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Neoliberalism and Emotional Detachment in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

What does it mean to stop—to truly remove oneself from the relentless churn of a society that equates productivity with purpose? In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Ottessa Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist embarks on a yearlong experiment in self-induced sleep, seeking escape from the pressures of her urban, consumer-driven existence. This unnamed protagonist seeks not reinvention, but obliteration, embarking on a radical journey of withdrawal in a world that refuses to rest. Set in the early 2000s against the backdrop of New York, the novel delves into themes of isolation, grief, and the oppressive weight of neoliberalism. The protagonist's experiment is a stark rejection of a society that equates productivity with worth, emphasizing individual responsibility over collective care. Moshfegh's bitingly dark humor is embodied within the narrator: a deeply unlikable 24-year-old anti-protagonist who lives a privileged "WASP" life on the Upper East Side of New York City (17). With enough inheritance for the rest of her life, she is jobless and frivolous in her spending on "things [she] couldn't remember" and blacking out on a slew of drugs (Moshfegh 12). In his *Chicago Review of Books* review, Lincoln Michel asserts that "Moshfegh pushes the question of how 'unlikeable' a character can get even further" (1). The narrator actively isolates herself from friends, society, and even her own memories. She rejects any attempts at connection, viewing others with disdain. Michel highlights this aspect, noting that "every other character is eminently hateable" through her lens, from Reva, her needy best friend, to her self-absorbed on-and-off boyfriend (84). Though her experiment in detachment is extreme, it becomes clear that her year of rest is also a quest for transformation. The narrator states, "If I kept going, I thought, I'd disappear completely, then reappear in some new form. This was my hope. This was the dream" (Moshfegh 84). This underscores her deep-seated yearning for transformation, despite the destructive nature of her methods. While the

novel hints at some emotional growth by the end, it remains ambiguous whether her hibernation experiment will lead to lasting change.

This journey, however, transcends personal crisis, reflecting the broader socio-economic framework of neoliberalism, which, as Rachel Greenwald Smith observes, casts "individuals as exclusively responsible for themselves" and commodifies emotions as part of "market-oriented behavior… invested, traded, and speculated upon" (Smith 3, 6). Moshfegh uses the late '90s to look at the evolution of late capitalism; her characters hold up disturbing mirrors in which we see ourselves extremely clearly in 2018 when the novel was published. This critical lens on the late capitalist era provides a deeper understanding of the protagonist's withdrawal as a response not only to personal loss but to the societal pressures that define her world. Smith's critique of the "affective hypothesis" offers a lens to understand the protagonist's isolationist and self-destructive behavior as a rejection of neoliberalism's emphasis on personal productivity and emotional management. Moreover, Judith Butler's essay "Violence, Mourning, and Politics" complicates this reading by exploring how grief and vulnerability can disrupt such neoliberal constructs, challenging the protagonist's withdrawal as a viable response to loss and societal pressures. Beneath her desire to sleep lies grief over her parents' deaths, a loss she refuses to confront, situating her withdrawal and reflecting a culture that privatizes mourning and denies vulnerability. Butler asserts that "mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation," a transformation that the narrator refuses to process, underscoring the denial of collective grief (21). By placing Moshfegh's novel in dialogue with Smith's and Butler's theories, as well as other critical essays and scholarly works, this analysis illuminates how *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* critiques the psychological and emotional tolls of a society that privileges individualism over collective care.

Smith's Critique of Neoliberalism and the Affective Hypothesis

Smith's theory critiques the "affective hypothesis," which she defines as "the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience" (1). Smith argues that this perspective aligns closely with neoliberal ideologies, which emphasize individual responsibility and privatization. By casting emotions as personal assets owned and managed by individual authors, characters, and readers, the affective hypothesis mirrors neoliberalism's framing of individuals as entrepreneurial subjects in a competitive system. This view, she contends, is limiting because it "stuffs diverse literary practices into a single mold," valuing only those works that conform to its focus on personal emotional transmission. Smith challenges this model, advocating for the recognition of "impersonal feelings"—shared, diffuse, and unpredictable emotions that resist commodification (6). She advocates for a broader understanding of literature's emotional dimensions, moving beyond the narrow focus on personal experience to consider how texts can generate complex, collective, and impersonal forms of affect that resist neoliberal paradigms.

In Michael Walonen's essay on neoliberalism in contemporary literature, he emphasizes how neoliberal globalization operates as both an economic and cultural phenomenon. Walonen describes neoliberalism as "a political-economic approach" that prioritizes deregulation, privatization, and the reduction of protective policies, creating a global system designed to benefit a transnational capitalist elite (4). This system enforces "a massive transfer of wealth from the periphery to the center and from the lower and middle classes to the upper class within various nations" (3). Such practices underline the extractive and exploitative nature of neoliberalism, which is structured to prioritize capital flows over social welfare.

These dynamics resonate with Smith's critique, particularly her assertion that neoliberalism privatizes emotions and encourages individual self-management, mirroring the broader commodification and depersonalization inherent in globalization. Additionally, Walonen's exploration of the "planetary scope" of globalization as a force shaping lived experiences highlights the cultural hegemony Smith critiques, where even affect becomes a tool for market regulation and control (1). By linking Smith's affect theory with the mechanisms of neoliberal globalization, we see how literature becomes a site of resistance, interrogating the systems that commodify human connections and emotions.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the protagonist's withdrawal into a drug-induced hibernation can be seen as a critique of neoliberal demands for emotional productivity and personal responsibility, embodying Smith's notion of impersonal feelings as a rejection of the affective hypothesis and its alignment with individualistic frameworks. Smith describes neoliberalism as a socio-political system that allows "emotional states to be used as forms of control" (17). This ideology, emphasizing personal responsibility, drives the protagonist to view her own mind and body as assets to be controlled and perfected. She uses pharmaceuticals not for enjoyment or spiritual exploration but as tools to manage her own self-optimization, hoping her chemically induced hibernation will allow her to wake up transformed: "'I'm not a junkie or something' I said defensively. 'I'm taking some time off. This is my year of rest and relaxation'" (Moshfegh 12). Much like a neoliberal subject pursuing economic efficiency, she treats her mental state as something to be modified and regulated, that would make her "life more tolerable," through her "self-preservational hibernation" (Moshfegh 7, 17). This self-treatment reflects the neoliberal expectation that emotions, as stated by Smith, are "resources to develop and manage" by individuals rather than with traditional sources of support (6).

Similarly, the narrator's friend Reva blatantly uses bulimic behaviors as a way in which to 'perfect' her body: leaving a "lingering stink of her sadness" in the narrator's bathroom after purging (Moshfegh 109). Stephanie Tsz Yan Ng, in her exploration of the two main women in the novel, states that Reva's bulimia “restores the control that she as a supposedly liberated young woman believes she has” thus also becoming a subject that can be regulated (63). Ng suggests that these behaviors exhibited by Reva and the narrator are "instances of self-management, which, much like prosthetics, enable the reconstitution of the subject such that she can remain attached to an unchanged environment where normativity is utopia par excellence" (Ng 63). Rather than support one another through their respective malaise, both choose to prioritize their individual selves to be in accordance with the world around them: "Reva's ritualistic binging and purging offer momentary distraction and dissociation from the demands of generic personhood" (Ng 88).

On the other hand, one could interpret the narrator's year of sleep as an act of control through apathy, suggests critic Marlene Dirschauer. By "annihilating the most basic rhythms of human existence—waking and sleeping—the novel establishes nonaction and apathy as the narrator's preferred state of mind" (Dirschauer 44). This growing detachment from both political action and human interaction affects the narrator's sense of being in the world (Dirschauer 45). From the very beginning, the narrator informs the reader that she "had investments" and "plenty of money in my savings account, too—enough to live on for a few years as long as I didn't do anything spectacular" (Moshfegh 3). Her solipsism is thus closely tied to the "luxury" of her financial freedom (Moshfegh 12), positioning the novel within a broader debate about how capitalism has fostered loneliness and devalued human interaction and solidarity. This apathy, however, is not purely existential; it is made possible by the narrator's financial situation,

allowing her to 'trade' her capital for isolation. This underscores the neoliberal notion of economic privatization, where personal freedom is shaped by one's financial resources.

Smith also critiques the rise of the "self-care" industry, which encourages individuals to take responsibility for their own mental health, often without genuine support from doctors "properly diagnosing and treating patients" (8). The character of Dr. Tuttle in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* serves as a critique of the neoliberal wellness culture that Smith describes. This "self-moderating" approach to mental health underscores neoliberalism's emphasis on individual responsibility and the commodification of well-being. Dr. Tuttle's practice—more transactional than therapeutic—embodies the hollow structure of wellness culture, where treatment is reduced to a mere exchange of goods and services rather than a journey toward healing. Moshfegh depicts the narrator finding her psychiatrist in the yellow pages, and at their first meeting session, lies with a "practiced speech" stating, "I need downers, that much I know" (21). After a slew of unrelated questioning, Dr. Tuttle gives the narrator a "sheath of prescriptions," and "sample packets of pills" and tells her to "dial 9-1-1 if anything bad happens" (Moshfegh 24-25). Tuttle's willingness to medicate, rather than guide, aligns with "self-moderating" mental health culture, which prioritizes quick fixes such as "pop-scientific knowledge" and "a Prozac prescription," underscoring the novel's critique of wellness culture as another form of market-driven self-management (Smith 7). Moreover, Sofie Beluli, in her essay on Literary Apathy, also highlights this critique of self-care in relation to Moshfegh's novel:

> This urgency to care...is instrumentalized by capitalism and redirected into a consumption-based practice of 'self-love' and 'selfcare': the affective gaze is turned inward and away from the world and the individual is asked to 'take care of themselves' to quickly reintegrate into the work force (609).

Thus, Beluli further drives the notion of the novel's conflation of the self and capitalist practices.

Though framed as "taking time off" to presumably "make life easier," the narrator reveals a deeper, more calculated intent later in the novel: "At the end of my hibernation, I'd wake up – I imagined – and see my past life as inheritance. I'd need proof of my old identity to help me access my bank account, to go places. It wasn't as if I'd wake [to have] a different face and body and name. […] I was born into privilege […] I'm not going to squander that" (Moshfegh 264-265). Here, the narrator's so-called retreat is less an escape from her identity than an attempt to reset it, a strategy to reclaim her privilege on her own terms. Ng argues that "the protagonist is so attached to the existing lifeworld that she paradoxically alienates others and resorts to self-erasure to survive it," highlighting the superficiality of a world caught in the neoliberalist self-care industry (69). I wonder if the character's unlikeability is itself a critique of the neoliberalism of which she is a product? By depicting the protagonist's mental health journey as largely self-directed and chemically sustained, Moshfegh critiques a system that leaves people isolated in their struggles, conditioned to see pharmaceutical and superficial solutions as substitutes for real healing. The protagonist embodies the contradictions of neoliberalism, seeking emotional freedom and self-care through the very tools of commodification and isolation that neoliberal culture offers. Smith's framework allows us to see the novel as a dark satire of the neoliberal promise of self-reliance and autonomy, showing that when rest and relaxation become commodities, emotional freedom remains painfully elusive.

Butler's Theories on Mourning and Relationality

While Smith critiques neoliberalism's emotional frameworks, Judith Butler offers a complementary lens through her theories on mourning and vulnerability in the essay, "Violence, Mourning, and Politics." The essay argues that mourning can become a transformative political act by challenging frameworks that deny the shared vulnerability of human life. Vulnerability, as

defined by Butler, is "an invariable feature of social relations" that exposes the human "condition of dependency and interdependency that challenge the dominant ontological understanding of the embodied subject" (21). Butler critiques the military preemption and derealization of loss, suggesting that such practices undermine fundamental human ties by framing grief as a private experience rather than a collective one (21). She asserts that recognizing the interdependence revealed through grief can disrupt the neoliberal and militarized paradigms that insist on self-sufficiency and individualism. Butler writes, "When we lose certain people…we do not know who we are or what to do" because our identities are shaped by relational ties (22). This interconnection exposes the fundamental fact that we are, as bodies, "vulnerable to one another," a realization that can foster non-violence and solidarity (Butler 27).

However, one must not confuse the narrator's inaction in the novel as a form of non-violence. Butler's assertion highlights that grief can be an action completed over time: "To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself." Therefore, the inaction or apathy of the narrator deeply contrasts because though her 'hibernation' has a slow-moving integration back into society, it is not the actions of grief, rather complete inaction.

As Behluli notes, works like Moshfegh's "pose a challenge to the affective status quo," calling attention to how emotional withdrawal has become a dominant societal response (607). Behluli argues, "These different sociopolitical contexts of emotional withdrawal – labor fatigue, drug addiction, brutal war, and late capitalism – have fueled the staging of a particularly U.S.-American conflict between feeling and unfeeling that persists to this day" (608). This conflict is starkly illustrated in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Behluli also describes the novel as

"successfully oscillating between feeling and detachment, care and apathy, attunement and alienation," posing the question of how we can or should engage emotionally with the present moment (615). Plotwise, the protagonist's withdrawal into sleep reflects an attempt to avoid confronting personal and collective loss, including the death of her parents and, implicitly, the looming trauma of 9/11. The withdraw of the narrator, as asserted by Behluli, "roots her within an American literary tradition that juxtaposes interpersonal care and political dissent.

Watkins points out that Butler's essay "starts from the fact of the 9/11 tragedy and the feelings of loss it generated" (190) In this context, Butler critiques how the collective mourning of the event was channeled into nationalist and militarized responses rather than a shared acknowledgment of global vulnerability. She argues, "the obituary functions as the instrument by which grief is publicly distributed" and asks whose lives are grieved publicly and whose are not, underscoring how some losses are rendered invisible or illegitimate (34). The derealization of loss, both personal and collective, is emblematic of a broader societal trend following 9/11, as grief was redirected into militarized responses rather than collective acknowledgment of vulnerability. Concurrently, Diana Filar suggests that the events of September 11, 2001, is "one possible periodizing starting point for the category of not just contemporary, but also neoliberal literature," and therefore Butler's argument is relevant here as a solution to the narrator's behavior in the novel, given it concludes with these shocking events (2).

The 9/11 Climax: A Turning Point in Vulnerability

In the concluding chapter of the novel the narrator discovers that 9/11 has just occurred and her friend Reva has died in one of the towers, leaving the reader with an ambiguous ending:

> On September 11, I went out and bought a new TV/VCR at Best Buy so I could record the coverage of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers. Trevor was on a honeymoon in Barbados, I'd later learn, but Reva was lost. Reva was gone. I watched the

> videotape over and over to sooth myself that day. And I continue to watch it, usually on a lonely afternoon, or any other time I doubt that life is worth living. Each time I see the woman leap off the seventy-eighth floor of the North Tower–one high-heeled shoe slipping off and hovering up over her, the other stuck on her foot as though it were too small, her blouse untucked, hair flailing, limbs stiff as she plummets down, one arm raised like a dive into a summer lake– I am overcome by awe not because she looks like Reva, and I think it's her, almost exactly her, and not because Reva and I had been friends, or because I'll never see her again, but because she is beautiful. There she is a human being diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake (Moshfegh 289).

This ending symbolizes Smith's perception of personal feeling and privatization of emotion. Not only does the narrator isolate herself at home watching her television set, but she also uses a violent image of another person dying to "sooth" her (Moshfegh 289). Likewise, the narrator uses the means of capitalism— buying a "TV/VCR" at named business "Best Buy" — to privatize her reaction in her own home, rather than communicate with others of the tragedy. In fact, Smith states, "as media sources...increasingly become personalized and privatized, neoliberalism amplifies this tendency for capitalism to individualize, casting individuals as exclusively responsible for themselves" (3). The narrator consistently uses "I" statements in this closing section, not acknowledging the hundreds of lives lost in the tragedy. Likewise, she selfishly conflates the woman leaping as being her friend Reva, once again connecting with her own personal losses rather than a collective.

The narrator, however, does demonstrate vulnerability in this concluding section, her watching the tape "any other time [she] doubt[s] that life is worth living," insinuating some form of depression and suicide idealization (Moshfegh 289). By waking up from her slumber and facing the aftermath of the attacks on September 11th, the narrator shows genuine vulnerability for the first time in the novel. Butler writes of grief as "moments in which one undergoes something outside one's control and finds that one is beside oneself, not at one with oneself..."— in other words, grief becomes an out-of-body experience (22). This is realized in the narrator's reflections: "I am overcome by awe," and "there she is, a human being diving into the unknown,

and she is wide awake" (Moshfegh 289). Though her 'awe' seems an understated moment of vulnerability, compare this reaction to her description of sleep: "Days slipped by obliquely, with little to remember...Sleeping, waking, it all collided into one grey, monotonous plane ride through the clouds" (Moshfegh 84) This description is deeply apathetic and somewhat nihilistic with the words "grey" and "monotonous," as well as non –descript actions of simply 'sleeping, waking" (Moshfegh 84). Likewise, early in the novel, Moshfegh emphasizes the narrator not caring about news in New York City, saying "things were happening in New York City—they always are—but none of it affected me" (13).Therefore, this moment of awe is in immense contrast to the narrator before the terrorist attack, now confronting a profound vulnerability and interconnection that had been absent in her previous isolation.

In Watkins' analysis of Butler, he suggests that "loss reveals the condition of common vulnerability and challenges us to keep our rage from overwhelming our common humanity" (189). This vulnerability, as Watkins elaborates, is inescapable and foundational, as "a condition not just for the inauguration of the subject but for the continued existence of subjects" (192). By facing the loss of Reva, unlike the death of her parents, the narrator demonstrates this vulnerability as outlined by Watkins. This marks a turning point where the narrator engages with the relationality Butler identifies as central to grief and the human condition. As Watkins notes, "the common experience or spectacle of such a traumatic violation of security serves for Butler as a terrible unmasking of the fantasy of autonomy and invulnerability, challeng[ing] the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (190). This unmasking allows the narrator to move away from the withdrawal that characterized earlier losses, suggesting that vulnerability, rather than the pursuit of invulnerability, holds the potential for transformation. Furthermore, Butler's post-9/11 work, as Watkins highlights, "explode[es] the familiar post-9/11 political

choice" by rejecting the idea of perfect security as a trade-off for civil liberties, emphasizing instead the enduring significance of shared vulnerability (192).

Beluli also claims that Moshfegh "works hard to trouble the reader's habituated affective strategies and prevent them from any easy attunement with hegemonic narratives" an example being this very ending that does not resolve "the tension that is built towards this thematic and formal climax" (615). In terms of "impersonal feelings," Diana Filar summarizes Smith's definition as "feelings which are less recognizable, more complex, and difficult to assign individually, thereby challenging neoliberalism's hegemony in our contemporary moment" (2). Smith says, "feelings frequently become yet another material foundation for market-oriented behavior: emotions are acquired" (6). The narrator demonstrates impersonal feeling as she watches the video tape "over and over," to "sooth herself," thus the object of the video tape becomes a way to acquire emotion (Moshfegh 289). From this perspective, Smith's essay remains a valuable lens for an analysis of neoliberalism to the end of the novel.

Rachel Greenwald Smith and Judith Butler both critique the individualism promoted by neoliberalism, but they approach the topic through distinct frameworks: affect theory and mourning, respectively. Smith's critique centers on what she terms the "affective hypothesis," the belief that literature is most meaningful when it transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience. This commodification of emotions, Smith contends, limits the potential of literature to evoke impersonal or collective forms of feeling that transcend individual ownership and challenge neoliberal subjectivities. Butler, on the other hand, examines how mourning can resist the neoliberal emphasis on self-reliance and the derealization of loss. Mourning, for Butler, has the potential to "rethink community" and foster "nonviolence" by acknowledging that our lives are "bound up with others in ways that challenge the autonomy of the subject." In contrast to

Smith's focus on affect as a critique of neoliberal commodification, Butler emphasizes grief as a political practice that disrupts the violent and dehumanizing tendencies of neoliberal and militarized systems.

In the novel, the narrator's behaviors align with the argument of Smith's essay, which in turn demonstrates Moshfegh's critique of neoliberal practices. However, the narrator does not exemplify Butler's call for collective mourning and shared vulnerability. While the narrator acknowledges her own vulnerability at the novel's conclusion, this recognition does not appear to coincide with any meaningful resistance to neoliberalism. From that point of view, while these theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the novel, the novel itself also exposes a potential limitation in Butler's theory—namely, that the mere acknowledgment of vulnerability does not necessarily disrupt larger neoliberal economic and affective dynamics. Therefore, using Butler, we can challenge the actions of the narrator and suggest a solution for her lack of emotional healing. Both scholars call for a recognition of interconnectedness to resist neoliberal ideology, but the novel ultimately presents an individual who remains entrenched within the very structures they critique.

Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* critiques the isolating forces of neoliberalism, showing how its emphasis on individual responsibility and self-management leaves individuals detached and emotionally hollow. Through Smith's critique of affective commodification and Butler's call for relational mourning, the novel reveals the psychological toll of a society that privileges productivity and individualism over collective care. While the narrator's withdrawal exemplifies the contradictions of neoliberalism, her eventual confrontation with vulnerability hints at the possibility of transformation. The novel challenges readers to question the systems that shape their emotional and relational lives, offering a dark satire of the

neoliberal promise of self-reliance while gesturing toward the potential of shared vulnerability as a path to healing.

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