe postfeminism to be in fact apolitical. As an example, Genz and Brabon point out how its

interrelatedness with the allegedly superficiality of popular culture is frequently perceived as incompatible with politics or activism, noting that "the popular media is criticised for co-opting feminism's language of choice and empowerment and selling women an illusion of progress that ends up subjugating and oppressing them even further and on more unconscious levels" (41). Similarly, Carisa R. Showden argues that postfeminism borrows certain feminist concepts only to "focus[…] on personal choices rather than political action" (172). In that manner, they illustrate that popular forms of feminism, such as postfeminism, are regularly condemned for preventing any advancement regarding women's rights to choose and act autonomously, despite the fact that postfeminism actually foregrounds such feminist values, albeit in an individualised and commercialised form.

In general, postfeminism retains the image of a depoliticised concept. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue that postfeminism is essentially apolitical, although they note that it does contain feminist, and thus political, influences (5). Consequently, they propose an opposition "between feminist *politics* and a postfeminist *culture*", using this as the title of the introduction to their anthology *Interrogating Postfeminism* (5). Genz and Brabon sceptically approach Tasker and Negra's rigid distinction, highlighting that they do not wish to reduce postfeminism's close ties with popular culture to a solely problematic relationship (44). Even though Tasker and Negra acknowledge that politics and popular culture, as well as feminism and postfeminism overlap, they nevertheless focus on the distinction between the two (5). All in all, postfeminism's strong association with popular consumer culture mainly evokes a depoliticised image of the concept.

Besides its depiction as apolitical, postfeminism is likewise often related to conservative politics. While indicating that postfeminism does not necessarily have to function within a conservative framework because of its connection to popular and consumer culture, Genz and Brabon state that it nonetheless might be associated with reactionary gender politics (51). More specifically, they link these more conservative branches of postfeminism to new traditionalism, in which women independently return to the domestic sphere in order to reclaim the house as an autonomous space and the housewife as a renewed feminine heroine (87-88, 93-94). Also the new traditionalist rhetoric functions as a reaction to the second wave, which attempted to move away from the domestic (88). Genz and Brabon further elaborate on new traditionalism:

> Prominent in the "boom" years of the 1990s and early 2000s, this new traditionalist stance centralises a woman's "choice" to retreat from the public sphere and abstain from paid work in favour of family values. Severing its previous associations of drudgery and confinement, the domestic sphere is redefined and resignified as a domain of female autonomy and independence. (94)

Yet again, "choice" operates as an important pillar within postfeminism. In that regard, new traditionalism, similar to postfeminism, redefines traditionally anti-feminist values, such as domesticity or femininity, and embeds them within a framework of empowerment, in which women can autonomously choose to appropriate those principles that were previously deemed oppressive and patriarchal.

However, what complicates postfeminism's relation to the progressive values of feminism is its aim to employ this autonomy in order to reach the very same traditional goals – managing a family while engaging in unpaid labour – that feminism deems oppressive. For this reason, feminist critics have condemned new traditionalism as "a political assault on women's rights, their re-imprisonment in the home and regression to a stance of feminine passivity" (Genz and Brabon 95). Another common critique challenges the new traditionalist position for its "profoundly classed" as well as "thoroughly commodified" character (Hollows qtd. in Genz and Brabon 96). Advocating a more nuanced approach to postfeminism's relation to new traditionalism in which overlapping attitudes and contradictions with more progressive strands are possible, Genz and Brabon are careful to mark a rigid opposition between feminism on the one hand and the traditional figure of the housewife on the other (95-97). Nevertheless, new traditionalism mainly continues to be perceived as a conservative trend that is oftentimes incorporated, to varying degrees, within postfeminism.

Postfeminism remains largely comprehended as apolitical and conservative because of its ties to neoliberalism, popular culture and conservative gender politics such as new traditionalism; however, as suggested previously, this image must be nuanced. Genz and Brabon "propose that postfeminism can act in politically and theoretically challenging ways that do not result in the end of critical and political production" (63). In addition, they imply that postfeminism can be a "*political category*" (64), albeit in a different and less collective, activist and overtly political manner than feminism (73). In that way, Genz and Brabon acknowledge that politics operate differently within a postfeminist context, explaining that they "do not understand postfeminism as

an alternative to feminism and its political struggle, nor do [they] discuss it as a bounded philosophy and an organised political movement that gains its force through activist lobbying at grass-roots level" (67). Postfeminism can thus be intertwined with politics, although this political stance must be redefined to a postfeminist, and therefore more individualistic, context.

Regardless, it is important to the discussion of politics in relation to postfeminism to acknowledge that it is generally not perceived as a critical, political concept, but that it is not entirely detached from all kinds of politics, especially individualistic politics, either. The general consensus nevertheless characterises postfeminism as apolitical, as its connection to reactionary and popular frameworks cannot be dismissed. Ottessa Moshfegh similarly follows the understanding that recognises postfeminist culture as lacking political sincerity, which will be discussed in the third section of my thesis.

2.3.3 Sexuality, femininity, and postfeminist beauty culture

Postfeminism is characterised by a focus on female sexuality, femininity and beauty culture. The notion of empowerment, which holds a significant position within the postfeminist discourse, namely includes being empowered to express one's sexuality and femininity. The origin of this feminine and sexual empowerment is to be found in the sex wars of the 1980s and in the debate between power and victim feminism (Butler 38; Genz and Brabon 105, 110-11; Showden 170). As explained in section 2.2, the sex wars consisted of a debate between feminists who celebrated female sexuality and those who condemned it as being tied to patriarchal gender norms (Butler 38). The conflict in which certain feminists advocated a power feminism that implored empowered women to embrace their sexuality as a response to the second-wave "victims" is likewise an important influence for postfeminism's focus on sexuality and femininity (Genz and Brabon 105, 110-11). Sexuality was thus already foregrounded in the sex wars of the '80s as well as in power feminism.

Connected to the stance of power feminism is the notion of Girl Power, which emerged in the late '90s and early '00s, foregrounding female autonomy and the expression of female sexuality and femininity (Genz and Brabon 120). Similar to power feminism, Girl Power developed as a reaction against the common second-wave perspective which perceives femininity as "as a patriarchal marker of female powerlessness and oppression" (120). Not wanting to adopt the unattractive image of the stereotypical feminist, postfeminist Girlies began to embrace "elements of femininity and girlishness in fashion and style, […] discar[ting] the notions that feminism is

necessarily anti-feminine and anti-popular and that femininity is always sexist and oppressive. Instead, Girlies are convinced that feminist and feminine characteristics can be blended in a new, improved mix" (120). In that manner, the postfeminist Girlies redefined femininity as being a choice for women too, as opposed to adopting the unattractive look of the second-wavers.

In their adoption of femininity, Girlies likewise implemented the postfeminist beauty culture as a site of autonomy, as they desired to freely choose how to present their appearance without any judgement from the feminist movement (Lazar 38). Michelle M. Lazar indicates that "the beauty project is signified as an extension of women's right to freedom and liberation [and that] beauty practices are represented as offering women self-determined choices" within the postfeminist framework (Lazar 38). This postfeminist beauty culture, embedded in a neoliberal framework that centralises self-responsibility and self-transformation, heavily relies on what Jess Butler refers to as the postfeminist "makeover paradigm" (44). As result, makeovers, beauty culture, sexuality and femininity are no longer seen as tabooed topics within postfeminism, but might rather operate as sources of empowerment and liberation, as opposed to the second-wave perspective that shuns these expressions.

As exemplified by the sex *wars*, the topic of sexuality, and by extension femininity, has always been a highly contested subject within (post)feminist discourse. Nicola Rivers analyses that these discussions mainly question "the [postfeminist] promotion of agency and choice over analysis of social and structural inequalities" (83). Consequently, especially the disregard for the historical-political context in which female sexuality and femininity have developed is often deemed a problematic aspect of postfeminism. Carisa R. Showden similarly states that postfeminism

> thus disaggregate[s] cultural representations of women's bodies and choices from the political messages they have been tied to and the material effects that have resulted. This does not mean that one cannot engage in "sexy dressing" and be a feminist, but it does mean that a lack of attention to context and power is not the same as the resistant disruption of heteronormative feminine gender. (177-78)

Connected to this political negligence is the critique that accuses postfeminism of conforming to patriarchal imagery related to sexuality, femininity and beauty. In an analogous manner, Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon explain that "[a]lthough Girlies are resolute that they are free to

construct their own appearances and identities, critics are concerned that the range of their choices is suspiciously narrow as the Girlie look is similar to, if not synonymous with, patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty" (122). The lack of political awareness that marks postfeminism, in addition to its commercial and neoliberal agenda, might therefore result in an affirmation of oppressive beauty standards and female sexuality.

Postfeminism's inattention to politics, history and activism might as a result evoke internalised sexism, in which women adopt patriarchal norms. Shelly Budgeon suggests that postfeminism evokes a "self-objectification" on women's part, leaving them with the illusion that their empowered status and agency allows them to choose how they act and present themselves, while this image is in fact determined by a long patriarchal tradition (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 122). Rosalind Gill uses the term "sexual subjectification" to refer to the self-objectification that is present within postfeminism, in which women actively choose to sexualise themselves, whereafter she questions whether this is ultimately liberating or repressive ("Sexual Subjectification" 104-5). Genz and Brabon similarly point out this ambivalence, as they note that postfeminism might both "commoditise and objectify" women, as well as challenge these very same female standards by appropriating them and adapting their meaning (252). As a result, postfeminism could promote harmful and traditionally oppressive images of female sexuality and femininity. The contradictory and debate-heavy sentiment of postfeminism is therefore also to be found within the discussions surrounding sexuality, femininity and beauty culture.

3. Postfeminism in Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

3.1 Neoliberalism

The unnamed female narrator of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is navigating life in the rampant capitalist New York of the years 2000 to 2001 with the help of her patently unqualified psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle. The narrator should supposedly thrive within this postfeminist, neoliberal climate of the early 2000s: she is described as a privileged "WASP" (Moshfegh 11), is not in need of employment after she quits her job at an art gallery, and lives, using her wealthy, late parents' money, in an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. In short, she "wasn't worried about money" (3). Besides, the narrator is "tall and thin and blond and pretty and young" (27), perfectly meeting the postfeminist female beauty standards. Her best and only friend Reva feels "underprivileged" (13), compared to the narrator, and believes it to be "[n]o fair" (10) that her

wealthier friend has the freedom to embark on her sleeping project – her year of rest and relaxation. Although Reva surely possesses certain middle-class privileges, her friendship with the narrator is characterised by a continuous jealousy on Reva's part. Consequently, Moshfegh defines the position of both women, especially the status of the narrator, as privileged right from the beginning of the novel.

The elitist position of the narrator and, to a lesser extent, her friend Reva, is typical of postfeminist culture. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon argue that postfeminism is often criticised for foregrounding perspectives in which "the most 'free' and 'empowered' postfeminist subjects happen not only to be young, good-looking and affluent but also White and middle class" (72). Moshfegh challenges her narrator's elitism by portraying her as ironically hyperaware of her privilege: "I was born into privilege […] I am not going to squander that. I'm not a moron" (265). By adopting a satirical stance, Moshfegh questions her characters' privileged positions and exposes their elitist societal status as an intrinsic feature of postfeminism.

The meritocratic, neoliberal, Western society of the long 1990s that generates the characters' privileged status is closely connected to postfeminist culture. Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff point out how neoliberalism and postfeminism are related: they explain that both neoliberalism and postfeminism share a focus on individualism rather than a socio-political focal point and they indicate that neoliberalism and postfeminism concentrate on an autonomous subject and female self-transformation (7). As a result, Gill and Scharff propose that "neoliberalism *is always already gendered*" (7), noting that neoliberalism and postfeminism are closely related. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra add that postfeminism "commodif[ies] feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer" (2). Therefore, "consumer postfeminism" is "enabled by the consumption of a range of female-oriented products, giving a boost to, for instance, shoe/handbag fetishism and 'shopaholic' behaviour" (Genz and Brabon 9). To sum up, postfeminism is intertwined with neoliberalism, with the postfeminist consumer of goods and services marketed specifically to women as its emblematic figure.

In *My Year of Rest of Relaxation*, Moshfegh challenges the postfeminist, neoliberal and consumerist culture of the long 1990s as well its individualistic nature. Reva is the character who embodies neoliberal female consumer culture, as she has an "obsession with the material world" (Moshfegh 156). When the narrator enters Reva's apartment, she encounters a branded world of female consumption:

> Stacks and stacks of *Cosmo* and *Marie Claire* and *Us Weekly*. The only movement in the living room was the swirling screensaver on Reva's enormous Dell, which sat on a little side table in the corner and was mostly obscured by a drying rack weighed down with Ann Taylor sweater sets and Banana Republic dress shirts, matching bras and panties. A half dozen discolored white sports bras. Pairs and pairs of flesh-colored nylons. (248)

As indicated by her sleeping project to withdraw from the neoliberal world for a year, the narrator condemns Reva's consumerism: "She was a slave to vanity and status, which was not unusual in a place like Manhattan, but I found her desperation especially irritating. It made it hard for me to respect her intelligence. She was so obsessed with brand names, conformity, 'fitting in'" (9). The narrator then mentions that she "resented her on principle" (14), suggesting that she is opposed to Reva's "empowered" consumerist values.

Not only does the narrator denounce her friend's obsession with consumption, she likewise portrays a self-awareness that she formerly conformed to this postfeminist consumerism as well. She confesses that she used to go on shopping sprees and book various beauty appointments for the weekend. Moreover, she explains that "living uptown had infected [her] with its own virus when [she] first moved there. [She]'d tried being one of those blond women speed walking up and down the Esplanade in spandex, Bluetooth in [her] ear like some self-important asshole, talking to whom – Reva?" (Moshfegh 28). In other worlds, Moshfegh's protagonist clearly states her judgement towards this fast, consumerist lifestyle, referring to it as a "virus" (28). The narrator's decision to sleep for a year in order to be reborn afterwards thus functions as a rejection of the superficiality and meaninglessness of "a world that valued looks above all else" (35). In that manner, Moshfegh's narrator is pursuing a life isolated from the shallowness of female-oriented consumption and the modern neoliberal society in which she lives.

Although the narrator undermines the capitalist agenda of the West and its corresponding fast lifestyle, she nevertheless cannot escape functioning as a consumer herself in that very same world that she seeks to reject. For instance, during her train ride to Reva's mother's funeral, the narrator appears to exist in an impersonal, branded universe instead of mourning the loss of her best friend's mother. Capitalist society has made her devoid of emotions: "I felt nothing. I could *think* of feelings, emotions, but I couldn't bring them up in me" (Moshfegh 137). Moshfegh demonstrates

that consumer culture can lead to apathic, emotionless behaviour, as well as loneliness, as the narrator's only "friend" merely annoys her, even at the moment that Reva is confronted with her mother's death. On top of that, the narrator remains a consumer even in her sleep, unwillingly purchasing random stuff and booking beauty appointments when she is not awake. For that reason, Moshfegh denounces the pervasive influence of late capitalism that causes her narrator to feel numb and to lack the power to take matters into her own hands and entirely withdraw from consumerism by sleeping.

The narrator opposes postfeminist consumerism, embodied by Reva, but her hibernation that operates as a means to generate a new self is nonetheless based on individualistic objectives, which are characteristic of neoliberalism and postfeminism. As mentioned previously, Gill and Scharff have pointed out the connection between neoliberalism, postfeminism and individualism (7). The transformative project of *My Year*'s narrator illustrates the relation between the above interconnected frameworks and individualism. Moshfegh's narrator indicates that her "hibernation was self-preservational", and "beyond issues of 'identity' and 'society' and 'institutions.' [It] was a quest for a new spirit" (Moshfegh 7, 264). For that matter, the narrator's year of rest and relaxation is mainly based on an individualistic self-improvement, as opposed to provoking any collective or societal developments or advancements.

Moshfegh nevertheless shows how the narrator's individualistic attitude differs, in certain respects, from the capitalist individualism favoured by neoliberalism by mocking its emphasis on self-responsibility. Gill and Scharff note that women are expected "to self-manage [and] to self-discipline" in a postfeminist, neoliberal culture (7). Additionally, Angela McRobbie explains that, within this context, women must be responsible for maintaining their professional career (35). Opposite to this notion of self-responsibility regarding one's professional life, the narrator is entirely indifferent towards her job at a trendy art gallery and eventually gets fired because she is constantly napping during her working days. This allows her to devote herself to her year of rest and relaxation. The narrator's disinterest in a meaningful professional life reaches a climax – or rather an anti-climax – when she loses her job: "There was no sadness or nostalgia, only disgust that I'd wasted so much time on unnecessary labor when I could have been sleeping and feeling nothing. I'd been stupid to believe that employment would add value to my life" (Moshfegh 49). In this quotation, the narrator rejects any kind of professional responsibility, opposite to the premise of late capitalism. It must be acknowledged that the narrator's complete disregard for any responsibility towards her

professional life is derivative of a unequal system in which her privilege allows her to ignore her responsibilities. Moshfegh satirically mocks the postfeminist, neoliberal premise of an individualistic sense of self-responsibility by displaying her narrator's indifference towards her professional career, in addition to revealing that carrying out this rejection is exclusively possible within the confines of the upper social strata.

Furthermore, Moshfegh exposes how the narrator's indifference towards her job in the art gallery is connected to a hollow commercialism that dominates the art world. She describes the art world as being driven by a capitalist agenda:

> The art world had turned out to be like the stock market, a reflection of political trends and the persuasions of capitalism, fueled by greed and gossip and cocaine. I might as well have worked on Wall Street. Speculation and opinions drove not only the market but the products, sadly, the values of which were hinged not to the ineffable quality of art as a sacred human ritual – a value impossible to measure, anyway – but to what a bunch of rich assholes thought would "elevate" their portfolios and inspire jealousy and, delusional as they all were, respect. (182-83)

Instead of responding to a *l'art pour l'art* logic or providing a deeper socio-political meaning, the artworks produced mainly follow the market. In Ducat, the gallery where the narrator works, "[t]he art […] was supposed to be subversive, irreverent, shocking, but was all just canned counterculture crap" (36). Ping Xi, one of the artists whose works are exhibited at Ducat "titled the abstract paintings as though each had some deep, dark political meaning. *Blood-Dimmed Tide*, and *Wintertime in Ho Chi Minh City* and *Sunset over Sniper Alley*. *Decapitated Palestinian Child*. *Bombs Away, Nairobi*. It was all nonsense, but people loved it" (37-38). Part of why the narrator feels disconnected from her professional life is thus related to the fake subversiveness of the art world, which is supposed to be authentic and meaningful in its challenge to the societal status quo, but rather amplifies Western society's predilection for an empty consumerism.

In an attempt to reject the commercial world, the narrator undertakes her hibernation project, in which she asks the famous artist Ping Xi to help her with the final stages of her project, even though she does not respect his principles. Consequently, she commercialises her personal ambition to withdraw from the superficiality of capitalist New York by asking the commercially successful

Ping Xi to fulfil her basic needs and by allowing him to turn her performance into one of his art projects. Marlene Dirschauer likewise argues that, "ironically, her project now becomes 'productive' to someone else" (52). The narrator imagines the false subversiveness and the self-centred hypocrisy of the possible paintings that Ping Xi will make based on their project: "He could sell them for hundreds of thousands and say they were self-conscious critiques of the institutionalization of painting, maybe even about the objectification of women's bodies through art history" (Moshfegh 272). This statement becomes ironic when taking into account that the narrator obviously chooses to participate in this commercialisation of her project. After the project ends and the narrator awakens from her hibernation, Ping Xi transforms her performance into an actual series of paintings called "Large-Headed Pictures of a Beautiful Woman" (283), in which she is painted alongside brand logos, including the logos of Coca-Cola and Chanel. Ultimately, the narrator is not capable of fully escaping neoliberal society, since Ping Xi quite literally interweaves the narrator and brand culture in his paintings.

The narrator additionally stimulates Reva's obsession with materialism, as part of her project consists of discarding the majority of her possessions, whereupon she leaves all of her designer clothes, shoes and jewellery for Reva to choose from. The narrator's ironic self-awareness of her complicity in Reva's consumerism becomes apparent when she acknowledges that Reva's "greed would unburden [the narrator] of [her] own vanity" (Moshfegh 256). She understands that postfeminist consumerism, of which Reva is its greatest supporter, will only be reinforced by passing on her luxury purchases of which the majority still have their tags attached to them. Moshfegh thus challenges the inherently neoliberal postfeminist culture of the long 1990s, questioning the shallowness of consumption, as well as the almighty influence of female-oriented consumerism. In addition, she points out that even the narrator who detests this culture of female consumption and who attempts to break free from it, can ultimately not avoid it.

3.2 Popular culture and politics

An important aspect of postfeminism is its connection to popular consumer culture. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon explain that postfeminism is closely related to popular culture, and highlight its origin in the popular press of the '80s (43). According to Genz and Brabon, a common critique of postfeminism is based on its relation to popular culture and neoliberalism, in which it "is interpreted as an abatement and depoliticisation of the feminist movement whereby feminism's

entry into the popular is represented as a damaging attempt to manage and contain the revolutionary potential of the feminist enterprise" (44). Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra similarly argue that postfeminism has little political potential because of its connection to popular culture and its individualistic nature, although they note that postfeminism can be political in certain contexts, albeit often not explicitly (5). Subsequently, they distinguish "between feminist *politics* and a postfeminism *culture*" (Tasker and Negra 5), despite nuancing this rigid separation. Genz and Brabon, however, do not necessarily perceive postfeminism as apolitical, and even attempt to redefine postfeminism as a "*political category*" (64). Regardless, there is an overall understanding that postfeminism's relation to consumer and popular culture facilitates a depoliticisation of collective, feminist activism.

Because of this apolitical tendency, postfeminism is frequently associated with conservative gender politics. As an example, Genz and Brabon take into account that certain types of postfeminism or popularised feminism might be conservative (51). In one of the chapters of *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*, they discuss how postfeminism has been associated with conservative politics, in the sense that it is often rather simplistically perceived as "an anti-feminist and media-driven backlash characterised by a rejection of feminist goals and an attempt to turn the clock back to pre-feminist times" (87). These conservative, anti-feminist politics moreover return in the "new traditionalism" of the 1990s and early 2000s, a position in which women "choose" to return to the domestic sphere, which is perceived as a space where they can, similar to the professional sphere, explore their autonomy (Genz and Brabon 87-88, 93-94). Because of postfeminism's conservative reputation, it might therefore involve aspects put forward by the new traditionalist movement.

At first glance, this "back-to-the-home movement" (Faludi qtd. in Genz and Brabon 94) seems analogous to Moshfegh's narrator returning to the private realm of her New York apartment, in which she partly isolates herself for a year in order to escape neoliberal society. However, Moshfegh subverts the return to the domestic, as her protagonist does not transform into a perfect housewife romantically retreating into the home, as Genz and Brabon characterise new traditionalism (93-94). Indeed, she substitutes her job at the gallery for a life at home, but the novel challenges its romantic aspect, as well as the narrator's autonomy to create her isolated space on her own terms. When the final phase of the narrator's sleeping project begins, she asks the artist Ping Xi to lock her up in her apartment and maintain her space without leaving any traces of his presence.

The narrator is therefore not capable to independently finish her own project, or design it entirely according to her own conditions. This turns out perfectly for Ping Xi, since he attempts to create an image of the narrator in which she is expected to "be constantly … naive", a stereotypically female condition (Moshfegh 264). In that sense, the novel calls into question the postfeminist new traditionalist position in which women freely choose to retreat to and exist independently in the private sphere, as well as points out the complex patriarchal power balance in which Ping Xi both locks the narrator up and violently invades her privacy – an invasion in which the narrator, however, is *herself* complicit.

The narrator's connection to the private sphere becomes even more ambivalent when she reflects on her late mother's relation with the domestic. She states: "I could make a case for my mother's rejection of domesticity as some kind of feminist assertion of her right to leisure, but I actually think that she refused to cook and clean because she felt that doing so would cement her failure as a beauty queen" (Moshfegh 135). The narrator seems to mock the feminist proposition that a rejection of the domestic entails female liberation; however, what indicates her paradoxical position is that she, contradictorily, also condemns her mother's aspiration to be a typical postfeminist, empowered "beauty queen" (135), who does not reject her domestic "duties" in order to commit to a feminist objective. While criticising the postfeminist position of her mother, the narrator's complex blending of feminist and anti-feminist, progressive and reactionary attitudes, including the rejection of these perspectives, nonetheless also marks her postfeminist condition, in the sense that the postfeminist context of the early 2000s allows her to mix and match various contradictory values until there do not appear to be any real meaningful values left besides her desire to sleep.

Postfeminism is characterised by debate and contradictions. This means that postfeminist texts may contain both conservative and progressive aspects and political viewpoints (Genz and Brabon 34), similar to Moshfegh's contradictory portrayal of domesticity. Nevertheless, various critics, including Tasker and Negra, seem to have reached a consensus, stating that postfeminism is largely apolitical because of its ties with popular and consumer culture (Genz and Brabon 44; Tasker and Negra 5), even though some critics, like Genz and Brabon, opt for a more nuanced, reformulated understanding of postfeminist politics (64). All in all, because of its affiliation with popular culture, based on fast consumption, postfeminism is generally perceived as and criticised for its lack of historical-political reflections.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Moshfegh challenges postfeminist culture's focus on popular culture to the detriment of politics. As Moshfegh's novel shows, popular culture dominates the early 2000s: the novel consistently references pop culture, especially the vast amount of Hollywood movies that the narrator mindlessly consumes during her hibernation. In the course of her sleeping project, the narrator continuously watches one movie after the other at the times that she is resting, but not actually sleeping. The almost hypnotic enumeration of movies continues throughout the novel until her videocassette recorder breaks down. When she has to replace her movie marathons with TV series, she is even more exposed to consumer culture, as she is left with a stream of commercials on her television:

> A commercial for cat food. A commercial for home saunas. A commercial for low-fat butter. Fabric softener. Potato chips in individually portioned packages. Chocolate yogurt. Go to Greece, the birthplace of civilization. Drinks that give you energy. Face cream that makes you younger. Fish for your kitties. Coca-Cola means "I love you." Sleep in the most comfortable bed in the world. Ice cream is not just for children, ladies: your husbands like it, too! If your house smells like shit, light this candle that smells like freshly baked brownies. (Moshfegh 197)

Similar to the narrator's movie marathon, she never reflects on the series or commercials that she consumes. In that manner, Moshfegh mimics the numbness that results from consumerist and popular culture.

The narrator nonetheless possesses a certain – albeit ironic – understanding that the mere consumption of movies or television for the sake of one's entertainment is rather superficial. When a news story reporting on employment insecurities among Hollywood screenwriters and executives sneaks into her cocoon anyway, the narrator does not seem to mind that "viewers could be left watching virtually nothing with a script" (Moshfegh 243), suggesting that she might have been watching nothing substantial or purposeful all along. She likewise condemns Reva's preoccupation with popular culture:

> I preferred my VHS tapes, but Reva always wanted to see whatever movie was "new" and "hot" and "supposed to be good." She took it as a source of pride that she had a superior

> knowledge of pop culture during this period. She knew all the latest celebrity gossip, followed the newest fashion trends. I didn't give a shit about that stuff. Reva, however, studied *Cosmo* and watched *Sex and the City*. She was competitive about beauty and "life wisdom." (13)

Ironically, while stating that she, unlike Reva, does not care about the latest postfeminist trends in pop culture, she watches similar movies and TV shows to the ones she condemns. It is not very surprising that Moshfegh's narrator constantly watches television during her hibernation: popular culture is namely a perfect manner for the narrator to become even more numb and secluded. Moshfegh thus demonstrates what the possible, numbing effect of an overload of meaningless popular consumer culture could be: an apathic, alienated, and isolated narrator who does not know how to navigate life.

Whilst *My Year of Rest of Relaxation* foregrounds popular culture, politics only appear in the background of the story, mirroring the absence of meaningful politics within postfeminist culture. Marlene Dirschauer similarly argues that Moshfegh's novel portrays a modernity characterised by alienation, causing a complete lack of political immersion on the narrator's part (43-45, 50). Indeed, the narrator wants to avoid politics and the news, she wants to read nothing more than the headlines of newspapers and attempts to refrain from news that might cause her to think critically about anything. Sporadically, news snippets seep into the narrator's isolated life through the television or the newspapers that she sees lying around in the bodega, but more often than not, the narrator turns the TV off, switches the channel or looks away when she sees a newspaper at her local bodega. As a result, Moshfegh ironises her narrator's lack of political or historical engagement.

Whenever these news fragments do flash by, they appear in the form of enumerations of news events without any contextualisation or critical reflection, as in the following passage:

> The only news I could read were the sensational headlines on the local daily papers at the bodega. I'd quickly glance at them as I paid for my coffees. Bush versus Gore for president. Somebody important died, a child was kidnapped, a senator stole money, a famous athlete cheated on his pregnant wife. Things were happening in New York City – they always are – but none of it affected me. This was the beauty of sleep – reality detached itself and appeared

> in my mind as casually as a movie or a dream. It was easy to ignore things that didn't concern me. Subway workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. It didn't matter. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn't have worried. (Moshfegh 3-4)

Similar to the movies and TV series, the narrator mindlessly consumes the news and she likewise does not meaningfully interact with it. Interestingly, she compares reality to movies in the previous quotation: everything has become popular culture to be consumed, instead of real life with actual, significant events. The novel thus does not foreground historical-political events, as the narrator attempts to exclude these from her isolation as much as possible. However, Moshfegh yet again portrays an ironic self-awareness on her narrator's part, as she writes that "[i]t was easy to ignore things that didn't concern [her]" (4). Moshfegh acknowledges that postfeminist, apolitical attitudes are connected to privilege, and that her protagonist's apathy is only desirable in a specific situation that reinforces the status quo of the elite. She thus portrays the absence of any deeper reflection on societal issues on her narrator's part as a consequence of postfeminism's apolitical tendency that automatically affirms, instead of questions, her privileged position.

As the narrator's project advances, she becomes increasingly disconnected from the world. This indifferent behaviour is supported by her grotesquely odd psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle, who gives her the advice of thinking as little as possible in addition to prescribing her a dangerous amount of sleep medication. At one point, the narrator does comment on feminist politics, albeit indirectly through a recollection of a humiliating event at university. The passage describes how the narrator is analysed in the context of "feminist performance art as a political deconstruction of the art world as a commercial industry" when she arrives late at her course on Feminist Theory and Art after breaking the heel of her stiletto (Moshfegh 189). In this passage, the narrator is described as a "Barbie" (189), a symbol of postfeminist culture. The class strongly condemns the narrator's affiliations with consumer culture, as implied by their comments about the price of her stilettos. They moreover suggest that feminism and neoliberal, feminine ideals are incompatible: one of the students namely points out that the narrator was "broken by the male gaze" (189). Moshfegh therefore criticises a dogmatic type of feminist activism and the overly moralistic feminist practices within academia. Within this context, feminism almost seems to evoke alienation just as much as postfeminist, neoliberal culture does. Nevertheless, the satirical layer that characterises the novel

also opens up a contradictory reading in which the narrator is in fact exposed as a victim of the male gaze as stated by one of her fellow students: she is, for instance, subordinated and sexualised by various men and likewise has internalised this sexist perspective, which will be elaborated on in section 3.4. Moshfegh once again critically appropriates the postfeminism of the long '90s, in that her novel allows for contradictory readings and sentiments towards feminism as well as postfeminism itself: postfeminism might lack a political attitude, but an overly dogmatic political stance is not recommended either.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* ends with a major historical and politically significant moment: in the final chapter of the novel, the narrator repeatedly watches VCR recordings of 9/11 and believes to see someone who looks like Reva jump out of the North Tower. Jonathan Greenberg explains that in this final chapter, politics and history are eventually foregrounded, contrary to the rest of the novel (200). While this might seem to be an historical-political awakening on the narrator's part, as opposed to her previous thoughtless engagement with postfeminist consumer culture, Moshfegh implies that no real transformation has taken place. Dirschauer similarly does not perceive Moshfegh's protagonist's experience of 9/11 as being fundamentally different from the movies that she watched during her year-long hibernation:

> The narrator continues to watch the news recording just as she before watched Hollywood movies on endless repeat. That the event is made into a comforting spectacle that can be consumed like animal crackers, designer jeans, or Hollywood movies to fit the narrator's individual needs is strangely at odds with the alleged awe that the horrible spectacle of 9/11 seemed to have triggered in the narrator. Once it has become part of the loop of mass-mediated consumerism, even 9/11 ultimately has a numbing, anesthetizing effect. (60)

In other words, she argues that consumerism persists, and that a critical awareness of society is still not acquired at the end of the novel. Despite Moshfegh's foregrounding of 9/11 at the end of the novel, the narrator nevertheless does not provide any meaningful reaction to the event or the politics of the time, implying that popular culture has impaired her character's ability to absorb the political landscape and has even prevented her from forming a purposive opinion on one of the most formative events of the previous decades.

Moshfegh moreover comments on the depoliticisation of Western culture on a broader scale. In her analysis of the novel, Ariel Saramandi remarks that Moshfegh uses the context of the early 2000s to comment on a trend that has since continued in our current societal climate, in which meaningful politics are being increasingly reduced to Trump-like populism ("Sleeping Through the '90s"). Saramandi contextualises *My Year*'s tension between politics and its apolitical themes within its historical framework: she explains that the late 1990s and early 2000s were paradoxically characterised by a reflection on the importance of history, in the sense that this this time period heavily contemplated "its ahistoricity, [and its] absence of political consciousness particularly evident in popular culture" (Saramandi, "Sleeping Through the '90s"). In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Moshfegh explores this complex tension between politics and popular consumer culture within early-twenty-first-century postfeminist society, eventually concluding that popular culture prevails over politics. Additionally, she argues that, within the postfeminist period of the long 1990s, a pop cultural attitude is adopted towards politics, resulting in a lack of political sincerity.

3.3 Activity and passivity

In a similar manner that the narrator passively engages with politics, the news and the outside world, her sleeping project exemplifies how she challenges the active, postfeminist consumer. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra refer to "the active or action heroine [as] an emblematic and problematic icon of female empowerment within postfeminist culture" (20). They describe the characteristics of the postfeminist active heroine as follows: "[T]he self as a project; kick-ass, working-out women as expressions of agency; or freedom as the freedom to shop or have cosmetic surgery" (21). In addition, it is important to note that Tasker and Negra highlight their position as feminist critics, and are consequently sceptical towards the postfeminist heroine and the foregrounding of popular culture within postfeminism (21). Regardless, postfeminism remains associated with active consumption and the female shopaholic.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Moshfegh criticises the active, postfeminist heroine. As mentioned previously, Reva is the embodiment of the postfeminist consumer: she aspires to be the active heroine shopping her way through society as envisioned by postfeminism. Reva, a typical "gym rat" (Moshfegh 7), likewise tries to pursue agency and freedom through working out. Her mantra, "You can do anything you put your mind to" (58), distinguishes her as a postfeminist "can-do girl" of whom it is expected "to take charge of her life, seize chances, and achieve her goals"

(Harris qtd. in Projansky 48). Moshfegh, however, exposes that Reva cannot be the active postfeminist heroine or the can-do girl, as she is not wealthy enough to purchase the designer clothes that she desperately desires, and as her workouts have not led to any self-progress or provided her with empowerment since she retains a problematic body image. For this reason, Reva does not have any agency regarding her appearance and merely follows societal trends of beauty and fashion without much reflection.

Although, theoretically, the narrator has all the resources to embody the postfeminist, active heroine – she is wealthy and meets the female beauty standards of the early 2000s, contrary to Reva – she cannot find any agency in the consumerist world either. Ariel Saramandi argues that the narrator paradoxically finds agency, not in capitalist consumerism, but in her sleeping project: "Divorced from historical or present context, sick of the world, she decides to actively remove herself from it by sleeping. Crucially, I believe, she sleeps because she feels she has no agency, no power to cause any kind of change, since everything is determined by the market" ("Sleeping Through the '90s"). In other words, Moshfegh's narrator wants to withdraw from the consumerist, meaningless world, where the active, postfeminist heroine thrives, by sleeping for a year in order to find a sense of autonomy and self-determination. The narrator is convinced that she has a well thought-out plan, with her medication properly regulated, and describes her hibernation project in terms of agency: "Oh, sleep. Nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness" (Moshfegh 46). She thus embraces the passivity of sleep as her new-found freedom. Interestingly, the narrator nonetheless perceives her hibernation as "productive" (51), suggesting that passivity might be productive as well, as opposed to a late capitalist opinion on the matter. She feels that she is paradoxically taking matters into her own hands by sleeping.

Reva, however, adopts a postfeminist perspective when she points out that she perceives the narrator's hibernation as a passive preoccupation, and challenges this position: "Your problem is that you're passive. You wait around for things to change, and they never will. That must be a painful way to live. Very disempowering" (Moshfegh 77). Readers might not be inclined to believe the postfeminist character of Reva to possess any critical insights, but must eventually agree that the narrator's passivity indeed does not result in any real changes or transformations, on which I will elaborate in section 3.5. Even though *My Year* questions postfeminist, active consumerism's capacity to provide agency to the female characters, the novel likewise questions whether real

agency can be found in the narrator's passive sleeping project, as her ability to independently choose and act towards her goal of self-improvement, free from capitalist influences, is contested throughout the novel.

Moshfegh's questioning of the narrator's passive agency becomes apparent when, even in her sleep, the narrator is unable to escape consumer culture and to function autonomously within that culture, as she continuously orders lingerie and other clothes, and makes various online beauty appointments and restaurant reservations that she does not need or want during her hibernation. Though the narrator is trying to discard this consumerist lifestyle based on purchasing products and services marketed to women, she seems to have internalised postfeminist consumer culture within her unconscious sleep state, ordering her to consume more although she attempts to resist it. She describes this consumerist sleepwalking as a "resistance to [her] project" (Moshfegh 87), indicating that postfeminist, neoliberal culture continues to violently infiltrate her unconscious private space. Also Marlene Dischauer explains that "the allures of capitalism come to further penetrate her unconscious, resulting in a consumerism for consumerism's sake, whereby she does not even use the things she buys" (52). The narrator is therefore not really autonomously functioning in her so-called "chosen" passivity, as the novel suggests that there is little agency left when the narrator chooses to passively spend her days sleeping but continues to purchase random items and services that reinforce female beauty standards against her will. Besides, the narrator cannot prevent referring to her sleep in capitalist terms: "Sleep felt *productive*" (Moshfegh 51; emphasis added). Morgan Robinson notes that the very plan to take a lot of sleep medication in itself exposes how the narrator is in fact not entirely passively free from the onset (9). In order to accomplish her project of sleeping, the narrator has to actively participate in the lucrative pharmaceutical business. In short, consumer culture shapes her life, even in her sleep.

In her rejection of active consumerism, the narrator perceives the opposite passive sleep as providing her with the agency to break free from the capitalist status quo; however, the novel proposes that individual, and especially female agency is in fact limited in a neoliberal, postfeminist society. This is, ironically, already suggested by Reva, who proposes that women have limited freedom of choice when giving her friend some pop culture-inspired advice: "Oprah says we women rush into decisions because we don't have faith that something better will ever come along. And that's how we get stuck in dissatisfying careers and marriages. *Amen!*" (Moshfegh 55). According to Reva, women must be empowered to make their own choices, regardless of what limited

opportunities society provides them with. It is somewhat tragic, then, that Reva is unable to follow her own advice, in that her life is not governed by her personal agency, but rather by a patriarchal, market-driven logic which is typical of postfeminist culture. Moshfegh therefore both challenges Reva's alleged active, consumerist agency and the narrator's passive agency within the postfeminist early 2000s, perceiving them as impossibilities in an inherently gendered neoliberal world.

3.4 Sexuality, femininity and postfeminist beauty standards

My Year of Rest and Relaxation furthermore calls postfeminist agency into question by contesting female autonomy and agency with regards to the characters' romantic relationships and experiences of sexuality and femininity. In the novel, Moshfegh exposes how postfeminist celebrations of female sexuality and femininity are often tied to internalised sexism, misogynistic behavioural patterns and self-objectification. Sexuality in particular has been a much contested topic in feminist and postfeminist discourses, and comes especially to the fore in the sex wars and in the tension between victim feminism and power feminism, with power feminism being closely connected to the empowerment that postfeminism advocates. This debate surrounding sexuality within feminism dates back to the mid-1980s' sex wars. During this conflict, certain feminists celebrated women embracing their sexuality while others strongly condemned this sexualisation (Butler 38). The debate surrounding the sex wars moreover influenced the opposition between victim feminism and power feminism, in which power feminism perceives the second-wave feminists' "victim status […] as disempowering and outdated" (Genz and Brabon 105). According to power feminists, the second wave promotes an image of women as "sexually pure" and in which they are characterised by a "powerlessness" (Wolf qtd. in Genz and Brabon 110). In that sense, female sexuality is seen as something that needs to be repressed (Genz and Brabon 113). Power feminism, on the other hand, foregrounds individual autonomy and women's right to express their sexuality, similar to postfeminism (111). In that respect, postfeminism's discourse, which encompasses a sex-positive stance that embraces female sexuality, is heavily influenced by the sex-wars in the 1980s and by the notion of power feminism.

The notion of Girl Power is, consequently, an important aspect of postfeminist culture. Girl Power is "a popular feminist stance (common among girls and young women during the mid-late 1990s and early 2000s) that combines female independence and individualism with a confident

display of femininity/sexuality" (Genz and Brabon 120). Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon describe Girl Power as follows:

> Reclaiming elements of femininity and girlishness in fashion and style, Girl Power discards the notions that feminism is necessarily anti-feminine and anti-popular and that femininity is always sexist and oppressive. Instead, Girlies are convinced that feminist and feminine characteristics can be blended in a new, improved mix. (120)

In other words, postfeminism's Girl Power foregrounds femininity and is strongly connected to popular consumer culture, especially the consumption of products and goods marketed to women (121). In that manner, women can consume their way towards empowerment and embrace their purchased feminine and sexual selves (121). Similarly, in a postfeminist context, beauty culture is perceived as providing women with agency and empowerment (Lazar 38). As a result, Girl Power "encompasses a reconsideration of a multitude of practices and forms – including previously tabooed symbols of feminine enculturation (Barbie dolls, make-up, fashion magazines) as well as body remodelling exercises such as cosmetic surgery" (Genz and Brabon 121-22). The postfeminist Girl Power perspective therefore evokes a celebration of sexuality, femininity and beauty culture, as opposed to recognising these as symbols of the repression of feminist values and female agency.

The postfeminist viewpoint of Girl Power is not necessarily liberating for all women. Subsequently, not every critic perceives Girl Power as an empowering expansion of how feminism could be understood. Yvonne Takser and Diane Negra, as well as Angela McRobbie are respectively sceptical about the commercialisation of beauty culture and sexuality, and consequently question postfeminism's ability to be subversive and offer women real agency (3; 34). Genz and Brabon indicate that feminist critics generally argue that the notion of Girl Power limits women's choices, as this sense of empowerment is often tied to "patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty" (122). As follows, Girl Power only offers one image of female empowerment, namely one centring on sexuality and femininity, which has been traditionally associated with the male gaze. According to Rosalind Gill this results in a "*re-sexualisation* and *re-commodification*" in which women are not portrayed "as passive objects but as knowing, active and desiring sexual subjects" ("Sexual Subjectification" 104). Gill identifies this trend as a "sexual subjectification" and critically remarks that it still encourages female objectification and might not be as liberating as it is oftentimes

depicted ("Sexual Subjectification" 104-5). Shelley Budgeon likewise notes how, in this manner, postfeminism might evoke a "self-objectification" on women's part (qtd. in Genz and Brabon 122). Postfeminism thus also facilitates internalised sexism, self-objectification and self-sexualisation for certain women.

Even though postfeminism's celebration of female sexuality and femininity might be liberating for some women, it likewise denotes a reinforcement of the patriarchal status quo. Several scholars have highlighted this discrepancy in which postfeminism might be both oppressive and liberating. Genz and Brabon, for instance, state that postfeminist sexual politics, in particular, reveal the contradiction in which sexualisation can be recognised as both a commercialisation and an objectification and as a liberation for women to express themselves as they please (252). Carisa R. Showden is more critical about this liberating understanding, indicating that the patriarchal context in which these sexual and feminine images of women have emerged must not be ignored (177-78). Similar to Showden's argument that postfeminism's advocacy for female empowerment regarding women's sexuality and femininity does not exclusively – or even barely – result in liberation and independence, Moshfegh's postfeminist world ironically exposes its superficiality and demonstrates how *My Year*'s narrator and Reva are in fact disempowered by societal gender norms regarding beauty and relationships.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Moshfegh uncovers that postfeminist celebrations of sexuality and femininity are generally tied to internalised sexist and misogynistic patterns as well as self-objectification. Already at the beginning of the novel, its narrator states that she is not "sexually active" and would "rather be alone than anybody's live-in prostitute" (Moshfegh 23, 28), thus rejecting postfeminism's female sexualisation. Reva similarly does not usually discuss the sexual affair that she has with her boss with the narrator. Contrary to postfeminism's focus on sexuality, they do not seem to comply to this image of women embracing their sexual side, as they rather attempt to avoid or conceal it.

However, they allegedly choose to engage in heteronormative, sexual relationships, and when they do so, these are depicted as problematic and based on harmful, patriarchal norms. For instance, the narrator's on-again, off-again relationship with Trevor mainly proceeds according to his wishes, as it is brought up that "Trevor would periodically deplete his self-esteem in relationships with older women, i.e., women his age, then return to me to reboot. I was always available" (Moshfegh 30-31). From time to time, the narrator desperately attempts to get Trevor back when he

is not interested in her anymore, although he clearly emotionally and sexually abuses her by discarding her and returning to her whenever it suits him. When Trevor emotionally abuses the narrator, for example by saying that she is "frigid", Moshfegh's narrator merely accepts this problematic behaviour, stating that it "was fine with [her]" (204). Trevor undoubtedly abuses his position within their relationship, but the narrator likewise allows him to continue his behaviour.

The narrator nonetheless gives the impression that she understands and recognises Trevor's sexist and misogynistic behavioural patterns. When she describes Trevor "as though he were some divine messenger, my soul mate, my savior, whatever" (Moshfegh 31), the cynical stance that is adopted, for instance by downplaying her overly optimistic portrayal of Trevor with her expression of "whatever", suggests that the narrator is somewhat subconsciously aware that Trevor is displaying harmful behaviour towards her. Nevertheless, she refuses to reflect on or act upon this subconscious knowledge. Interestingly, she also comments on Trevor's distinctly sexist behaviour and even favours it over the more subtle sexism of these so-called intellectual hipsters: "But at least Trevor had the sincere arrogance to back up his bravado. He didn't cower in the face of his own ambition, like those hipsters. And he knew how to manipulate me – I had to respect him for that at least, however much I hated him for it" (34). It is ironic, then, that the narrator condemns the covert sexism of these hipsters, since she herself has adopted these subtle sexist behavioural patterns by continuously returning to Trevor.

Another example in which the narrator believes to function independently and to be in possession of her own life when she is actually portraying this internalised sexism is when one of her late father's colleagues sexually harasses her. Ariel Saramandi explains that the narrator is a

> victim of a culture that bombards her with the message that she is in control, as long as she buys the necessary products, looks a certain way. In one of the most poignant moments of the novel, she doesn't realise that this agency is a false god: when the narrator is molested by one of her father's colleagues, she believes she was "letting [him] kiss me" and is confused as to why, since after all, as the epitome of desire, she must be responsible. ("Sleeping Through the '90s")

Moshfegh shows that the postfeminist culture in which the narrator lives offers her the illusion that she possesses agency and is an empowered, independent subject, while, in reality, she is not and

rather has adopted patriarchal gender patterns. As a result, Moshfegh illustrates how internalised sexism and misogyny operate.

Not only the narrator has adopted patriarchal though patterns, but Reva functions according to patriarchal norms within her affair with her boss Ken as well. When Reva confronts Ken with his controlling behaviour and with his unfair treatment after finding out that she is pregnant with his child, he ends the affair, similar to Trevor, being totally indifferent to her emotional and physical state. After everything that happened, Reva nonetheless ends up wondering if Ken still loves her. It is likewise interesting to note the reference to Barbie's Ken, suggesting that Reva's embodiment of postfeminism, as a symbolic Barbie, does not empower her with regards to her sexuality or her relationship. Instead, the postfeminist context in which her affair is situated seems to generate Reva's engagement in an unequal relationship.

Regardless, the characters appear to have the freedom to choose to engage in these relationships, but as they continue to participate in them, even when they are aware that their respective partners are not treating them in the right manner, Moshfegh shows how this supposed postfeminist agency is in fact a form of internalised sexism. The most significant passage that illustrates this type of sexism discusses how the narrator, while being in her drugged state of sleepwalking, sends explicit pictures of herself to strangers on the internet, thus demonstrating how this patriarchal sexualisation has infiltrated her subconscious.

The beauty culture of the late '90s and the early '00s is another field that Moshfegh explores as a site of internalised patriarchal and sexist norms. In the novel, Moshfegh criticises the postfeminist female beauty standards and the beauty industry that are determined by the late-capitalist Western society of the long 1990s. As previously mentioned, Reva's embodiment of this culture is the most recognisable example of postfeminist beauty culture's problematic nature. In the following fragment, for instance, the narrator describes her friend's bathroom as a peculiar postfeminist paradise:

> The bathroom looked like it belonged to a pair of adolescent twins preparing for a beauty pageant. I could smell the mildew and the puke and Lysol. A pink expanded toolbox burst with brushes and applicators of all shapes and sizes, drugstore makeup, nail polish, stolen testers, a dozen shades of Maybelline lip gloss. On the shelf, there were two hair dryers, a curling iron, a flat iron, a bowl of bejeweled barrettes and plastic headbands. Cutouts from

> fashion magazines were taped to the edges of the mirror over the low vanity and sink: Claudia Schiffer's Guess Jeans ad. Kate Moss in her Calvins. Runway stick figures. Linda Evangelista. Kate Moss. Kate Moss. Kate Moss. (Moshfegh 250-51)

This excerpt already indicates that there is a darker truth to be found within the so-called empowering beauty and popular culture of the early 2000s: makeup, fashion and beauty are associated with "mildew and puke" (250). In this manner, Moshfegh questions capitalism's optimistic attitude to be found within the commercial beauty culture that encourages women to improve the self – or rather, consume to improve the self – towards happiness.

In addition, the fragment indicates what the consequences of a culture that is preoccupied with unattainable beauty standards might be: Reva struggles with an eating disorder and likewise has an unhealthy fixation on thin bodies. Especially the narrator's body is a continuous source of jealousy. Also the narrator describes their relationship in competitive terms, believing Reva "must have felt that I [the narrator] was cheating in the game of skinniness, which she had always worked so hard to play" (Moshfegh 56). As a result, postfeminist beauty culture seems to rule out any female solidarity. Throughout *My Year*, Reva constantly mentions that she is on a diet, is working out and attempting to lose weight, Kate Moss being her beloved idol and role model. She cannot even resist thinking about bodily standards when talking about her late mother's thin body during the end of her life, describing her as "[s]kinnier than Kate Moss" (162). In this manner, Moshfegh shows that the postfeminist mantra to "work on the self" is easily taken to an unhealthy extreme and often resists a more critical analysis of how it might impact women's mental and physical health, as demonstrated by Reva's situation.

Reva's typical postfeminist perspective concerning beauty culture is particularly foregrounded and criticised when, while watching a movie, she wonders whether Julie Delpy is a feminist, whereupon she notes that she probably is a feminist based on her body, which is not skinny enough. Reva, on the other hand, does attempt to present herself as feminine and cares about the size of her body and appearance, as she has adopted the postfeminist stance. Here, postfeminism is characterised as being as superficial as linking a person's political and social beliefs to the size of their body, in addition to presenting itself as an update to the unattractive feminist appearance.

The narrator of the novel rejects popular beauty culture when she begins her hibernation, since she "stopped tweezing, stopped bleaching, stopped waxing, stopped brushing [her] hair. No

moisturizing or exfoliating. No shaving" (Moshfegh 2). With her "eye boogers and scum at the corners of [her] mouth" (5), she is definitely not a postfeminist role model embracing her feminine beauty. However, as mentioned before, she has internalised postfeminist culture, with its misogynistic tendencies, and therefore "some superficial part of [her] was taking aim at a life of beauty and sex appeal" (86) during her hibernation, resulting in her making wax or spa appointments and an awakening of her sexual impulses while she is asleep. This internalisation moreover surfaces when Trevor comments on the narrator's appearance, whereupon she just accepts his remarks:

> "Blondes are distracting. Think of your beauty as an Achilles' heel. You're too much on the surface. I don't say that offensively. But it's the truth. It's hard to look past what you look like." […] Trevor was right about my Achilles' heel. Being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else. (35)

Ironically, Trevor, a horribly sexist and misogynistic character, is speaking the truth here about neoliberal and postfeminist values regarding beauty culture. The narrator herself even sexualises her friend Reva, showing how she is in fact a victim of a society that prioritises sexuality when, at a certain point, she describes Reva as "troublingly pornographic" when mentioning her friend's appearance (280). On a surface level, the female sexualisation and objectification, as well as the toxic relationships in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are portrayed as being of the characters' own choices and as showcasing their postfeminist agency. However, Moshfegh approaches this ironically and exposes the female characters' internalisation of sexist and misogynistic ideas within the postfeminist culture that they live in.

3.5 The postfeminist makeover paradigm

Beauty culture exemplifies that postfeminism expects women to go through a transformation in order to improve the female self. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon explain that "self-goals like 'confidence', 'independence' and 'empowerment', linked to consumerist and neoliberal imperatives", must be achieved through this self-transformation (18). Jess Butler calls this transformation the "makeover paradigm" of postfeminism (44). Surely, capitalist popular and beauty culture capitalise on the postfeminist makeover paradigm, of which Reva's obsessive and damaging relationship with "self-help books and workshops that usually combined some new

dieting technique with professional development and romantic relationship skills, under the guise of teaching young women 'how to live up to their full potential'" is a clear example (Moshfegh 15). Once again, Reva is the character that symbolises the failure and superficiality of the postfeminist makeover paradigm.

The narrator, on the other hand, attempts to reject this postfeminist and consumerist makeover by proposing her own transformational paradigm. *My Year*'s narrator namely wants a personal transformation by sleeping, and, consequently, by not participating in the consumerist world, part of which consists of discarding a large part of her material possessions, as examined in section 3.1 about neoliberalism. More specifically, the narrator tries to transform herself by embarking on her hibernation project – a renewed type of makeover – with the help of Dr. Tuttle's prescriptions of sleep medication, because capitalist society provokes her anxiety, which she wants to resist. Dr. Tuttle agrees that the capitalist world goes too fast and often generates anxiety and depression: "The modern age has forced us to live unnatural lives. Busy, busy, busy. Go, go, go" (Moshfegh 22). Therefore, the narrator is in need of a personal makeover that will allow her to break free from the fast, consumerist world and to seek meaning within that trivial society.

The narrator feels enthusiastic that her retrieval from this stressful world will result in her being a better, reborn person, mimicking neoliberalism's capitalist optimism. Instead of an optimism concerning the capitalist notion of consuming towards prosperity and progression, the narrator is optimistic about her stagnant hibernation. When she shares her optimism, she notes: "It was an exciting time in my life. I felt hopeful. I felt I was on my way to a great transformation" (Moshfegh 54). Moshfegh nonetheless does not explicitly conclude whether her narrator's sleeping project has had a positive transformative effect in the end: whether she ultimately liberates herself of her anxiety and vanity caused by the postfeminist early-twenty-first-century society remains ambiguous. Similar to capitalist optimism, Moshfegh's narrator's optimistic attitude towards her transformation might just as well be an illusion.

Reva already called into question whether the narrator's sleeping project will actually have a significant outcome: "'Sleeping all the time isn't really going to make you feel any better,' she said. 'Because you're not changing anything in your sleep. You're just avoiding your problems'" (Moshfegh 58). Ironically, despite her postfeminist position that Moshfegh continuously mocks throughout the novel, Reva appears to be right about the narrator's hibernation, even though she does not provide a solution to cure her friend's apathic state either. For a brief moment at the end of

the novel, the narrator has seemingly awakened, successfully completing her transformative year of rest and relaxation, as implied by references indicating that she is “like a newborn animal” (278) and that her “sleep had worked” (288). However, it is rather difficult for the reader to perceive what has changed in the narrator’s mind or behaviour. Arin Keeble correspondingly questions whether the narrator actually accomplishes this life-changing makeover, noting that “while she earnestly evokes the possibility of her own awakening, this occurs on the novel’s final page and is so cursory it has the effect of returning emphasis to the preceding pages of ‘American sleep’” (9). The narrator’s transformation is merely briefly referred to, but Moshfegh’s decision to not show *how* her character has progressed implies that her transformative journey has failed to succeed.

Furthermore, as mentioned in section 3.2 on popular culture and politics, the ending of the novel’s focus on 9/11, a significant political-historical event, at first glance suggests that the narrator has indeed undergone a successful makeover, allowing her to engage with a rich political life and reinstalling her interest in societal meaning beyond the space of her Manhattan apartment; still, the narrator’s engagement with 9/11 proves otherwise. Marlene Dirschauer argues that the final chapter nevertheless cannot resist framing 9/11 within consumerist terms, as she points out the similarities between the narrator watching Hollywood movies throughout the novel and rewatching her recording of 9/11 over and over again as if it were one of the movies (60). The narrator’s project of self-improvement and self-transformation to become more consciously part of the world surrounding her is never actually realised, since she continues to consume society without any meaningful reflection. For this reason, Dirschauer argues that Moshfegh’s protagonist never succeeds in truly transforming herself, or in eliciting her own awakening that would make her reconsider the outside world in a more meaningful light instead of thoughtlessly drifting along with the autocratic rule of capitalism (60). Moshfegh’s narrator is therefore still stuck in her apathic “American sleep” (Moshfegh 252), indicating that she is unable to escape postfeminist culture, based on popular, female consumerism, or to find meaning in that world. In that sense, Moshfegh challenges the postfeminist makeover paradigm, including its association with progress and self-improvement.

Not only does Moshfegh criticise the postfeminist self-transformation and the related notion of capitalist optimism, which are prominent in neoliberal thought, on the personal scale of the narrator, the novel likewise questions the postfeminist makeover paradigm on a broader historical scale. Ariel Saramandi describes *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as “a double novel”, arguing that

Moshfegh connects her critique of the late capitalism of the long '90s to the current day affairs of the 2016 to 2018 period:

> Disturbing as it is, the final page of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* mocks the idea, touted at the time and still upheld by some, that the '90s in all its frivolity imploded the day of the attack. The ending suggests that the attacks were just a violent continuation of our spectacle-obsessed culture. The rest of the book makes clear that this culture continues into today. We recognize these late-'90s capitalist evils as our own. ("Sleeping Through the '90s")

In other words, Saramandi believes Moshfegh to criticise that neoliberal culture continues to this day. Moshfegh thus not only challenges the makeover paradigm that postfeminist culture advocates on the narrator's personal level, in that she cannot transform herself as an individual situated within postfeminist society, but also on a larger scale, as the world has – paradoxical to capitalist optimism, and related notions of progress and improvement – not progressed either and still celebrates the superficial popular consumer culture that foregrounds femininity, sexuality, and female passivity.

4. Conclusion

In my thesis, I have argued that Ottessa Moshfegh subverts postfeminist culture in her novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, in that she criticises a number of features that are intrinsic to postfeminism. More specifically, Moshfegh challenges postfeminism's affiliation with neoliberalism and popular culture, condemning its lack of political engagement. In addition, she questions the postfeminist figure of the active, female consumer, postfeminism's foregrounding of female sexuality, femininity, and beauty culture, as well as the framework's makeover paradigm. After introducing the topic of this thesis, I have explained the contradictory nature of postfeminism, partially caused by its existence within a myriad of contexts that are often perceived as contradictory themselves. As follows, various definitions have been attributed to the term, which demonstrates that the term does not have a single, neatly demarcated definition.

Postfeminism has nevertheless been heavily associated with its original meaning of an anti-feminist backlash, indicating that feminism belongs to the past. Within this movement away from feminist activism, the outdated relevancy of feminism might be understood as a triumphant sentiment grateful for the changes that the feminist movement achieved or rather as a feeling of

relief after discarding the dogmatic gender norms that the second wave advocated. However, the term likewise increasingly began to denote its connection to feminism, in that postfeminism both includes feminist and anti-feminist elements. Today, this latter, more nuanced interpretation prevails.

In this second section, I have moreover provided the historical context in which postfeminism emerged, namely the popular media culture of the 1980s, in which the backlash understanding dominated. Since then, postfeminism has developed a rich history in its own right, and nowadays postfeminist characteristics can still be encountered in our contemporary culture: popular types of feminism, frequently relying on the postfeminist tradition, have become increasingly dominant within the media and on social media platforms.

Whether referring to postfeminism in the '80s or to its legacy nowadays, it remains closely interconnected with neoliberalism and consumer culture, clarifying its individualistic agenda. The individualism that typifies postfeminism generates the concept's most significant values: agency, choice and empowerment. It is important to note that these values are similar to the principles advocated by the second wave of feminism, but differ in their individualistic approach and personal relevance, instead of adhering to a more collective interpretation that embeds these principles within a political movement highlighting activism as a means to enforce change.

Then, I described the characteristics of postfeminism that were most relevant to my analysis of Moshfegh's exploration of postfeminist culture in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, namely its interrelatedness with popular and consumer culture, including the implications that the framework has affiliations with conservative, anti-feminist gender politics and that it therefore remains largely depoliticised, as well as its emphasis on sexuality, femininity and beauty as means of empowerment. In this section, I have moreover included various positions towards and critiques of these characteristics, explaining the most relevant debates surrounding popular culture, politics, sexuality and femininity within the postfeminist discourse.

In the third section of my thesis, I explored how Ottessa Moshfegh questions postfeminist culture in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. First, I analysed that Moshfegh criticises postfeminism's close connection to neoliberalism and consumer culture that dominated the New York City of the long 1990s. In her novel, she observes that consumer culture is highly gendered, illustrating how female-centred consumption generates limitations concerning women's agency. Reva's embodiment the postfeminist female consumer of goods and services, which are particularly marketed to privileged women, is portrayed as superficial and unattainable for anyone who does not belong to

the middle or upper classes of society, causing her to suffer from a low self-esteem and an eating disorder.

My Year's narrator, though strongly rejecting Reva's affiliations with consumer culture, nonetheless fails to entirely move away from this culture by means of her sleeping project in which she isolates herself from the outside world: Moshfegh exposes how the narrator is embedded in a world of female consumption, as she is unable to escape consumer culture even in her hibernation, implied by the subconscious and unrequested consumption patterns that unfold during her sleep. Her ironic awareness that she is merely a cog within the neoliberal system, including her awareness that she stimulates Reva's obsession with materialism – such as clothes, shoes, and other markers of femininity – in combination with the reality that she is not capable of taking her life into her own hands, signifies that she lacks agency. This causes her to become passive, to engage in her sleeping project, and to become "unhinged", as it would be perceived by postfeminism. As follows, Moshfegh thus argues that postfeminism is tied to neoliberal consumerism and that female commercialism governs women's day to day lives. She therefore uncovers that this aspect of postfeminism limits the characters' agency and rather leaves them feeling shallow.

Besides neoliberalism, Moshfegh moreover challenges postfeminism's entanglement with popular culture, often resulting in a negligence of meaningful politics and activism. She depicts the early 2000s as a society dominated by popular culture, exemplified by the continuous stream of movies and TV series that the protagonist watches throughout the novel. Only short fragments relating to politics or historical events flash by as if they were pop cultural events, designed to be quickly consumed instead of evoking any deeper reflection. The narrator yet again denounces Reva's passion for everything that is related to popular culture, but is herself guilty of mindlessly overconsuming commercial Hollywood movies. This results in the narrator's numb and alienated state – essentially the sentiments that sum up the entire novel – which is depicted as an unattractive, apathic state not to be recommended.

Even the ending, referring to 9/11, a major historical-political event, resembles pop culture as the narrator repeatedly watches recordings of the event, therefore mirroring her year-long "movie marathon" that serves the purpose of taking her sleeping project to another level of indifference. Although, at first glance, this short final chapter suggests that politics become more significant within the narrator's life, her lack of critical reflection and her continuation of the fast and thoughtless consumption of the videotapes of the event imply that consumer culture remains the

dominant factor that shapes her relation with and positioning within the world. Ultimately, Moshfegh attacks the numbness caused by an overexposure to popular culture, in which meaning seems to be lost for good within a world devoid of political integrity.

Another aspect that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* critically explores is the figure of the consumerist, can-do girl of postfeminism. Moshfegh condemns this figure by foregrounding her narrator's sleeping project as a choice to be passive as opposed to promoting active consumption towards female empowerment. It is suggested that the narrator finds agency in her sleep; however, she is still not entirely free because of her inability to escape postfeminist consumer culture during her hibernation. Reva likewise fails her goal of being a postfeminist can-do girl, as she is not wealthy enough to pursue this ideal, thus resulting in her lack of agency in that she merely follows what the female-oriented market is telling her to consume. In that manner, the novel lays bare that agency and empowerment are in fact restricted in a postfeminist society. Postfeminist agency is perceived as an impossibility: women are expected to automatically follow the trends of the market. However, Moshfegh goes one step further by implying that even the narrator's choice to be passive, directly opposing the postfeminist concept of active empowerment leading to self-improvement and self-transformation, is not providing her with any real agency either within this culture.

Furthermore, Moshfegh uncovers that postfeminist sexuality, femininity, and beauty culture generate female self-sexualisation, internalised sexism, as well as self-objectification. This is demonstrated by the narrator's paradoxical awareness that she, for instance, has an unequal and problematic relationship with her ex-partner Trevor, while still continuing to engage in that toxic relationship. In that manner, Moshfegh illustrates how the narrator has internalised a sexist mentality based on accepting Trevor's sexualisation and abuse. The internalisation of sexism and misogyny happens to be a societal pattern, as Reva adopts a similar attitude towards her romantic life. *My Year* moreover exposes that postfeminist beauty culture, including the ideal of femininity that Reva seeks to embody, spawns a harmful image of the female self. Once again, the narrator who attempts to reject these damaging beauty norms during her hibernation, fails to do so, as she has internalised this within her subconscious sleep state, booking various beauty appointments while asleep.

Finally, I argued that Moshfegh challenges the postfeminist makeover paradigm, based on self-improvement and self-transformation, leaving the individual entirely responsible for shaping their own future. She suggests that, within a postfeminist and neoliberal society, a true, meaningful transformation is impossible: the narrator's transformation through sleeping in which she desires to

break free from the superficiality of the early 2000s does not succeed, since the ending of the novel implies that she still functions within the very same postfeminist culture that lacks any real sincerity and significance. This is especially exemplified by her consumption of 9/11 videotapes resembling an easily absorbed aspect of pop culture. On a larger scale, Moshfegh also questions whether the world has moved forward since then, exposing the malfunctioning of a gendered, postfeminist neoliberalism as the culprit for this stagnation. According to Moshfegh, our contemporary society is still stuck in the very same dysfunctional and restrictive postfeminist paradigm as a couple of decades ago.

In conclusion, Moshfegh thus subverts postfeminism on various levels, as postfeminist culture similarly functions within diverse contexts and frameworks: she criticises its relation to neoliberalism and popular culture, including its apolitical tendencies; shows how the active postfeminist consumer is not in fact empowered with agency; skilfully uncovers that the celebration of female sexuality, femininity and beauty culture is not necessarily empowering, but might likewise facilitate sexism and misogyny; and demonstrates that capitalist optimism and the postfeminist makeover paradigm are only attainable for the most privileged women – in other words, those who are "tall and thin and blond and pretty and young" (Moshfegh 27). Even then, the narrator is not able to successfully conclude her journey of self-development, but merely lives under the illusion that she does.

My Year of Rest and Relaxation is fraught with contradictions, one of the most significant ones being the narrator's rejection of postfeminist values by means of passivity and embarking on her sleeping project, while at the same time having internalised postfeminist culture. This contradiction ties into the discussion whether the "unhinged woman", representing the trend that explores mental illness within female characters, is an affirmation of female stereotypes of madness and passivity or not. I believe Moshfegh's satirical stance subversively appropriates this stereotypical position of madness or passivity in order to question the opposite values of the optimistic, actively consuming can-do girl. In doing so, she denounces the oftentimes oppressive gender norms that postfeminism and popular forms of feminism foreground. Although the novel's narrator is emblematic of the unhinged women trope, opposite to the postfeminist heroine, and even though Reva functions as the – albeit failed – embodiment of postfeminism, the novel does not simply portray the narrator as a passive madwoman or Reva as a superficial Girlie: rather, they are complex characters, symbolising the struggles of identity, community and purpose that come to the

fore in a society that has become progressively individualistic, analogous to popular forms of feminism or postfeminism's individualism.

Moshfegh's novel not only calls into question postfeminist culture, but also offers a reaction to a more modern type of popular feminism as well, given that the society in which the narrator navigates life seems eerily similar to our own. Moshfegh lays bare the contradictions of our time in which gender politics are rarely black and white. She adopts a perspective that allows modern women to blend ideas and values, as long as they resist thinking within the limitations of one specific ideology, whether it is a feminist, postfeminist or a (post)feminist-critical one. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, while condemning postfeminist culture, nevertheless has been ironically influenced by postfeminism as a critical framework itself: the novel resists binaries and embraces confusion and contradiction. In Moshfegh's world, ambiguity is essential to make sense of an age in which meaning has become increasingly elusive for women.

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