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“Rest, Don’t Resist: Capitalist-Neoliberal America in the early 2000s and its usage of Escapism in Ottessa Moshfegh’s My Year of Rest and Relaxation”

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1. Introduction

“Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (Marx 342).

Throughout the 21st century, we have faced escalating catastrophes such as the rise of global temperatures, natural disasters, the spread of new viruses, economic crises, and widespread mental health issues. Globalization and social media have increased public awareness of these challenges, and people seek answers to why we seemingly approach the end of the world rather than utilizing our resources to improve planet Earth and our lives on it. One system that is often held accountable for these struggles is capitalism – a structure that prioritizes profit over people, exploits labor, commodifies nearly every aspect of human life, and destroys the only planet we have. This system perpetuates itself through the promotion of distraction, overwork, and consumption.

Otessa Moshfegh’s novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, offers a subtle yet powerful exploration of the issues that capitalism creates, portraying how money ultimately cannot buy happiness. The text reveals how the 21st century has sparked an intense sense of yearning and nostalgia for a better past and future. The novel, furthermore, explores privilege, alienation, and the miseries caused by a society prioritizing productivity and consumption.

While writing my master’s thesis, I aimed to provide a thorough critique of capitalism and explore how this system perpetuates misery, particularly in the United States. I chose *My Year* for analysis because the text satirically challenges the capitalist system in the United States and the individuals who are most favored and privileged by it, namely white, wealthy people. Consequently, the primary objective of this thesis is to investigate how *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* represents and critiques capitalist-neoliberal America and its usage of escapism as a coping method at the beginning of the 21st century.

To achieve this objective, I analyzed *My Year* using the method of close reading from a Marxist and feminist perspective.

After this introduction, the first part of my thesis will depict the theoretical background of the American society in the early 2000s, its economy, politics, work ethic, gender roles, and the changes that the turn of the 21st century has created, as well as the theory of escapism, its history, reasons for adopting it and its methods. These theoretical chapters provide an overview of the topics that will form the basis of

my analysis in the second and central part of this thesis. The analysis of *My Year* will investigate American society under neoliberal capitalism, the utilization of New York City as a setting and the examination of the central role of sleep in capitalism, as well as the impact of capitalism on American citizens and their well-being. Secondly, and finally, the analysis focuses on the coping method of escapism in *My Year*, examining why and how escapism is practiced, as well as the role of death and grief in the adoption of escapism in *My Year*.

2. American Society in the Early 2000s

2.1. Economy, Politics, and Work Ethic

The economic, social, and political system of the United States at the turn of the 21st century can be described as capitalist (Foster and McChesney 1). According to Foster and McChesney, in the United States, the dominant view of the capitalist system as sustaining the democratic nation offers little space for critique of capitalism and fosters its dominance (2). The capitalist United States primarily focuses on accumulating and maximizing capital, often at the expense of the overall development of society (Foster and McChesney 2). This constant goal of increasing profit, however, results in an enormous wealth gap and wealth inequality, with a mere four hundred people becoming the wealthiest in the United States, possessing essentially almost the same amount of money as the rest of Americans combined (Foster and McChesney 4-5). Capitalism has been favored and protected due to its typical stimulation and support of economic growth; however, in recent decades, the American economy has stagnated (Foster and McChesney 5). Moreover, ignorance of collective well-being and needs resulted in increased dissatisfaction among the population (Foster and McChesney 6). Further results of capitalism in the United States have been a detrimental ecological footprint with signs of an environmental crisis, low profit and unemployment rates, a credit and housing crisis, as well as an overall economic crisis (Foster and McChesney 7; Heller XI; Lapavistas 1; Duménil and Lévy, *Neoliberal Revolution* 9).

Since the turn of the 21st century, American society has been characterized as capitalist-neoliberal (Duménil and Lévy, *Crisis* 551). During the 1970s, neoliberalism was first established in the United States (Duménil and Lévy, *Crisis* 551). It can be understood as a new organization of capitalism, as the policies, institutions, and methods of capitalism ceased to improve society but instead created a crisis (Duménil

and Lévy, *Crisis* 551; Duménil and Lévy, *Neoliberal Revolution* 9; Campbell 188-189). According to Duménil and Lévy, this structural crisis of the world economy resulted in increased unemployment and inflation, as well as a decline of growth and profit rates (*Neoliberal Revolution* 9). Neoliberalism has assisted and strengthened U.S. hegemony and pursues free markets, benefiting mainly lenders and shareholders, limited government intervention and regulation regarding welfare and development, individualism, and constant improvement of the economy as well as the people (Duménil and Lévy, *Neoliberal Revolution* 10; Campbell 189; Eagleton-Pierce 19-23; Duménil and Lévy, *Crisis* 553; Connell 22-23). Neoliberalism is focused on economic growth and profit and can be defined as seeing every human action as an "economic conduct" (Brown 9-10). For instance, neoliberalism views people as capital and emphasizes self-entrepreneurship, placing responsibility on individuals to enhance their market value (Brown 36). Every aspect of life is centered around the goal to increase the market value of either goods or humans (Brown 177). In neoliberalism, the neoliberal subject, namely the human capital, needs to calculate the costs and benefits of its action, not only in the economic context but in every aspect of life, and "every facet of human life may be read as an ostensibly market-based form of interaction" (Kiersey 168). In summary, under neoliberalism, labor is redefined as human capital, and workers are portrayed as entrepreneurs, which results in disguising the ever-present class system (Brown 65). Consequently, neoliberalism prioritizes economic growth and profit over social equality and justice (Brown 17).

Neoliberal capitalism, with its influence on economy, politics, and society, has also affected the work ethic of people in the United States. Work ethic can be defined as "the manifestation of personally held values," which means that different cultures have different work ethics that define the meaning of work in people's lives (Porter 535).

Twenty-first century, 24/7, flexible capitalism creates new demands for those who work, and those who want to work, to imagine that their performance at work is determined by their health, fitness, relationships and work-life balance. Increasingly, all aspects of a worker's life have come to be seen as performance related, and consequently of interest to those who employ them. (Kelly 9-10)

Kelly discusses the new work ethic under neoliberal capitalism, which constantly pressures employees to improve their performance and commitment at work (11). This sense of responsibility to work is not limited to the workplace but also influences employees' personal lives. People's identity and sense of self are tied to work (Kelly 11). Kelly stresses that the self "is pressured for continual renewal; is subjected to

demands to continually up the *ante* in terms of performance; is not allowed to rest" (12). Neoliberal capitalism emphasizes the self as an enterprise and demands that workers continually improve themselves to deliver better performances at work (Kelly 12). However, understanding the self as an enterprise creates impossible standards, and Kelly argues that it requires a perfect model employee to handle these 'unstable, fragmentary social conditions' of neoliberal capitalism (11). The self as an enterprise demands constant improvement and hustle, leaving little room for other aspects crucial to the self's identity. It limits our interests and narrows our horizons, requiring identities that can harm the physical and mental health of workers (Kelly 11-12). Capitalism creates a "dominance of work in people's lives," sacrificing their wellness for profit (Kelly 10). The work ethic under neoliberal capitalism manifests in toxic workplace conditions with constant and enormous pressure to perform, employment insecurity, long working hours, low salaries, inadequate health care, and little to no social support, resulting in hazardous habits such as addiction or suicide (Pfeffer 14-15). However, this understanding of work is not a new concept. In the eighteenth century, the myth of the Self-Made Man was prevalent in the economic sphere, emphasizing the idolization of entrepreneurship (Bernstein 141). The "American aspiration for success" is a constant and ever-present theme in the development of the United States of America (Bernstein 170). According to the myth of the Self-Made Man, upward mobility and success in the United States depend on the individuals' performance and motivation to work hard (Paul 367; Cullen 8).

While the virtues and the privilege of working were dominant in the early nineteenth century, in the late nineteenth century, the understanding of work has changed and has been seen as unpleasant, merely a necessity, and the motivation to work has started to come from extrinsic incentives rather than intrinsic values (Porter 537-538). Despite this distaste for it, "[w]ork has become such an integral part of personal identity that some people invest their entire sense of well being [sic] in work-related activity" (Porter 538). People have begun to prioritize work over other aspects of their identity and well-being, such as love, family, and friends, in pursuit of a better life with greater wealth, falling prey to the American myth of the Self-Made Man (Porter 539-540). Capitalism has created a work ethic fantasy around this myth. It promises that working people will fulfill all their dreams if they work hard enough, never stop working, and invest their entire lives and beings in their work. This work ethic drives people into mental and physical unwellness by always craving more (Porter 539-540). Even those who are

already wealthy and privileged never seem to cease their pursuit of wealth (Porter 540).

Moreover, the capitalist-neoliberal work ethic promotes individualism, as it asserts that American society advances through individual's success, thereby reinforcing the myth of the Self-Made Man (Kelly 14). This work ethic and its advocacy of individualism create a mindset where everyone is fighting for their interests, prioritizing their success (Kelly 14). While it is claimed that "the self as enterprise" has no "gender, or an ethnic background, or a particular age, or a specific geographic location," capitalism still favors white, young, cisgender men as the prime example of entrepreneurship, creating unequal circumstances in which people differing from this identity do not have the same chances at success (Kelly 15). Therefore, neoliberal capitalism fosters an unequal, often discriminating system that calls for everyone to fight for themselves and supports only a specific type of worker. It sacrifices equality, equity, and the happiness and well-being of everyone for economic growth and increasing profit (Kelly 15; Foster and McChesney 4-5; Pfeffer 50-51)

According to Ali, Falcone, and Azim, the work ethic of the United States, characterized by hard work and societal commitment to work to ensure economic development and competitiveness, is influenced by the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE), as described by Max Weber (26). The question that formed the basis of Max Weber's Protestant Work Ethic was whether a connection exists between Protestantism and capitalism and whether Protestantism and the corresponding Protestant Work Ethic are the reasons for capitalism's establishment in the Western society first (Norris and Inglehart 578). According to Norris and Inglehart, "[f]or Weber, it was the values associated with the Protestant Reformation and Calvinist doctrine that gave birth to the spirit of Western capitalism" (578). Protestantism was viewed by Weber as a precondition for capitalism, as the Protestant Work Ethic has been characterized as making it "people's duty to work diligently, to pursue financial rewards and to invest prudently" (Norris and Inglehart 578). Under the Protestant Work Ethic, work is seen as "a moral duty pursued for its own sake" and "[l]abour must [...] be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" (Norris and Inglehart 578). According to Weber, hard work, individualism, diligence, enterprise, prudent investment, frugality, punctuality, independence, self-discipline, and honesty are not only the key factors of the Protestant Work Ethic but also the enabling factors of successful market economies, bourgeois capitalism and private enterprise in the West (Norris and Inglehart 578). According to Norris and Inglehart, "[p]rotestant societies display the

strongest work ethic, conducive to modern capitalism as exemplified by their valuing the virtue of work as a duty, as well as favouring markets over the state" (578). The conviction of Weber about the beneficial effects of the Protestant Work Ethic on capitalism has influenced the work ethic of the United States (Ali, Falcone, and Azim 26).

2.2. The Turn of the Centuries & 9/11

The 20th century was often referred to as the 'American Century'¹ due to the dominance of the U.S. hegemony, characterized by its leading economy, technology, and culture of that time (Mason 1-4). The term 'American Century' was coined by Henry R. Luce, the publisher of *Life* magazine, and it describes the aspiration of the United States of America during the 20th century to gain „American global leadership“ (Bacevich 9). This goal became visible during the second half of the 20th century during the Cold War, but finally, between 2006 and 2008, the „U.S. military and political leaders gave up on victory“ (Bacevich 11). According to Rubin, the 'American Century' was characterized by economic growth and success, a distinct and dominant culture, and work stability (16). However, the turn of the 21st century enormously challenged American society and its global dominance, and many changes and struggles became increasingly noticeable (Mason 7). These challenges started already at the end of the 20th century but reached their peak with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Mason 7). 9/11 has evoked intense feelings of uncertainty and distress in not only but especially Americans due to its continuous media coverage (Joyner et al. 325). The attacks encouraged former American president George Bush even more to launch military missions to Afghanistan and Iraq because his goal was to wage "open-ended war on a global scale" (Bacevich 11). However, these missions led to long and brutal killings, of innocent people as well. Mason argues that "'Imperial overstretch' leads to domestic decline – primarily economically but inevitably socially and politically as well – and that in turn eventually weakens the country's international power as well" (8). In summary, the decline of the United States' power at the turn of the 21st century was marked by changes in the economy, culture, and technology, and a widespread perception of the American economy, politics, and culture as "a threat to peace, harmony, and national identity" (Mason 2).

¹ Henry Luce announced the 20th century as the American Century, indicating that America "was on the verge of assuming a role as a preeminent power, manifesting its economic, cultural, philanthropical, and political influence on societies all over the globe" (White 105).

During the 20th century, the United States were described as an unchallengeable "global economic power," and they even "dominated global financial institutions like the World Bank" (Mason 4). However, this changed at the turn of the 21st century, when the United States economy was highly indebted and in decline (Mason 1, 8). Factors such as "[i]ncreased international economic competition" and "failure to upgrade existing production techniques" led to an increase in the failure of American businesses, who attempted to counter this trend by reducing employees' salaries and working hours, as well as replacing workers through automation, computers, or robots (Rubin 16). However, these consequences presented further challenges for workers such as a decrease in work stability and an increase in part-time work rather than full-time. Workers also needed to change workplaces more frequently, and upward mobility² became increasingly challenging (Rubin 16, 18-19). The workforce was also realigned, with an increased participation of women (Fischer and Hout 98). Work has become progressively more specialized, and salaries also have depended on other factors such as age, gender, and race (Fischer and Hout 97). Additionally, the American social support system has been also in decline (Mason 9). The healthcare and social welfare system have failed to support U.S. citizens due to the government's financial instability (Mason 9). Consequently, economic inequalities and poverty have increased enormously during the turn of the 21st century (Mason 9).

Due to the enormous challenges facing American society at the turn of the 21st century, nostalgia has become an increasingly visible phenomenon among Americans as a means of coping with the changes (Becker 11-12). According to Tanner, nostalgia can be defined as an "emotion of intense longing for things lost. It's a yearning for a place you can't get back to, because we are prisoners of the present. It's a longing for stability and autonomy after losing control" (38). It can also be described as a longing for the old days, an inevitable "homesickness for a lost past," and "the sense of feeling oneself a stranger in a new period that contrasted negatively with an earlier time in which one felt, or imagines, oneself at home" (Sayers 23). Tanner claims that "nostalgia is one way we can fight against finality and come to terms with the devastating knowledge that some things disappear" (38). At the beginning of the 21st century, Americans have struggled and felt lost, and nostalgia has helped endure these conditions (Sayers 23). To be experienced, nostalgia depends on culture; for example,

² The term upward or "social mobility epitomized in the cultural figure of the self-made man – from rags to riches, "from a servant to the rank of a master" – prototypically illustrates the promise of economic success in America as a direct consequence of the condition of freedom and equality (Paul 16).

watching old films and their use of outdated technology and other past practices induce nostalgic feelings in contemporary viewers (Sayers 27). The development of the cinema during the 20th century has also enabled Americans to experience "lives that are not their own" (Sayers 29). Technology also helps to strengthen nostalgia: on the one hand, nostalgia induces anxiety toward technology and innovations; on the other hand, new media and technology help manifest and express nostalgia (Sayers 27). Sayers states that "[a]s such nostalgia is both anti-modern and yet a peculiarly modern phenomenon" (27). According to Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt, nostalgia is "a self-conscious, bittersweet but predominantly positive and fundamentally social emotion" that is triggered when reflecting on fond memories and past times of one's life," and nostalgia is even supposed to improve well-being (259). There are three functions of nostalgia: a self-oriented function, an existential function, and a social function (Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt 259). The first function aims to strengthen optimism and self-esteem, emphasizing that values can endure over a more extended period (Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt 259-260). The second one is supposed to weaken existential anxieties and remind people of the meaning of their lives (Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt 260). Lastly, the third function reminds people of the feeling of connectedness with others, weakening social threats and strengthening community (Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt 260).

In summary, American society at the turn of the 21st century has faced instability through various challenges, including 9/11, leaving Americans in uncertain and complex circumstances, yearning for a simpler past.

2.3. Gender Roles

According to Barr et al.:

Gender is a multidimensional construct with multiple domains that influence human health: identity and expression; roles and norms; relations; and power. Gender identity refers to a core element of a person's individual sense of self and gender expressions describe how a person communicates their gender to others through their behavior and appearance. Gender roles and norms are social domains reflecting cultural expectations and perceptions about how a person should behave, act, or express themselves based on their perceived or attributed gender. (13)

In 1990, Judith Butler published her work *Gender Trouble*, in which she discusses this understanding of gender (Butler). Butler argues that the "presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it" (9). She further argues:

[W]hen the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and

masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one. (Butler 9)

Consequently, Butler argues that gender and sex are not the same concepts and that gender is not a fixed identity given by birth, which is how most people understood gender before Butler's work (34). She suggests that gender is a performative act, "gender is always a doing," and by this doing, gender creates the identity it pretends to have always been, typically masculine or feminine (Butler 34). Consequently, gender is not something people are born with as it is assumed with sex. It is not a preexisting identity declared at birth but part of the identity that only forms through (Butler 34):

acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, [that] are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (Butler 185)

In other words, the acts and gestures construct the false impression that gender is something that is innately in us while they are, in fact, necessary to maintain gender. Gender, therefore, consists of these performative acts (Butler 185-186). Consequently, gender is not a fixed identity from which these acts and gestures result; rather, through time and in the context of the society we live in, gender is an artificially created and stabilized identity shaped by these acts or rather "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 191). Butler implies that the body is stylized through movements, gestures, clothing, and practices, thereby creating a gender identity (Butler 191). She named this phenomenon "gender performance" since these stylized acts, movements, et cetera need to be constantly repeated, much like a performance (Butler 187, 192). Otherwise, the gender identity will collapse (Butler 192). Butler further argues that people themselves often do not consciously notice this stylized repetition of acts but believe in an innate, internal, and fixed gender identity (192). Gender, however, "is also a norm that can never be fully internalized," and "gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody" (Butler 192). Butler further argues:

there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured [...] and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction. That gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character and the performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. (192-193)

Butler also questions the understanding of sex and suggests that fixed categories of sex are created as well to disguise gender performativity (192-193). In summary, society believes and makes us believe that people are born with a fixed gender identity

like they are presumably born with a particular sex. When gender is something that only exists in the external space of society and through the constant repetition of certain acts that are labeled as feminine or masculine. It follows from this that binary female and male gender roles only exist due to gender performativity trying to impose rules on people that are presented as natural and fixed about how men or women should behave.

Gender roles establish a stable understanding of how women, as well as men, are expected to behave, with societal rejection as the consequence for not adhering to these roles (Freedman 130-131). In the context of the turn of the 21st century and neoliberal capitalism in the United States, the neoliberal self is characterized by its ability and willingness to consume, and especially women and their gender roles have been defined through consumption (Scharff 218). Women have been socialized to consume and to constantly improve and transform themselves, with the expectation that they manage and control their sexualities and bodies (Scharff 218). Moreover, gender role expectations at the turn of the 21st century have resulted in women being mainly responsible for the childcare and household chores, as well as other responsibilities of the domestic sphere such as planning and preparing holidays, maintaining "family and community ties," as well as "parent-teacher associations" (Freedman 134). Over the centuries, understandings and attitudes towards gender roles have changed, but women have been still seen as primarily responsible for care work. According to Freedman, "[i]n the 1960s women in the United States worked six times as long as men did domestic tasks; by the 1990s they still worked twice as much. And when paid jobs demand more hours from workers, men reduced their housework more than women do" (133). This is because the female gender role identifies women as mothers by nature and "motherhood as women's primary vocation" (Freedman 133). Freedman gives another example to prove this point, in the United States "when both parents hold jobs, a mother is about four times more likely than a father to take times off from work to care for a sick child" (133). hooks also argues that men are not ready to accept equality between men and women when it comes to childcare and household chores (81). Moreover, she claims that motherhood and taking care of children are deeply connected with the gender identity of women and that they change the dynamics in relationships and marriages. If, and only if, a couple is childless, they can face each other as peers and maybe even as equals, but as soon as children exist, women are positioned as mothers (hooks 81).

When it comes to gender roles, it is also important to look at the role of class and race. According to hooks, class privilege in the feminist movement was perceived even before race/ethnicity was (37). As soon as the feminist movement advanced and white privileged women reached „equal access to class power [...] the feminist struggle was no longer deemed important“ by them (hooks 37). The white working-class women noticed this class privilege but were unable to attract as much public attention and interest as privileged, well-educated feminists did. Moreover, the issue, which was repeatedly stressed in the feminist movement, of women “being confined and subordinated in the home as housewives“ was actually “only a crisis for a small group of well-educated *white* women“ because many working-class women were already working at that time and had to handle the household as well (hooks 38). Working-class women were aware that labor, with the small income it generates, would not free them of patriarchy (hooks 38-39). hooks argues that white women, especially feminists, have always been aware of the privilege they enjoy that Black women and Women of Color do not experience, namely white privilege (55). However, many of them still choose to deny and erase the differences in the experience of women of different ethnicities in the feminist movement. The appearance of only white women, as well as the wealth privilege that the protagonist carries in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* could portray a critique of the ignorance and betrayal of white privileged women towards Black women and Women of Color.

Women's gender roles in the United States are also closely tied to societal beauty standards. A particular idea of how girls and women should look is constantly presented and circulated through society, and primarily through the media. As Freedman claims, “[i]mages of women's bodies have proliferated widely, but the female ideal in popular culture has quite literally narrowed over time” (210). The beauty ideal is always an almost unattainable standard; nevertheless, women who do not match it are expected to modify and transform their bodies to fit it (Freedman 210-211). Women are expected to become Barbie dolls, with bodies made of plastic, and their endeavors focusing solely on improving their appearance (Walter 12). Consumerism has created numerous ways to discipline and modify female bodies, such as commercial products, exercise classes, and cosmetic surgeries (Freedman 211; Walter 12). Significantly, plastic surgeries have increased at the turn of the century enormously, from 30.000 breast surgeries alone in 1992 in the United States to 87.000 in 1997 (Freedman 211). Moreover, statistics from the American Society of Plastic Surgeons for 2023 also show a general and consistent growth in the number of cosmetic surgeries among women

and girls (19). To be more precise, for girls aged 19 and under, 23,087 cosmetic procedures were conducted in 2023 (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 19). Cosmetic surgeries such as liposuction and breast augmentation but also minimally invasive procedures such as Botox have been performed more often over the years, which highlights the booming societal demand and acceptance for cosmetic surgeries for women and girls (American Society of Plastic Surgeons 20-24). Diet culture, dissatisfaction with their appearance, and body dysmorphia have been common among teenage girls as well (Freedman 211-212). But not only white girls and women are affected by the beauty ideals, but also Black, Indigenous, and other women of Color participate in body modulation practices, often as a coping mechanism in response to trauma, poverty, and discrimination (Freedman 212). Many women have complained of the unrealistic and unattainable expectations of the beauty standards which evolve over time, but, ultimately, they have become increasingly restrictive and powerful (Walter 13). The beauty ideal has also become more connected to sexuality than ever, expecting women and girls to present themselves as sexually attractive, positioning sexuality and sexual attractiveness as the way to success (Walter 13-14). This ideal of female sexuality has been defined by the sex industry and distributed through television, advertisements, music, magazines, and cinema (Walter 14). The objectification and sexualization of girls and women are tightly connected to capitalism trying to commodify and control female bodies through the sex industry; however, it is promoted under the disguise of feminism, claiming to liberate women from sexual restrictions (Walter 14-15). The beauty ideal shows "the need of the powerful to punish women through beauty" (Wolf 212). Feminism has achieved a lot in the fight to liberate women and accomplish equality; nevertheless, the more women emancipate themselves, the more patriarchy tries to control them through the beauty expectations with even stricter and more cruel demands of female bodies (Wolf 10). According to Wolf, these increased efforts at the turn of the 21st century succeeded, resulting in highly increased consumerism, growth of pornography consumption and its popularity, as well as girls and women being more dissatisfied with and working on their appearance more than ever (10).

Although, since the turn of the 21st century, the workforce has consisted of almost as many women as men, women have received less money for their labor (Freedman 147). This phenomenon remains prevalent and is known as the gender pay gap and is responsible for the fact that "by 2000 American women earned approximately 75 cents for every male-earned dollar" (Freedman 162). The gender pay

gap is not dependent on the education or occupation of women, instead professional women also earn less than men. Freedman describes this phenomenon as "[w]henver women enter male-dominated jobs, the earning gap is wide, but when men enter female dominated fields as nurses or secretaries, they actually earn more than women" (163).

Additionally, at the turn of the 21st century, a specific type of feminism called 'choice feminism' has emerged, giving women the impression that they are not restricted to the domestic sphere but can work and aspire freely to a career, while ultimately expecting women to choose between "seriously pursuing a demanding career or family life" (Rottenberg 86). It has been suggested that women cannot handle both successfully and that working women will neglect their duties as mothers and wives (Rottenberg 86). Moreover, while the myth of the Self-Made Man has profoundly influenced the American workforce, women have been initially excluded from the founding myths of "self-making," and female success has not been measured by productivity but rather by the effort women have invested in their appearance (Paul 398). Therefore, "[w]omen entered the discourse of economic wealth and social mobility as customers and as male status symbols. Women's upward mobility thus depended on their relations to men" (Paul 399).

Existing gender expectations in the United States at the turn of the 21st century have significantly influenced people's lives, including negative consequences like the gender pay gap, sexual harassment of women at their workplace as well as the idolization of marriage, and demonization and marginalization of single women (Freedman 147-169; Byrne and Carr 84; Reynolds and Wetherell 489). The stereotypical representation of women as passive and men as active have a negative influence on both individuals' lives (Schweitzer 48). The socialization of women as mothers and homemakers as their primary life goal can cause psychological problems, especially when women sacrifice their entire lives for this purpose only to be left lonely and aimless after their children grow up (Schweitzer 48). Men also often abuse their influential role as providers and protectors of the family by controlling and coercing women (hooks 101). hooks also highlights the lack of a 'safe haven' for women (50). For many men, this haven is provided by women in the form of the home, where they can relax after their work. For many women, the home is a stressful workspace, just like their paid jobs (hooks 50).

3. Escapism

3.1. Definition, History, and Theoretical Background of Escapism

According to Konzack, escapism is a distraction from everyday life or problems through entertaining leisure activities (246). Moreover, it is understood as “one manifestation of the entertainment function of mass communication” to distract workers from “thinking about their oppression” (Chandler and Munday, “escapism”). Sharzer describes escapism as the desire or urge to escape from stressful conditions that are unchangeable (1). This definition is closely connected to the social conditions in the capitalist society, describing escapism as a tool to cope with social struggles, such as poverty (Sharzer 1). He even claims that escapism constitutes a significant part of our social world and, consequently, is a crucial aspect of it (Sharzer 2). Jouhki and Oksanen also define escapism as “a tendency to seek escape and distraction from reality or real-life problems” (202).

The concept of escapism is presumably first attributed to John Crowe Ransom, a literary critic, who commented on the psychology of defeat in 1930 (Sharzer 2; Konzack 246). However, as Konzack states, the first recorded use of the term was in 1933 in *the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (246). Konzack stresses that escapism has never been a technical term, and its origins were never based on research (249). Throughout the history of escapism, the term and its implications have changed and been used inconsistently (Konzack 253). Consequently, there are different, varying views on escapism.

Sharzer claims that modern escapism could be described as “a nostalgia for a cancelled future” (2). According to Sharzer, this future that U.S. citizens long for was realized for a short period between World War II reconstructions and the beginning of neoliberalism in the United States, when genuine attempts at improving society took place (2). This time was characterized by social democracy, marked by benefits such as the prevention of enormous wealth inequalities, social housing, free healthcare, and education, as well as efforts to democratize the United States (Sharzer 2). The capitalist-neoliberal American society that replaced post-war social democracy, in contrast, has focused on increasing profits and corporate interests, neglecting the needs of U.S. citizens. The challenges that this society entails prompt people to engage in escapist activities as a means of coping with the struggles (Sharzer 2). Sharzer argues that while “escapism predates neoliberalism”, capitalist-neoliberal societal structures have intensified the need for escapism since goods such as housing

and healthcare, which were formerly protected from the market forces, have become open to monetization through the privatization of state-controlled properties, as well as the provision of low-cost loans (Sharzer 2-3). The new private capital has been invested in financial markets, and consequently, developing markets have been exposed to global competition, the influence of global financial institutions has increased, and strict structural adjustments have been implemented in developing economies (Sharzer 3). Those who have not benefited from the increased privatization have relied on cheap credit, leading to debt as a means of escapism to flee from seemingly unchangeable social struggles (Sharzer 3-4). It is essential to note that neoliberal capitalism's primary objective is to maximize profit, social benefits and development are not prioritized, leading a vast number of people into poverty, and, therefore, it has created social conditions that compel people to escape to make their lives bearable (Sharzer 4). Sharzer states that escapism reflects the desire to leave the problems of capitalist America behind, acting as a way of "asserting individuals' presence and validity against the anti-human forces of accumulation" (32). Consequently, it is a natural reaction but is still often criticized and stigmatized by scholars. "Escapism is *constitutive*. As a product of alienation, it shapes our coping methods and attitudes towards the dislocations and contradictions of capitalism" (Sharzer 33). Sharzer explains that escapism influences how people handle challenging conditions in a capitalist society (33).

While modern industry condemns people to jobs that insult their intelligence the mass culture of romantic escape fills their head with visions of experience beyond their means – beyond their emotional and imaginative capacities as well – and thus contributes to a further devaluation of routine. The disparity between romance and reality [...] gives rise to an ironic detachment that dulls pain but also cripples the will to change social conditions, to make even modest improvements in work and play, and to restore meaning and dignity to everyday life. (Lasch 96)

This quote by Lasch suggests that while escapism helps individuals cope with the everyday challenges of living in a capitalist-neoliberal society, at the same time, it distracts from the goal of improving these social conditions by focusing on the imagined romance of escapism (96).

Escapism as a psychological concept, is often conceptualized as a dualistic model of positive and negative escapism, which is also defined differently as productive and unhealthy escapism, cause-based and effect-based escapism, or escapism as self-suppression or self-expansion (Igorevna 103; Stenseng, Falch-Madsen, and Hygen 319). Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt distinguish escapism into functional and dysfunctional escapism (260). Functional escapism refers to the use of

escapist methods due to the “positive experiences associated with them”, such as better coping with and recovering from stress (Wulf, Breuer and Schmitt 260). Dysfunctional escapism refers to the pursuit of these methods to disconnect from reality and escape from current problems (Wulf, Breuer and Schmitt 260). The researcher A. Evans further distinguishes escapism into the following types: avoiding, passive, active, and extreme escapism (Igorevna 104). Escapism avoidance refers to the behavior of resisting the urge to escape reality and its challenges. Passive escapism refers to types of escapism that require no effort, such as watching television, movies, or listening to music (Igorevna 104). Active escapism, however, encompasses behavior that facilitates a shift in action or a transition from one activity to another. Lastly, extreme escapism involves behavior such as alcohol and drug use that is potentially dangerous (Igorevna 104).

3.2. Reasons for Escapism

Life in capitalism involves a constant level of distress and danger (Sharzer 9). One of the only reliefs that present itself from the problematic circumstances and the “trauma of developing and existing in the capitalist lifeworld” is escapism (Sharzer 10). Escapism is deeply ingrained in capitalist’s “social and mental fabric” and its methods allow people a short escape from “meaningless survival” and open opportunities to new worlds and dreams away from the “uncertainties of living in an overcrowded and polluted social prison” (Sharzer 10-13). However, practicing it too frequently can lead to the dangers of addiction, even though the circumstances of capitalism create the demands of constant escape (Sharzer 13). According to Sharma and Batra, many college students show increased behaviors of substance abuse as an escapist method (3). Moreover, structural inequalities serve as a motivator, leading students of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds to tend to escape more frequently, which in turn deepens the existing inequalities (Sharma and Batra 3). Consequently, not only are workers targets of this need to escape capitalist society, but wealthy privileged people can also suffer under the social conditions. Mental illnesses in capitalist-neoliberal America, for example, have escalated, and the health care system is “extremely inefficient and very costly” (Sharzer 170; Chomsky 69). Marx and Engels also already stressed in their *Communist Manifesto* that the conditions necessary for the bourgeoisie to exist are the same conditions that threaten their own existence (70-71).

With the context of this thesis in mind, two common types of escapism, namely escapism from work and escapism from mental health issues, will be discussed. The circumstances of work and work ethic, especially in the United States at the turn of the 21st century, have already been discussed in my first chapter. Based on this, work and work circumstances are one of the primary reasons people resort to escapist methods:

The pain of work, looking for work or being unemployed must be hidden in order to appear employable and as a well-regulated citizen, despite the loss of identity and dignity that the disjunction of the labour market create. The response to this is, of course, escapism, which protects the real self and shields workers from alienation. (Sharzer 74)

Work, work ethics, and the work circumstances present in capitalist-neoliberal society can be highly challenging and occupy a big part of people's lives. Capital growth is prioritized at every price, while workers are merely a means to an end and suffer under capitalist labor (Sharzer 74). Since the rise of capitalism as the primary economic system, the power inequality between capital owners and workers has been significant and present (Sharzer 74). The circumstances of work are surprisingly still tolerated; nevertheless, work is more of a curse than a blessing for most workers. People need to work to survive financially and materially, but labor often has a profound impact on the worker's mental and emotional health (Sharzer 74). Escapism presents a favored way to cope with these challenges: "The dignity that comes from self-respect may not be available from other sources, so workers create it themselves by exercising creative powers through escapism. The practice of escapism is, consequently, not a distraction from but an assertion of humanity, identity, and self-respect" (Sharzer 74). Sharzer consequently argues that escapism presents a crucial outlet for workers to exercise and stress their self-respect and identity (74). Consequently, on the one hand, escapism from work serves as a coping mechanism for survival under the difficult circumstances of neoliberal capitalism in America while also presenting a form of rebellion against it (Sharzer 75). Therefore, escapism can be understood as a way "to maintain a sense of freedom and dignity in contexts where these threaten to be engulfed" (Sharzer 75). On the other hand, escapism from work also serves as a capitalist-neoliberal tool to control workers' productivity since it allows workers "to achieve a balance between being physically present and emotionally absent" at work (Sharzer 75).

Human beings naturally experience a need to exert influence and power, to occupy important positions within the system they inhabit, and to acquire status (Sharzer 77). However, only a small number of jobs provide their workers with this

experience, and even these privileged ones still experience a lack of control and anxiety to be perceived as incompetent from time to time. This further leads to a perceived lack of autonomy and dignity among workers, which in turn results in being unable to perceive oneself as an “autonomous, creative being” and the inability to perceive oneself as distinct from others in terms of work and success (Sharzer 77). As Sharzer argues for workers, “being average is shameful” and the inability to recognize and acknowledge oneself and one’s work leads to further “stigma and a low self-worth” (77). This so-called recognition gap can further marginalize workers who suffer from racism, isolation, or poverty (Sharzer 77). Therefore, work is often chosen in comparison to other jobs by the criteria of prestige as well as “the opportunity it affords for escapism” (Sharzer 77). A 2017 study, which involved 160 countries, found that 85% of the 1.2 billion people working full-time are dissatisfied with or experience a strong aversion to their work (Sharzer 78). This hatred of work further leads to alienation from it and leaves escapism as the only possibility for coping with it (Sharzer 78). Consequently, it can be summarized that under the working conditions present in capitalist-neoliberal America the likelihood of practicing escapism is increased.

As previously discussed, escapism is used to escape from reality, particularly from real-life struggles. Mental health issues pose extreme difficulties in everyday life with numerous expectations, which makes mentally ill people often prone to escapism (Jouhki and Oksanen 202). Sharma and Batra highlight the discovery that “[s]tudents with poor mental health or lower psychological capital resort to negative coping mechanisms,” namely dysfunctional escapism (Sharma and Batra 4; Wulf, Breuer and Schmitt 260). According to Fang, Chung, and Wang the “[e]xposure to a traumatic event is a statistically normative experience in the general population” (1). Experience with trauma often also results in further psychological issues and can be seen as a potential “risk factor for psychological disorders” (Fang, Chung, and Wang 1). Posttraumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and drug abuse also often co-occur (Chilcoat and Breslau 913; Brady, Back, and Coffey 206). Using drugs and even abusing them is often a method to escape real-life issues. According to the study conducted by Barrett et al., 53% of the people who suffer from childhood trauma also experience criteria for “a life time mood, anxiety or substance use disorder” (217). Moreover, people who do not acquire healthy coping strategies for regulating their emotions often resort to escapism (Bloom 4). According to Bloom:

[c]hildren who are exposed to repeated experiences of overwhelming arousal do not have the kind of safety and protection that they need for normal brain development.

They may never develop normal modulation of arousal. As a result they are chronically irritable, angry, unable to manage aggression, impulsive, and anxious. (4)

To cope with the challenges of impaired arousal management and a constant state of anxiety, people affected will resort to escapism as an alternative to self-soothing and self-control (Bloom 4). People who experienced a complex, maybe even traumatic childhood are frequently also more prone to having learned abnormal “attachment behaviors, deficits in social-emotional competencies, and persisting difficulties in social functioning and relationship outcomes” (Doyle and Cicchetti 203). Consequently, childhood issues, trauma, and dysfunctional relationships are often connected and increase the likelihood of practicing escapism. Doyle and Cicchetti argue that “a caregiver’s behavior towards the child is the key-determinant of the attachment relationship and the child’s internal working model” (204). Parents and their parental styles, therefore, have a significant impact on the mental health of their children and their tendencies to practice escapism (Doyle and Cicchetti 204). According to Doyle and Cicchetti:

caregivers who are unavailable, low in sensitivity, or inconsistently or inappropriately responsive to a child’s needs promote an insecure attachment relationship. These children may develop ambivalent expectations about their own self-worth and view relationships as hurtful, rejecting, or unsafe. (205)

They further stress that people with difficult childhoods and dysfunctional relationships with their families are also more likely to experience further dysfunctions and mental illnesses (Doyle and Cicchetti 205, 208). It can be concluded that mental health issues, such as trauma, increase the likelihood of people participating in and, consequently, is a common reason of escapism.

3.3. Methods of Escapism

There are various means, but in the following, addiction, as well as consumption as escapist methods, will be discussed since they are the most common and relevant for the context of this thesis.

According to Massah et al., addiction is “the most common psychiatric disorder in the world” (173). Extended drug use and addiction cannot be explained through escapism alone; however, it is confirmed that people consume drugs as an escapist method (Jouhki and Oksanen 209; Sadava, Thistle, and Forsyth 725). Substance abuse does not diminish negative emotions and experiences; nevertheless, “drinking and drug problems have been related to stressful life events and to job-related stress” (Sadava, Thistle, and Forsyth 726). Moreover, Jouhki, and Oksanen found data in their

study that shows that people engaging in substance abuse to escape from stressful reality use drugs “to get out” of and distance themselves from the dissatisfying circumstances of their lives rather than to get high (206). Escapism enables “a warm, fulfilling or blissful experience,” which helps to obliterate unpleasant and distressing feelings, therefore, can cause and preserve addiction (Jouhki and Oksanen 209).

According to Sharzer, labor in capitalist society has oftentimes misled workers to escape into addiction to cope with the strenuous work conditions (8). Addiction and its meaning in the contemporary context are strongly intertwined with capitalism. Through the course of importation, “addiction became an individual rather than a social problem just like capitalist subjectivity itself” (Sharzer 8). The rise of capitalism has promoted individuality, which has resulted in workers’ freedom to choose an employer, further leading to workers being responsible for their employment and all the risks associated with it at work (Sharzer 8). It has also become common to prescribe workers drugs, such as Oxycodone, to endure work conditions but also to improve their performance at work (Sharzer 8). Consequently, to cope with the pressure and responsibility of work, substance abuse and addiction have become standard coping methods (Sharzer 8). Cain et al. also argue that a relationship between job dissatisfaction and substance abuse can be found (4). Issues occurring in the professional sphere affect the non-work environment as well, resulting in negative emotions, which can further lead to self-medication and increased alcohol consumption to escape these strong feelings (Cain et al. 4). Self-medication is understood as making problems at work more tolerable and allowing people to continue with their unsatisfying work, with the risk of leading to addiction (Cain et al. 4). A study conducted by Jouhki and Oksanen, which investigated the connection between escapism and addiction, has likewise shown that there is an evident link between addictive behaviors, such as smoking, drugs and alcohol, and escapism (206).

Mental health issues are another factor that can also lead to escapist addiction. According to Chilcoat and Breslau, comorbidity between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and drug use disorder is quite common (914). In 2019, the Canadian Institute for Health information found that 43% of their patients who received treatment for opioid addiction also suffered from another mental health issue (Sharzer 7). Sharzer argues that people who have an addiction use substance abuse as an escape from the pain they suffer from due to their experiences with “abuse and social neglect” (9). Sharma and Batra have discovered that students with low psychological resilience and

mental illnesses more often use escapist coping methods with adverse effects such as substance abuse than students with good mental health (4).

Sharzer claims that escapism can be seen as “a non-commodified response to exploitation and oppression” present in capitalist society (75). However, it is not independent or untouched by capitalism, as one standard method of escapism being promoted in capitalist-neoliberal America is consumption (Sharzer 75; Orazi et al. 1). Media consumption, as well as the consumption of goods, are capitalist methods that emphasize individuality. “[I]f work is a source of pain, then shopping [...] is its antithesis, the place where individuals encode themselves according to their most joyous desires” (Sharzer 75). Through consuming media and goods people become the subjects of capitalism rather than producers (Sharzer 75). Even public spaces are colonized by entertainment industries targeting the worker’s need to escape (Sharzer 78). “In the cinemas and concert-halls, where we consume its products, we are ‘alone together’, isolated from each other even as we occupy the same space” (Sharzer 78).

Additionally, Mir demonstrates that people’s practice of escapism affects their “online buying behavior” (40). Online shopping can be viewed as a form of escapism, as people often turn to it in adverse circumstances in their lives to cope with unpleasant emotions (Mir 44). “Escapist users consider online shopping to be a means of regulating negative thoughts and emotions” (Mir 44-45). Moreover, compulsive shopping is often a resort to cope with the unfulfilled need to experience affection and the desire to belong (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 103). Compulsive shopping is also often a consequence of consumers repeatedly trying to escape negative emotions and especially anxiety to improve their mood (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 105). Consequently, the result of escaping into consumption to cope with negative, distressing situations and emotions can be compulsive consumption³ (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 105). Compulsive consumption can be identified through increased and hyperactive shopping, online and in-store, hoarding, credit card overuse, gambling as well as uncontrollable media use (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 105). Escapist consumption allows consumer to avoid reality through the fantasies of being socially accepted and experiencing success (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 105). Suppose this is misused, and consumers always resort to it to flee from anxiety-inducing situations and emotions (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 105). In that case, it can lead to people losing the

³ Compulsive consumption is “a response to an uncontrollable drive or desire to obtain, use, or experience a feeling, substance, or activity that leads to an individual to repetitively engage in a behavior that will ultimately cause harm to the individual and/or to others” (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 103).

connection to reality (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 105). Therefore, consumers should be aware of the habit of regularly engaging in impulsive shopping as a method of escapism, as it can signal a loss of self-control, as well as a potential shopping addiction (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 107).

Consumer culture studies have long focused on media consumption as an escapist method (Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini 498; Katz and Foulkes 379). Whenever consumers experience distress, alienation, or deprivation, they tend to consume more media as a means of escape from the unpleasant situation (Katz and Foulkes 380). Binge-watching⁴ is one of the methods of consumer escapism that, according to Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini, allows people to enter a state of hyperdiegesis (498). Due to this phenomenon, “consumers have the ability not just to actively fill in gaps and secure answers within the TV narrative itself but also within their own life-worlds throughout and around the time spent binge-watching” (Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini 498). Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini have found that narrative worlds offer the opportunity for consumers who want to escape “to project their fantasies, concerns, worries, anxieties and problems” onto those fictional worlds created by media (503). The hyperdiegetic function of binge-watching enables people to escape for a more extended period beyond the initial consumption (Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini 504). It presents a larger and richer world to consumers than they have known before (Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini 505-506). Consequently, escapism through consumption enables people to detach from their everyday realities (Orazi et al. 1).

Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt conducted a study on the use of entertainment media, particularly nostalgic media use, during the COVID-19 pandemic as a means of escapism to enhance well-being (258). While the circumstances of this pandemic cannot be equated with other times of distress, the turn of the 21st century has also involved circumstances of uncertainty, as well as has increased stress and insecurities. Therefore, this study has discovered significant insights that are also relevant for this thesis. Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt found that the experience of nostalgia can be triggered by consuming entertainment media (258). Experiencing nostalgia can help people cope with feelings of distress that arise during a crisis (Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt 258). Consuming media that triggers feelings of nostalgia is a successful way to escape negative realities, and it can even “increase psychological well-being” (Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt 259). Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt also highlight that people who

⁴ “the marathon-consumption of serialized content from the same TV show for an extended period of time” (Jones, Cronin, and Piacentini 498).

experience loneliness and boredom and search for meaning resort to nostalgia and the associated thinking about better past times to cope with these negative feelings (260). Seeking experiences of nostalgia can be understood as “an escapist reaction to the demands of the present and an anxiety towards the future” (Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt 260).

4. Analysis of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

The goal of the following analysis of Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (*My Year*) will be to investigate the themes of neoliberal capitalism in early 2000s America and the use of escapism as a coping method, as well as the representation, interrelation, and critique of these themes in the novel, using the method of close reading. Close reading involves analyzing semantics, syntax, repeating patterns, genre, and potential conflicting viewpoints in the text (Greenham 7). Additionally, the methods of Marxist and feminist literary analysis will be employed to explore how *My Year* portrays and critiques topics such as capitalism, competition, classism, alienation, work ethics, as well as gender roles and expectations in the text (Tyson 43-67, 70-115).

Ottessa Moshfegh, born in 1981, is an American author who has received the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and was shortlisted for various other awards (Moshfegh). Her second novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, which Moshfegh published in 2018, has sparked a wave of controversy regarding the unnamed protagonist, with opinions being divided on whether she is likeable or unlikeable, as well as the weirdness and darkness of the protagonist’s year of sleep and drugs (Moshfegh; Goodreads 2024; Smith 2024; Acosta 2020). *My Year* is a novel about a woman in her twenties living in New York City in the early 2000s (Moshfegh). The unnamed narrator-protagonist of the story and remains unnamed throughout the entire story, struggles mentally, primarily due to her dysfunctional relationship with parents, men, and friends, but also due to the seemingly inherent but mysterious misery of the protagonist. To manage her distress, she develops a drug addiction in her pursuit of sleeping for a year, her “year of rest and relaxation”, to cure her issues.

In the following section, I will analyze the novel *My Year* to explore how the text depicts and critiques American society in the early 2000s, particularly in relation to its capitalist and neoliberal values. The text investigates how the ideology of neoliberal capitalism influences the unnamed narrator-protagonist’s life negatively and forces her

into escapism through sleep to endure her suffering in an act of self-transformation with the help of medication and consumption. Moreover, her self-improvement project fails to bring her happiness because it is solely based on capitalist-neoliberal values, which are, initially, the cause of her misery.

4.1. American Society under Neoliberal Capitalism in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

4.1.1. The Urban Landscape of Neoliberal New York: Setting the Scene of *My Year*

The novel takes place from 2000 to 2001 in New York City (Moshfegh). The narrator-protagonist of the novel is twenty-six years old at the beginning of the novel and lives in Yorkville on the Upper East Side of New York City. At the beginning of the story, she works at a high-end art gallery in Chelsea, called Ducat. Her best friend, Reva, lives on the Upper West Side, and Trevor, the protagonist's ex-boyfriend, lives in Tribeca. Her psychiatrist, Dr. Tuttle, also has her office in Manhattan, near Union Square. The protagonist's parents are deceased; they lived upstate and bequeathed their house and their wealth to their daughter. In contrast, Reva's family lives in Farmingdale, on Long Island. All characters involved in the story, except Reva's family, live in Manhattan, and their socioeconomic position could be defined as upper-middle class; only Reva can be classified as lower-middle class due to her financial struggles (Tyson 45). New York City can be seen as a "microcosm of the world", which means that due to its diversity and transnationalism, the city can be interpreted as a place representative of globalization with its dominant capitalist forces such as competition, consumption, and classism (Perlin; Tyson 47). Additionally, it is internationally famous as the city where everything is possible. The story primarily takes place in Manhattan, which can be seen as the center of New York's high society, offering readers a limited perspective of wealthy, privileged (and almost exclusively white) people in New York City, while ignoring the diverse experiences of non-white and non-wealthy individuals living in New York. This restricted perspective indicates that the text critiques white and rich residents of Manhattan, mostly through its language, but it also shows that neoliberal capitalism affects the privileged people negatively as well:

I'd moved into my apartment on East Eighty-fourth Street in 1996, a year after I graduated from Columbia. [...] My neighbors were mostly fortysomething married people without children. Everyone was well-groomed, professional. A lot of camel-hair coats and black leather

briefcases. Burberry scarves and pearl earrings. There were a few loudmouthed single women my age I saw from time to time gabbing on their cell phones and walking their teacup poodles. They reminded me of Reva, but they had more money and less self-loathing, I would guess. This was Yorkville, the Upper East Side. People were uptight. When I shuffled through the lobby in pajamas and slippers on my way to the bodega, I felt like I was committing a crime, but I didn't care. [...] My building was eight stories high, concrete with burgundy awnings, an anonymous facade on a block otherwise lined with pristine town houses, each with its own placard warning people not to let their dogs piss on their stoops because it would damage the brownstone. "Let us honor those who came before us, as well as those who will follow," one sign read. Men took hired cars to work downtown, and women got Botox and boob jobs and vaginal "cinches" to keep their pussies tight for their husbands and personal trainers, or so Reva told me. I had thought the Upper East Side could shield me from the beauty pageants and cockfights of the art scene in which I'd "worked" in Chelsea. But living uptown had infected me with its own virus when I first moved here. I'd tried being one of those blond women speed walking up and down the Esplanade in spandex, Bluetooth in my ear like some self-important asshole, talking to whom – Reva? On the weekends, I did what young women in New York like me were supposed to do, at first: I got colonics and facials and highlights, worked out at an overpriced gym, lay in the hammam there until I went blind, and went out at night in shoes that cut my feet and gave me sciatica. (Moshfegh 27-28)

This crucial passage introduces the setting of the story and highlights the consumerism and classism prevalent in Manhattan's high society, which has also affected the narrator-protagonist. The use of the negatively connoted words "infected" and "virus" suggests that the narrator-protagonist involuntarily has adapted to Manhattan's environment of overconsumption and ostentation, which she regards with disdain in hindsight (Moshfegh). This scene shows how there is an unspoken agreement among wealthy New Yorkers to buy fancy cars, facials, colonics, and cosmetic surgeries not merely to feel better but as a sign of their class status. As Tyson argues, consumerism is inherently capitalist, urging the "purchase of products and services well beyond our basic needs" to stimulate economic growth and success, as represented in the scene above (48). Tyson also explains that "capitalism's survival depends on its ability to make us think of our purchases in terms of their ability to enhance our social status. And this is one of the chief reasons why capitalism is so destructive to our psychological wellbeing [sic]" (53). Consequently, the text demonstrates how capitalism exploits people's insecurities to promote overconsumption, disregarding the harm it causes to individuals' wellness and ties their self-worth to their possessions and capacity to consume (Tyson 53).

Moreover, the ideology of classism, which according to Tyson is the belief that the higher the "social class", the more valuable and important the person, becomes noticeable in *My Year* in the description of the people living on the Upper East Side (50). Even though capitalist-neoliberal America attempts to conceal its class system, *My Year* reveals how the class one belongs to is often highlighted and shapes one's

experience in the United States (Brown 65). That is also the reason why the characters of *My Year* show off what they have. Reva, the only character who is not securely positioned in the upper-middle class, uses fake designer items and overconsumption to become part of high society. However, the narrator-protagonist also feels compelled to prove her class status by consuming unnecessary “colonics and facials and highlights” (Moshfegh 28).

Other capitalist concepts present in *My Year* include competition and individualism. Tyson claims that competitiveness is often presented as an inherently human quality when, in fact, it is used by capitalist societies to push people to constantly crave more than they already have, to strengthen the commitment to work, to increase consumption, and to promote individualism (47-48). In *My Year* competition is especially visible in Reva:

‘It’s not about the men,’ she said. ‘*Women* are so judgmental. They’re always comparing.’
‘But why do you care? It’s not a contest.’

‘Yes, it is. You just can’t see it because you’ve always been the winner.’ (Moshfegh 144)

This scene reveals that Reva constantly compares herself to her best friend and views everything as a competition. Contrasted with her best friend, she perceives herself as less wealthy and less pretty which encourages her to constantly work on both her appearance and her career, increasing both her consumption and productivity. Despite all her efforts and due to individualism, Reva nevertheless “always feels dissatisfied” and as less than her best friend and other high society women (Tyson 48).

Moreover, according to Tyson, individualism “romanticizes the independent, tough, determined individual” (48). It encourages people to focus on themselves and express their individuality, leading to a focus on individual instead of communal well-being (Tyson 48). The protagonist also practices individualism which leads to self-isolation. She withdraws socially, which intensifies her misery unknowingly:

‘We probably shouldn’t be friends,’ I told her, stretching out on the sofa. ‘I’ve been thinking about it, and I see no reason to continue.’

Reva just sat there, kneading her hands against her thighs. After a minute or two of silence, she looked up at me and put a finger under her nose – something she did when she was about to start crying. [...] I pulled my sweater over my head and grit my teeth and tried not to laugh while she sputtered and whined and tried to compose herself.

‘I’m your best friend,’ she said plaintively. ‘You can’t shut me out. That would be very self-destructive.’ (Moshfegh 15-16)

The protagonist constantly pushes her best friend away, arguing that Reva hinders her project of sleeping to cure her misery, but also because the protagonist practices individualism and therefore believes that nobody but herself can help her in her pursuit of happiness. Reva is her only friend and the only one who looks out for her, but the

protagonist struggles to accept and show love, instead preferring to isolate herself. As she reveals while recounting childhood memories, she grew up feeling alone and isolated, which suggests that loneliness and alienation are what she knows best. However, this results in her feeling even more secluded, which she cures by taking “Placidyls or Noctecs or Miltowns when I suspected I was lonely” (Moshfegh 26).

The fact that the story takes place at the beginning of the 2000s highlights the feelings of being lost and miserable, as well as a nostalgia for a better past that was common as the 21st century approached (Sayers 23). Moreover, the word nostalgia⁵ is mentioned five times in *My Year*: “There was no sadness or nostalgia, only disgust that I’d wasted so much time on unnecessary labor” (Moshfegh 49). “Like the nostalgia for a mother I’d seen on television” (Moshfegh 135). “I felt no longing or nostalgia for the clothes” (Moshfegh 281). A “pang of sadness, a twinge of nostalgia” (Moshfegh 221). “But the nostalgia didn’t hit” (Moshfegh 222). The 80s and 90s movies that the protagonist repeatedly watches and finds comfort in also convey a prevalence of nostalgia, indicating that she wants to escape from the looming 21st century and into these films. The text utilizes the story’s setting, specifically New York City in the early 2000s, to illustrate the dominance of neoliberalist capitalism in the United States and its impact on urban citizens. It also demonstrates how New York’s high society actively adopts capitalist-neoliberal values. In the story, the women, namely the protagonist and Reva, suffer the most from these neoliberal processes. The protagonist experiences an inner conflict towards capitalist-neoliberal America. She continuously participates in it, but she also suffers due to the circumstances and calls people participating in it “self-important asshole[s]” (Moshfegh 28). Reva, who desperately craves upward mobility and acceptance in New York’s high society, suffers from the pressure since she utilizes her entire money and energy to realize that goal, only to eventually die in the tragic events of 9/11 which, further highlights the futility of her efforts.

The events of 9/11 are only mentioned in the end, but since the novel takes place from 2000 to 2001, the readers already expect them to be part of the story. 9/11 has impacted America severely and in Tanner’s words, since that day there is a “feeling in the air that something had changed that could not change back” (1). The forecast of the 9/11 attacks intensifies the atmosphere of misery and “homesickness for a lost

⁵ Tanner defines nostalgia as an “emotion of intense longing for things lost. It’s a yearning for a place you can’t get back to, because we are prisoners of the present. It’s a longing for stability and autonomy after losing control” (38).

past” that is present in *My Year* (Sayers 23). After this horrible incident, a new genre has emerged, namely 9/11 literature. While there is not one consistent and stable definition of this kind of literature, there are recurring themes and ideas. For example, many texts of that genre represent and discuss history as traumatic and unsafe (Holloway 107). History is portrayed as an overwhelming, powerful and uncontrollable force which again raises doubts about the existence of participative citizenship (Holloway 107). The text also shows that history and especially reality is uncontrollable and inescapable. Through the hibernation, the protagonist tries to flee from the pain and trauma caused by her reality. Putting 9/11 at the end and simultaneously as the ending of this story, leaving no clues for the protagonist’s future, shows that she cannot avoid either her own or the collective misery and trauma of the United States. Especially early literature did not attempt to precisely represent the attacks, but rather they have tried to capture the feelings and anxieties caused by 9/11 symbolically, especially the fears of U. S. citizens that their government was and would not be able to protect them (Holloway 108). This also becomes visible in *My Year* since the protagonist receives no support and help with her misery. The capitalist-neoliberal American government puts the responsibility on each individual person, leaving them to fend for themselves. Consequently, *My Year* can be also defined as 9/11 literature. Moreover, the occurrence of 9/11 also symbolizes the crash of the intense optimism of neoliberal capitalism as a salvation as well as the end of the ‘American Century’ (Mason 1). By ending *My Year* with the 9/11 attacks the perspective of the novel moves from the personal crisis of the protagonist to a collective trauma, shifting from an individual to a national perspective. By doing this, the text manages to create feelings of insecurity and anxiety about the future of the protagonist and the United States as well as the current and future devastating effects of neoliberal capitalism on American society. It can be argued that the events of 9/11 further strengthened neoliberalism in the United States because of the operations that followed, such as the wars in the Middle East. The Bush administration “was able to exploit the individual and collective grief of the American people” to start the “wars on terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq (Stow 238). While only the war in Afghanistan can be truly linked to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Iraq cannot be seen as just a reaction to it but rather the Bush administration used the terror attacks as a justification to invade Iraq due to the alleged existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) (Stow 238; Schwarz 22). This invasion of Iraq was utilized to accomplish “accumulation by dispossession”, namely the extraction of wealth from Iraq’s population through the imposition of neoliberal values such as open

markets, dismantled welfare and privatization under the excuse of “economic liberalization” (Schwarz 21, 23). Additionally, through neoliberal processes such as privatization the American government has also gained control and access to Iraq’s oil (Schwarz 62). Consequently, mentioning 9/11 at the end of *My Year* further hints at the far-reaching consequences of the American government under neoliberal capitalism.

Lastly, New York City as the setting of *My Year* intensifies the story’s satirical nature. The irony of *My Year* is to put the unnamed protagonist, who wants to sleep for over a year, into a “city that doesn’t sleep” (Sinatra). This city is used as the site of the story to highlight the narrator-protagonist’s unyielding goal of rest in the form of sleep and to offer a satirical critique of New York City, as one of the biggest cities, with its constant offering of activities and opportunities. Moreover, I argue that the bodega also represents the protagonist’s inner conflict regarding capitalist-neoliberal values. It in some way symbolizes capitalism since it is open 24/7 and, consequently, seems as if it would be “immune from time” because it is “unaffected by the diurnal cycles of waking and sleeping” (Greenberg 189). Even though the protagonist does not like to leave her apartment, she, nevertheless, constantly does to visit the bodega. She always orders two large coffees only to immediately take medication as soon as she returns home to enable sleep. This stands in contradiction to itself since caffeine is a stimulant and her medication are sedatives, and still, she cannot stop visiting the bodega during her sleeping project. Therefore, I argue that the bodega symbolizes capitalist-neoliberal America, which constantly lures her in and tries to wake her up, which she can only avoid at the end of the story by locking herself into her apartment.

Overall, this analysis suggests that the text of *My Year* uses early 2000s New York City as a satirical setting of the story to represent and critique capitalist-neoliberal concepts such as classism, competition, individualism, and consumerism, and to foreshadow the intense feelings of nostalgia that mark the 21st century due to the negative impacts of capitalist concepts as well as the 9/11 attacks.

4.1.2. The Role of Sleep in *My Year*

“Things were happening in New York City – they always are” (Moshfegh 4).

To realize her “year of rest and relaxation”, the protagonist plans to sleep for a year, starting with her visit to Dr. Tuttle, her psychiatrist, in January 2000 and ending in June

2001 (Moshfegh). After she loses her job at the art gallery, she can finally fully immerse herself in her sleep project, which she also often refers to as hibernation. The label of 'hibernation' reflects her desire to plunge into an uninterrupted, long sleep that alienates her from the outside and makes her forget her existence. The protagonist is unhappy with her life and hopes that sleeping for a year will heal her struggles:

[E]very time I lay down in that supply closet I went straight into black emptiness, an infinite space of nothingness. [...] It was peaceful. [...] But coming out of sleep was excruciating. My entire life flashed before my eyes in the worst way possible my mind refilling itself with all my lame memories every little thing that had brought me to where I was. I'd try to remember something else – a better version, a happy story, maybe or just an equally lame but different life that would at least be refreshing in its digression – but it never worked. I was always still me. (Moshfegh 40)

This scene occurs before the protagonist starts her hibernation project and describes the naps she takes at her workplace in the art gallery during her lunch breaks. It shows that the protagonist finds comfort in sleeping; it acts as an escape from reality. Every time she wakes up, she remembers her life and experiences intense despair because she desperately wishes for her life to be different. Sleep alone makes her existence bearable because it alienates her from her reality: "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).

The text uses the role of sleeping, on the one hand, as an act of resistance against the 24/7 mentality of capitalist-neoliberal America, which is represented using neoliberal NYC. The United States dreams of a state of sleeplessness and "sleepless worker[s] or consumer[s]" (Crary 3). Crary argues that "24/7 markets and a global infrastructure for continuous work and consumption have been in place for some time" (3). However, sleep is one of the last "'natural barriers' to the full realization of 24/7 capitalism" (Crary 17). Sleep is seen as a hindrance to the "continuous functioning" of human beings (Crary 8). Part of the realization of the 24/7 mentality that have developed over the centuries has been the invention and installation of urban street lights because it "reduced long-standing anxieties about various dangers associated with nocturnal darkness, and it expanded the time frame and thus the profitability of many economic activities" (Crary 16). Consequently, the increased illumination has not only provided heightened security but, more importantly, has enabled prolonged labor and productivity (Crary 16). Moreover, a dystopian vision of constant illumination of the earth to provide "daylight all night long" also exists (Crary 4). Consequently, New York City has been chosen as the setting to represent and challenge this dystopia of 24/7

capitalism since the city provides constant illumination and is known as a “city that doesn’t sleep” (Sinatra).

On the other hand, sleep can also be interpreted as a capitalist method to improve productivity and to increase profit, which becomes visible in the context of *My Year*, as the protagonist utilizes sleep to transform herself. Capitalist-neoliberal American society has acknowledged that “[s]leep poses the idea of human need and interval of time that cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability” (Crary 10-11). This is why, since the turn of the 21st century, there has been a steady rise in research on sleep to determine how to utilize it as a tool to increase productivity (Rogers 306). Sleep science, “the ‘pharmaceuticalization of sleep’⁶” as well as contemporary methods like ‘sleep clinics’ and ‘napping pods’ are strategies of capitalist-neoliberal America to bypass the impossibility of colonizing sleep (Rogers 306, 308-309).

By committing to her sleeping project, the protagonist, at least partially, also reinforces and practices the neoliberal value of self-transformation or self-improvement (Sykes 1-2). Phrases like “[g]ood strong American sleep” as well as “[o]nce I started sleeping fulltime” indicate that the protagonist sees her year of sleeping as a profitable, “American” endeavor, not as lazy and unproductive (Moshfegh 71, 252):

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

The protagonist sees her job at the art gallery as meaningless and a waste of time. However, sleeping matters profoundly to her, carries meaning, and is seen as “productive” (Moshfegh 51). By sleeping, she thinks that she and her life will transform, she will be “reborn”, and her past will be left behind and not trouble her any longer (Moshfegh 51). Her dream of a new and better life through a year of sleep does sound like a utopia that challenges and critiques capitalist-neoliberal America; however, this dream of self-transformation could be classified as the concept of self-improvement, a capitalist-neoliberal value that demands from the neoliberal subject to constantly work on and improve themselves, not only in their work time but also in their leisure time (Kelly 11-12).

⁶ The pharmaceuticalization of sleep describes the process of commodification as well as regulation and control of sleep through medication, for example, sleeping aids or caffeine (Rogers 309).

Moreover, the neoliberal concept of self-improvement is closely tied to individualism, which is also evident in the narrator-protagonist's actions, as she prioritizes her well-being over the welfare of others. Additionally, Sykes argues that the protagonist "embodies a neoliberal feminist sensibility, but her self-transformation exposes the hypocrisy of neoliberal feminism and condemns the oppressive work culture that neoliberal feminism endorses" (2). Consequently, the text highlights the ineffectiveness and unsuccessfulness of neoliberalism and its concepts, such as self-improvement, its work ethic, as well as its utilization of sleep as a capitalist tool. At first, the protagonist thinks that her sleep project is successful because it initially improves her mental state; however, in the story's final scene, it becomes apparent that she falls back into old habits of isolation and escapism to cope with everyday life, which indicates the failure of her sleep project.

In conclusion, the protagonist's sleeping project can be identified as both a resistance against and a compliance to neoliberal capitalism. The ambiguity of the role of sleep in *My Year* highlights the omnipresence of capitalism and the difficulty of freeing oneself from it altogether.

4.1.3. The Capitalist Trap: Escape from the Public into the Private

The protagonist's escape from her misery through sleeping is spatially represented in *My Year* through the differentiation between the public and private realms. The public sphere, as illustrated by the setting of New York City, with its classist and competitive nature, embodies the hardships of neoliberal capitalism. The protagonist wants to escape the pressures of capitalism, which cause her misery, into the private realm of her apartment, where she tries to assert control over herself, her time, and her body. However, the text highlights that this attempt fails because the escape from the public to the private is not left untouched by neoliberal capitalism, but is only made possible through her financial privilege, consumer goods, and pharmaceuticals.

My Year portrays the distinction between the public and the private realm and shows how the protagonist wants to retreat completely into the private to enable her hibernation, but ultimately fails:

When I needed more pills, I ventured out to the Rite Aid three blocks away. That was always a painful passage. Walking up First Avenue, everything made me cringe. I was like a baby being born – the air hurt, the light hurt, the details of the world seemed garish and hostile. (Moshfegh 4)

This scene highlights the significant difference the narrator-protagonist experiences when she leaves the private realm to enter the public one. As Crary explains, citing Hannah Arendt:

For an individual to have political effectiveness, there needed to be a balance, a moving back and forth between the bright, even harsh exposure of public activity and the protected, shielded sphere of domestic and private life, of what [Arendt] calls “the darkness of sheltered existence.” (21)

New York City, especially First Avenue in this context, represents the “harsh” public that exposes the protagonist to a brightly illuminated and frantically busy place (Moshfegh 21). Her apartment portrays the sheltered private sphere, where she hopes to sleep safely and unbothered. According to Arendt, a balance between the public and private sphere is necessary to ensure reality and prevent world alienation (199, 209). She argues that to “be deprived of it [meaning the public space where people appear to each other] means to be deprived of reality, which, humanly and politically speaking, is the same as appearance. To men, the reality of world is guaranteed by the presence of others” (Arendt 199). The protagonist actively rejects public space, as she does not want to appear to others or have others appear to her, but rather to escape completely. She seeks isolation and retreat in this sheltered space of the private sphere, which eventually escalates to her locking herself in and refusing to leave until she feels better. Her choice of words, such as “painful passage” and “the world seemed garish and hostile,” stresses the insecurity, brightness, and even pain she experiences as soon as she leaves her private sphere (Moshfegh 4). Saying that stepping outside feels “like a baby born” also hints at her vulnerability in the public sphere (Moshfegh 4). A baby just born cannot see, cannot articulate its needs, and cannot survive altogether on its own. This metaphor evokes the feeling of the narrator-protagonist being unsafe and unprotected as soon as she leaves her apartment and steps outside into the public, which overwhelms her with its unlimited stimuli, causing irritation, confusion, and a desire to retreat into the safety of her apartment, which symbolizes the safe womb.

The protagonist prefers to stay in her apartment to sleep because it enables her to escape and detach herself from reality and any depressing political event. This ignorance of other people’s problems, because being empathetic is too troubling or painful, reflects again the protagonist’s privilege. People who get discriminated against daily usually do not have the privilege, like the protagonist, to ignore this discrimination and inequality. She also has some experiences with sexism, but she chooses to ignore that instead of fighting for women’s rights because her happiness and survival do not depend on it. Moreover, taking a break from life and work for over a year also requires

privilege, the privilege of belonging to the upper-middle class, where one has more freedom due to financial resources. People from the lower-middle do not have the same possibilities. Even though some people may need to take a break for a year due to extreme burnout, they are not free to do so. They must continue to work to survive. This inequality, rooted in privilege, reflects the classism often present in capitalist societies, as also depicted in *My Year*.

The public sphere also makes the protagonist vulnerable to her feelings and issues, as well as the issues and pain experienced by others, which disrupts her sleep. For example, the death of Reva's mother triggers numerous, intense memories of her parents and their death together with the agony and trauma connected to it, which she tries to suppress through her hibernation. Also, by visiting Reva's family in Farmingdale to attend the funeral of Reva's mother, an unwelcome empathy with Reva and her grief arises in the narrator-protagonist's mind, keeping her from sleeping:

I lay awake for a long time. It was like sitting in a cinema after the lights go down, waiting for the preview to begin. But nothing was happening. I regretted the coffee. I sensed Reva's misery in the room with me. It was the particular sadness of a young women who has lost her mother – complex and angry and soft, yet oddly hopeful. I recognized it. But I didn't feel it inside of me. The sadness was just floating around in the air. It became denser in the graininess of the shadows. The obvious truth was that Reva had loved her mother in a way that I hadn't loved mine. My mother hadn't been easy to love. [...] So the sadness in the room felt canned to me. It felt trite. Like the nostalgia for a mother I'd seen on television. [...] My own mother would have rolled her eyes at the thought of doing that [cooking, cleaning and cuddling her child]. "I'm not your *nanny*," she had often said to me. (Moshfegh 134-135)

"The sadness was just floating around" suggests that the narrator-protagonist feels the pain of grief and loss in Reva's home, as the feelings are present and manifest in the room, but she does not know how to deal with them (Moshfegh 134). Her sensitivity to the grief of others underlines her urge to stay at home to not be confronted with events that trigger her feelings. Being in Reva's childhood home, memories of her parents resurface, which she recounts in detail, revealing the little love she received from them. These unwanted feelings and memories keep her awake and agitated. When Reva's mother dies, she visits the protagonist in her apartment and tells her the news:

'My mom died,' Reva said during a commercial break.

'Shit,' I said.

What else could I have said?

I pulled the blanket across our laps.

'Thanks,' Reva said again crying softly this time.

The ghoulish voice of the TV show's male narrator and Reva's sniffles and sighs should have lulled me to sleep. But I could not sleep. I closed my eyes. When the next episode, about crop circles, started, Reva poled me. 'Are you awake?' I pretended I wasn't. [...] I figured if there were ever a time to hit the sleep hard, it was now. I didn't want to have

to make it through Christmas with the lingering stink of Reva's sadness. I took only one Infermiterol, as directed. (Moshfegh 109)

The narrator-protagonist, even though being in her private space in that scenario, gets confronted with the pain and sadness of her best friend's grief due to Reva's constant, unsolicited visits. Since she cannot or does not want to deal with this sadness, she takes Infermiterol, a fictional drug that will make her fall asleep, only to wake up three days later with no memory of what happened in the past days. This scene shows her first time taking it. She is not aware of the consequences or side effects of the drug yet. However, her psychiatrist, Dr. Tuttle, warns the protagonist that "activity in sleep" could occur (Moshfegh 115). The protagonist, consequently, already suspects that something like this blackout could happen. However, she does not care as long as she can detach emotionally and sleep away her empathy for Reva and her grief. However, when she later realizes that she has not been asleep for three days but has been awake and active during that time, with no recollection of it, she panics. Her goal is to rest, yet the drug-induced sleeping activities disrupt her desired state of passivity. Infermiterol illustrates, in *My Year*, that the protagonist is unable to disengage from either public life or her emotions entirely.

Furthermore, even though the protagonist tries to avoid hearing or seeing any news, to some degree, she cannot steer clear of the troubling events in world politics:

Now more than ever, a movie would have helped me relax. I turned the TV on – ABC7 news – and off. I didn't want to hear about a shooting in the Bronx, a gas explosion on the Lower East Side [...] I got up and took another Nembutal. (Moshfegh 209)

This inevitability of reality underlines Arendt's argument that one must also be exposed to the harsh realities of the public to operate politically effectively (cited in Crary 21). Consequently, to participate in politics and to improve social well-being, one must venture into the public sphere. However, the protagonist is not interested in a social or communal well-being or growth, but only focuses on her wellness and improvement:

TV aroused too much in me, and I'd get compulsive about the remote, clicking around, scoffing at everything and agitating myself. I couldn't handle it. 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)

This passage illustrates how the protagonist begins to distance herself from the world through her retreat from the public realm. According to Rensmann, world alienation includes a “loss of worldliness,” which means that “a common world and a public realm in which humans disclose their individuality, speak with each other, and act together” gets lost (462). The protagonist is overwhelmed by the flood of adverse events happening around the world. She does not want to feel the pain of others since she cannot even cope with her own, and therefore, decides to alienate herself:

I woke up alone on the sofa a few days later. [...] The TV was on at low volume. [...] I listened to the world weather report: floods in India, an earthquake in Guatemala, another blizzard approaching the northeastern United States, fires burning down million-dollar homes in Southern California, ‘but sunny skies in our nation’s capital today as Yasser Arafat visits the White House for talks with Resident Clinton aimed at reviving the stalled peace process in the Middle East. More on that story in a minute’. (Moshfegh 179)

Most of the news that the protagonist encounters is negative, which reflects the *weltschmerz* that news often induce in people due to their negative, pessimistic, and painful nature, as well as the fact that people know “things could and should be better” in the world (Burkeman). The only “good” news is the weather report for the capital of the United States, as President Clinton discusses peace with the Palestinian political leader Yasser Arafat, which still highlights the complex political relationship between the United States and other countries, such as Palestine (Moshfegh 179).

Conclusively, in *My Year*, during her sleep project, the protagonist retreats from the public realm of capitalist-neoliberal New York City and its rest-rejecting 24/7 mentality into the safe and private realm of her apartment, in an attempt to escape capitalism, her emotions, and pain, and find happiness.

4.1.4. Privilege and the Female Experience in *My Year*

Both Reva and the unnamed protagonist are white, privileged women living in Manhattan in the early 2000s, and they are the main protagonists of *My Year*. However, while Reva is situated in the lower-middle class, the unnamed protagonist could be placed in the upper-middle class. Reva grew up on Long Island, where her family still lives, and works as an “executive assistant for an insurance brokerage in Midtown” (Moshfegh 7). She works hard but still struggles financially and is burdened by debt. The unnamed protagonist grew up in upstate New York with wealthy parents whose money she inherited after their death. At the beginning of *My Year*, she works at an art gallery, earning only a small income, and later she stops working entirely for more than

a year. Despite having a lower income than Reva and later even being unemployed, she never struggles financially due to her inheritance. The text utilizes female characters to illustrate how the experiences and the societal status of white women have been shaped by and have depended on their social class.

The differences in Reva's and the unnamed protagonist's social class influence their work experiences and especially their work ethic. Reva's view of work aligns with the new work ethic under neoliberal capitalism, which, according to Kelly, promotes constant self-improvement among employees (11). In the new work regimes of the 21st century, "all aspects of a worker's life have come to be seen as performance related" and consequently need improvement to guarantee work performance (Kelly 10). *My Year* presents Reva as the ideal worker for these capitalist-neoliberal work regimes. She portrays a capitalist-neoliberal work ethic since she constantly tries to improve herself to perform better at work to gain equality at her workplace, which also influences all other aspects of her life (Kelly 11):

"People don't understand what it's like for me," she said.

"They take it for granted that I'm always going to be cheerful. Meanwhile, these assholes think they can go around treating everyone below them like shit. And I'm supposed to giggle and look cute and send their faxes? Fuck them. Let them all go bald and burn in hell." (Moshfegh 7-8)

This scene suggests that Reva's male colleagues at work treat her unfairly due to her gender. Since Reva has an affair with their boss, her colleagues could potentially know that, judge her for it, and think that she has secured her position at work because she sleeps with the boss. Nevertheless, Reva's strong work ethic leads her to strive for a successful career. Even when her boss breaks up with her and mistreats her, due to an unplanned pregnancy, she does not quit her job but continues her goal of becoming a successful career woman. However, Reva shows a strong work ethic not because she believes in its importance, but primarily because her existence relies upon it. Due to her social class, Reva needs to work harder than her best friend since she is dependent on her work income. She constantly needs to prove herself to keep her job, but also to eventually climb up the ladder. Being successful at her job would increase her chances of getting promoted and, consequently, receiving a raise, which would enhance Reva's financial security. The text portrays Reva's desire to achieve upward mobility, aiming to become part of New York's high society and, consequently, attain financial freedom. Due to the myth of the Self-Made Man, men have always been promised upward mobility in American society, regardless of their socioeconomic background (Paul 367). Women have never been the target of the "foundational

narrative of self-making” (Paul 398). The myth of the Self-Made Woman was related to the work that is needed to achieve and maintain “physical attractiveness” (Paul 398). According to Paul, “[w]omen’s upward mobility thus depended on their relations to men” (399). This myth of the Self-Made Woman is represented in *My Year* through Reva, who has an affair with her boss and, as a result, gets promoted and transferred to work at the Twin Towers, which she has always wanted to do. “And I am getting a raise, so that’s good. Plus, I’ve always wanted to work in the World Trade Center” (Moshfegh 206). Reva also makes desperate efforts to improve her physical appearance, believing that beauty will enable her upward mobility.

Additionally, the constant need for self-improvement demanded by the work ethic of the 21st century neoliberalism extends to all aspects of life (Kelly 11). Self-help books and workshops have been used to promote the neoliberal value of self-improvement in women to advance their relationships as well as themselves:

Reva was partial to 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’. (Moshfegh 15)

This quote from *My Year* shows that Reva also resorts to “self-help books and workshops” to improve her body, her career, and her love life (Moshfegh 15). Her efforts remain unsuccessful, but Reva still believes in it because the self-help mantras give her hope and direction in sexist, capitalist America. When the unnamed protagonist gets fired from the art gallery, Reva gives her the following advice: “Take some time off and think about your next move. 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). This quote shows that Reva takes self-help advice seriously and thinks of it as the key to female happiness. She does not know how else to soothe her friend, besides citing unsolicited advice from her self-help books:

‘You’re still obsessed with Trevor, aren’t you,’ Reva said, slurping from her can. ‘I think I have a tumor,’ I replied, ‘in my brain.’ ‘Forget Trevor,’ Reva said. ‘You’ll meet someone better, if you ever leave your apartment.’ She sipped and poured and went on about how ‘it’s all about your attitude,’ and that ‘positive thinking is more powerful than negative thinking, even in equal amounts.’ She’d recently read a book called *How to Attract the Men of Your Dreams Using Self-hypnosis*. (Moshfegh 77)

This scene shows how Reva tries to console the unnamed protagonist about her failed relationship with Trevor by repeating things she heard or read, even though she does

not have a successful and healthy relationship either but suffers due to an unhappy affair with her married boss.

In contrast to Reva, who exhibits typical characteristics of a capitalist-neoliberal work ethic, the protagonist's attitude toward work evolves throughout the story of *My Year*. The protagonist characterizes herself as a WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Protestant): "I once asked her [Reva] whether her jealousy had anything to do with her being Jewish, if she thought things came easier to me because I was a WASP" (Moshfegh 10-11). Since it is mentioned repeatedly in the text, I would argue that the unnamed protagonist's work ethic is influenced by the Protestant Work Ethic, which defines work as "a moral duty pursued for its own sake" (Norris and Inglehart 578). This is why she starts to work at Ducat, hoping to become an artist herself. According to Norris and Inglehart, the protagonist believes in creating art as a "[l]abour [...] performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" (578). However, her position at Ducat does not involve her creating art: "I was fashion candy. Hip décor. I was the bitch who sat behind the desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing indecipherably cool avantgarde outfits. I was told to play dumb if anyone asked a question" (Moshfegh 36-37). At Ducat, she gets objectified, sexualized, and commodified, which eventually makes her realize the superficial and capitalist beliefs of the art scene and that it is entirely different from what she expected, which explains her attitude to her work at Ducat. Consequently, when the unnamed protagonist gets fired from the job, she does not care. However, she is somewhat relieved: "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).

As a result, the text uses Reva to illustrate how lower-middle-class women must work harder and continually strive for more to achieve financial freedom someday. Reva, however, is never able to achieve this goal since she dies in the 9/11 attacks, representing her failure of upward mobility. The unnamed protagonist, in contrast, emphasizes that achieving upward mobility and financial freedom does not guarantee one's happiness.

Lastly, I have interpreted the differences between Reva's and the protagonist's social class as creating feelings of competition in Reva, which portrays how differences in women's experiences create difficulties in using sisterhood as a tool to fight the patriarchy (Tyson 105). Competition is a capitalist ideal that encourages people to compare themselves to others, strive to be better than them, and causes them to

always “feel dissatisfied” (Tyson 50). Reva believes in and practices competition, while the protagonist rather disavows it. The friendship between Reva and the unnamed protagonist was only established since “she [Reva] was the only friend who ever really dared to try to know me. We didn’t get to be friends until later that year.” (Moshfegh 148). As the protagonist repeatedly claims in the story, Reva has been the only girl not intimidated by her beauty, who has talked to her and tried to be friends. However, ironically, Reva regularly shows how jealous she is of her best friend due to her privilege:

Jealousy was one thing Reva didn’t seem to feel the need to hide from me. Ever since we’d formed a friendship, if I told her that something good happened, she’d whine ‘No fair’ often enough that it became kind of a catchphrase that she would toss off casually, her voice flat. It was an automatic response to my good grade, a new shade of lipstick, the last popsicle, my expensive haircut. ‘NO fair.’ I’d make my fingers like a cross and hold them out between us, as though to protect me from her envy and wrath. I once asked her whether her jealousy had anything to do with her being Jewish, if she thought things came easier to me because I was a WASP. ‘It’s not because I’m Jewish [...] It’s because I’m fat.’ (Moshfegh 10-11)

Reva repeatedly shows signs of jealousy towards the protagonist, despite her misery, due to her privilege of being born into the upper-middle class as well as her ‘pretty privilege’: “She saw my struggle with misery as a cruel parody of her own misfortunes” (Moshfegh 14). The protagonist describes herself as being effortlessly beautiful without even trying. She is portrayed as extremely pretty, even during her hibernation when she does not take care of her appearance. She is also portrayed as extremely thin, which bothers Reva the most since she struggles with bulimia: “‘You’ve been sort of distant. And you’re just getting thinner and thinner.’ I think that bothered Reva more than anything. She must have felt I was cheating in the game of skinniness, which she had always worked so hard to play” (Moshfegh 56). Moreover, the protagonist is wealthy due to her parents’ inheritance and enjoys financial freedom. Reva, however, is situated in the lower-middle class; she grew up in more modest surroundings than her best friend, and she constantly struggles financially: “‘Lucky you,’ Reva said. ‘I wouldn’t mind taking time off from work to loaf around, watch movies, and snooze all day, but I’m not complaining. I just don’t have that luxury’” (Moshfegh 12). This scene highlights Reva’s envy of her best friend’s privileged but lonely life. Reva also constantly compares herself to and competes against the women of New York’s high society:

‘It’s not about the men,’ she said. ‘*Women* are so judgmental. They’re always comparing.’

‘But why do you care? It’s not a contest.’

‘Yes, it is. You just can’t see it because you’ve always been the winner.’

'That's ridiculous,' I said. But I knew Reva was right. I was hot shit. [...] Reva was pretty, too, of course. [...]
 'Chill,' I said. 'It's not that big a deal. You think people are going to judge you for not looking like a supermodel?'
 'That's usually the first judgment people make in this city.'
 'What do you care what people think about you? New Yorkers are assholes.'
 'I *care*, okay? I want to fit in. I want to have a nice life.'
 'God, Reva. That's pathetic'. (Moshfegh 144)

This quote indicates that Reva sees every woman, especially her best friend, as a competitor. The protagonist judges Reva for that because she herself never needed to be jealous of other people's wealth or beauty. As Reva argues, the protagonist does not understand the need to compete because she has always been the winner of the competition. However, she also knows the unfulfilling feeling of winning in this competition. She considers Reva's efforts to fit into New York's high society with her fake luxury goods as meaningless because she is aware that it will not ease misery or loneliness. Reva, nevertheless, is portrayed as someone who deems it more important to be rich and thin than happy, just as expected from female neoliberal subjects.

In summary, the text utilizes the characters of the unnamed protagonist and her best friend, Reva, to represent and critique the experiences and standard of living of white, privileged women in early 2000s capitalist-neoliberal America, and how they are shaped by the women's social class.

4.1.5. Satirical Figures of Capitalism: Dr. Tuttle, Ping Xi, and Trevor in *My Year*

My Year further critiques capitalist-neoliberal America through a satirical portrayal of the characters of Dr. Tuttle, Ping Xi, as well as Trevor.

Dr. Tuttle is the psychiatrist of the unnamed protagonist and the only doctor in *My Year*; consequently, she acts as a representative of the (mental) healthcare system of capitalist-neoliberal America. Dr. Tuttle shows how the healthcare system is influenced and shaped by neoliberal capitalism, resulting in the prioritization of the 'pharmaceuticalization'⁷ and medicalization of mental health (Frey 169).

There is a widespread belief that capitalism is responsible for the huge improvements in health that have occurred over the last century and a quarter. Capitalism is seen as the supreme engine of growth and growth is seen as crucial condition for health improvement. But it is not. Poor countries can and sometimes do have better health than rich ones. The US is held up as a 'world leader' in medicine, when it is really a world leader in healthcare market failure, spending almost a fifth of its huge national income to produce overall health outcomes little better, and in some respects, worse than those of neighbouring Cuba [...] The private health industry has successfully resisted all efforts to introduce a universal healthcare system in the US [...] It [the

⁷ "'Pharmaceuticalization' refers to a rise in chemical solutions offered for a growing list of issues in everyday life, including those that were not traditionally captured by a medical framework" (Frey 169).

private health industry] has also increasingly subordinated health research and training to its interest. And the era of neoliberalism has demonstrated once again how capitalism still fosters or at least perpetuates ill-health in today's new medical environment. (Leys 1-3)

Leys argues that the belief that the United States leads in the medical field is flawed due to its neoliberal influences (1-3). Neoliberal capitalism has significantly influenced healthcare in the United States, leading to the widespread adoption of capitalist-neoliberal values, including individualism and privatization, within the healthcare system. According to Leys, despite social relations being “key determinants of the health of populations,” they are ignored or even concealed by the U.S. government (8). Health policies often overlook the social causes of illness, despite numerous “state-dependent measures” that could improve overall health (Leys 8-9). Capitalist-neoliberal America tends to promote individualism, with an emphasis on “taking responsibility for one’s own health” (Leys 9). Zeira argues that neoliberal capitalism, with its values, “does not just increase distress and contribute to rising rates of psychiatric disorders, it also dictates how we go about diagnosis and treatment of mental distress” (209). Hence, neoliberal capitalism influences health, physical and mental, in a harmful way. Besides its negative influences on health, neoliberal capitalism also shapes how the United States treats illnesses, favoring profitability over health (Zeira 209). According to Zeira, “the practice of psychiatry has changed in the neoliberal era” (210). In 1980, the release of the DSM III has marked a significant shift in psychiatry towards a biological approach. The pharmaceutical industry has used this shift to promote a connection between the “DSM descriptive diagnoses” and biological abnormalities and promote psychiatric medication as treatment (Zeira 210).

The healthcare system under neoliberal capitalism, consequently, functions as a form of social control, promoting self-monitoring (Zeira 210). Additionally, in capitalist-neoliberal America, “[h]ealth care is considered a commodity rather than a social right,” causing unequal access to healthcare and a prioritization of pharmaceuticals (Zeira 210). The medicalization of mental health is preferred under neoliberal capitalism because it is time-efficient and enables the development of work-ready and well-managed individuals (Zeira 210; Esposito and Perez 424). *My Year* and its use of the psychiatrist, Dr. Tuttle, represents a mockery of the American healthcare system and its belief in encouraging people to “chemically modify themselves to better adjust to the market reality demanded by neoliberalism” since Dr. Tuttle’s character is portrayed as extremely irresponsible with her prescription of numerous serious drugs that cause addiction (Esposito and Perez 425). Her inability to remember the protagonist’s family

history shows that she lacks the time to treat the protagonist thoroughly and prefers to ease her patient's misery through medication quickly. She never adopts medical procedures of psychiatry, such as inquiry into the patient's past; however, she finds concerning explanations for the protagonist's misery that remind one of conspiracy theories: "The biggest threats to brains nowadays are all the microwave ovens." (Moshfegh 18). She never recommends her patient psychotherapy for her trauma, nor advises her to seek further professional help. The text shows, in a satirical manner, how the relationship between the protagonist and Dr. Tuttle is one of transaction:

She wasn't a good doctor. I had found her name in the phone book [...] I liked to think that I picked Dr. Tuttle at random, that there was something fated about our relationship, divine in some way, but in truth, she'd been the only psychiatrist to answer the phone at eleven at night on a Tuesday. I'd left a dozen of messages on answering machines by the time Dr. Tuttle picked up. (Moshfegh 18)

The protagonist even acknowledges that Dr. Tuttle is not a good psychiatrist, but that she needs medication to sleep, while Dr. Tuttle needs a quick and efficient method to earn money. The language used to portray Dr. Tuttle to the readers is extremely satirical and even comical:

'Are you FBI?'
'No.'
'CIA?'
'No, why?'
'I just have to ask these questions. Are you DEA? FDA? NICB? NHCAA? Are you a private investigator hired by any private or governmental entity? Do you work for a medical insurance company? Are you a drug dealer? Drug addict? Are you a clinician? A med student? Getting pills for an abusive boyfriend or employer? NASA?' (Moshfegh 18-19)

This dialogue, which shows the first interaction between the protagonist and her psychiatrist, portrays Dr. Tuttle's eccentric behavior as well as her mental instability, which suggests concerns about her qualifications to treat mental illnesses ethically. When the protagonist mentions that she probably has PTSD due to her mother's suicide, the psychiatrist merely questions the method of suicide, only to then respond: "Good to know." (Moshfegh 21). When the protagonist first meets Dr. Tuttle in her home office she reports of a bizarre encounter with a "wooden bowl of peanuts in an abalone shell" on the bathroom sink, as well as Dr. Tuttle greeting her in a "foam neck brace because of a 'taxi accident', holding an obese tabby, whom she introduces as 'my eldest'" all of which seems rather bizarre for a doctor" (Moshfegh 20). Moreover, Dr. Tuttle seems convinced that mental issues can be solved through psychotropic medication. She even tells the protagonist: "'People like your mother,' Dr. Tuttle replied, shaking her head, 'give psychotropic medication a bad reputation'", when she tells the

psychiatrist that her mother mixed medication with alcohol to commit suicide (Moshfegh 81). But then she also tells the protagonist there is “no way to know how these medications will affect you” after prescribing her new client a list of numerous, addictive drugs (Moshfegh 25). Lastly, Dr. Tuttle constantly mentions the insurance companies and ways to satisfy them: “‘I’m very good with insurance companies,’ she said matter-of-factly. ‘I know how to play into their little games’” (Moshfegh 22). “‘Try these,’ she said, handing me a sheath of prescriptions. ‘Don’t fill them all at once. We need to stagger them so as not to raise any red flags.’” (Moshfegh 24). The role of Dr. Tuttle shows and critiques the commodification of mental health and the commercialization of psychiatry, which is portrayed in *My Year*.

Ping Xi is one of the resident artists at Ducat. *My Year* uses Ping Xi with his ridiculous and satirical art projects to represent and critique the art scene and its prioritization of profit over meaningful art:

Ping Xi’s work first appeared at Ducat as part of a group show called “Body of Substance,” and it consisted of splatter paintings, à la Jackson Pollock, made from his own ejaculate. He claimed that he’d stuck a tiny pellet of powdered colored pigment into the tip of his penis and masturbated onto huge canvases. He titled the abstract paintings as though each had some deep, dark political meaning. *Blood-Dimmed Tide*, and *wintertime in HO Chi Ming City*. (Moshfegh 37)

The protagonist comprehends that Ping Xi is more interested in fame and profit than creating timeless, valuable art. She does not acknowledge him as a good artist, but she thinks that he markets his art smartly to gain profit. The art scene in *My Year* is also portrayed as heavily influenced by neoliberal capitalism, and art is presented as a commodity:

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. I was perfectly happy to wipe out all that garbage from my mind. (Moshfegh 182-183)

The protagonist sees art as “a sacred human ritual”, and she would have loved to become an artist herself: “I wanted to become an artist, but I had no talent” (Moshfegh 16). She does not think of art in terms of its value and how much profit she can make with it. She studied art history because she loves art, and the only dream or aspiration in life she has ever articulated is of becoming an artist. However, due to her experience at Ducat, she realizes that the art scene differs from what she expected. Not everyone

views art as a sacred ritual, but most artists at Ducat prioritize financial gain. Therefore, she compares the art world to the stock market to highlight the role of capitalism in the scene. The passage also perfectly shows the protagonist's rejection of capitalist commodification.

Finally, Trevor, the protagonist's ex-boyfriend, is portrayed as a self-absorbed, arrogant, and wealthy banker working in New York City. He presents the perfect example of a neoliberal subject due to capitalism preferring and privileging masculinity, whiteness, and youth (Kelly 15):

He was thirty-three, worked for Fuji Bank at the World Trade Center, wore tailored suits, sent cars to pick me up at my dorm, then the sorority house sophomore year, wined and dined me, and asked for head with no shame in the back of cabs he charged to the company account. (Moshfegh 29-30)

Additionally, he is portrayed as emotionally unavailable towards the protagonist, not only after their relationship, but also during it. Generally, Trevor mistreats women and is only interested in himself and his career:

Over the next eight years, 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. I dated guys from time to time, but there was never another real "boyfriend," if I could even call Trevor that. He wouldn't have agreed to carry that title. (Moshfegh 30-31)

The text uses Trevor to represent and critique the superficiality and emotional vacuity of the privileged class. All interactions between the protagonist and Trevor exemplify the superficial and self-centered nature of relationships within the social elite. The character of Trevor represents the emptiness that is characteristic of a life rejecting emotional commitment. He is portrayed as a man who desperately wants to be perceived as a cool, wealthy businessman; however, he mistreats the protagonist, showing no respect to women. The protagonist is not impressed at all but thinks that: "his apartment made him seem pathetic – status seeking, conformist, shallow" (Moshfegh 100). The representation of Trevor intensifies the text's mockery of capitalist-neoliberal America.

As a result, the novel employs mocking and satirical language to portray side characters, highlighting the superficiality, profit orientation, and self-centeredness of individuals participating in neoliberal capitalism, as well as the destructive consequences of this system, which particularly affects the protagonist. Her misery and her resulting alienation underscore the system's inescapable harm.

4.2. Escapism in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

4.2.1. Mental Health Issues and Work as Triggers for Escapism in *My Year*

Escapism plays an essential role in the novel written by Ottessa Moshfegh. As discussed in chapter 3, escapism can be defined as seeking escape from reality and its problems, and the protagonist's plan to sleep for a year aligns the description of escapism (Jouhki and Oksanen 202). Sharzer additionally defines contemporary escapism as "the desire to run from circumstances that do not allow actual change" (1). The protagonist, however, thinks that her escape from reality through sleep will change the circumstances that fuel her misery. According to Igorevna's categorization of escapism, the protagonist's sleep practice can be defined as avoiding, passive, and extreme escapism (104; see Chapter 3). Consequently, she tries everything in her power to escape her life, hoping to be able to escape it permanently. In *My Year*, escapism, consequently, symbolizes her salvation from her misery. However, where does this severe misery come from that prompt her to make such a radical decision to sleep for a year and escape reality completely, eventually transforming it?

I argue that the protagonist's decision to hibernate stems from her mental health issues and the toxic work circumstances that do not support but worsen her mental health. She never discusses or admits to having mental health issues but only ever speaks of her "misery" (Moshfegh 14, 18, 134, and 156). This misery, nevertheless, seems to have had a profound impact on her life and stands in the way of her happiness. The following analysis suggests that the protagonist experiences such an intense psychological distress due to her limited experience of relationships, mostly dysfunctional, and the loss of her parents in the past, which has created trauma leading to her misery. She most likely suffers from PTSD due to her neglectful upbringing by her parents, both their deaths within a short period, as well as her mother's suicide. Some of the symptoms that she exhibits that would fit the illness are "[r]eoccurring memories or dreams related to the events", "[s]taying away from places, events, or objects that are reminders of the experience", "[e]ngaging in risky, reckless, or destructive behavior", "[f]eelings of social isolation" and "[d]ifficulty feeling positive emotions, such as happiness or satisfaction" (National Institute of Mental Health). When the mother of the protagonist's best friend, Reva, was sick with cancer and near death, the protagonist could not talk or think about it because it reminds her of her own parents' death, which she still has not been able to process:

My parents died one after the other my junior year of college – first my dad from cancer, then my mother from pills and alcohol six weeks later. All of this, the tragedy of my past, came reeling back with great force that night I woke up in the supply closet at Ducat for the last time. (Moshfegh 49)

This quote from the novel shows that the protagonist herself calls the death of her parents a “tragedy” which still haunts her (Moshfegh 49). Later in the story, she recounts her parents’ deaths and discusses that her mother took her own life after her father died from cancer:

She took herself out before we could ever have a real conversation. [...] She left a note. [...] The letter was totally unoriginal. She felt she wasn’t equipped to handle life, she wrote, that she felt like an alien, a freak, that consciousness was intolerable and that she was scared of going crazy. ‘Good-bye,’ she wrote, then gave a list of people she’d known. I was sixth on the list of twenty-five. (152)

This scene illustrates how the protagonist’s mother abandoned her and left her alone to deal with now two deaths. Additionally, even before her parents’ deaths, the protagonist grew up in an environment that was not stable or loving:

There were moments when I was little, my mother could make me feel very special, stroking my hair [...] But the next moment she’d be in a haze, distracted, suffering from some grave fear or worry and struggling to put up with even the thought of me. ‘I can’t listen to you now,’ she’d say in these moments. (Moshfegh 64)

This quote also demonstrates how her mother treated her with little love and affection; however, her father was no better:

When I was growing up, we’d pass each other in the hallway in the morning like strangers. He was serious, sterile, a scientist. He seemed much more at ease around his students than with me or my mother. [...] The most personal thing he’d told me was that his parents had died in a boating accident the year after I was born. (Moshfegh 137)

According to Doyle and Cicchetti, when parents behave like the ones of the protagonist, namely unavailable, insensitive, and unresponsive, they foster an “insecure attachment relationship” with their child (205). Developing an insecure attachment as a child can lead to issues with self-worth and relationships. Children who grow up in such an environment often struggle to see relationships with other people as any different than “hurtful, rejecting, or unsafe” (Doyle and Cicchetti 205). This view would also explain why the protagonist isolates herself and does not want to form meaningful relationships besides her ambiguous relations to her friend Reva and her ex-boyfriend Trevor. Trevor never fully intends to commit to the protagonist; instead, he uses her to satisfy his own needs. Even though their relationship has ended for some time at the start of her sleep project, she repeatedly has urges to contact him. “I still couldn’t accept that Trevor was a loser and a moron. I didn’t want to believe that

I could have degraded myself for someone who didn't deserve it [...] But I was determined to sleep it away" (Moshfegh 76). She knows that he is not a good person, but she still cannot stop thinking and reaching out for him. She degrades herself as well for him, which reflects that she does not value herself much. Reva is described as the protagonist's best friend; however, the protagonist often seems to dislike her character. Reva is intensely jealous of her friend and her privilege, and consequently, does not believe that she has enough problems to be miserable about, and her resentment makes their friendship difficult.

Nevertheless, at the same time, Reva is the protagonist's only friend. "Besides my psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle, my friend Reva, and the doormen at my building, the Egyptians were the only people I saw in a regular basis" (Moshfegh 4). The protagonist has never learned how to form meaningful bonds with others because of her dysfunctional attachment to her parents, which taught her that relationships are unsafe and that she is not worthy of love. She became cautious of other people, which is why she keeps them at a distance, even Reva, and cannot let them come close to her. "I love you, Reva," I heard myself say from so far away. 'I'm really sorry about your mom'" (Moshfegh 177). In this scene, the protagonist utters these words to her friend for the first time and is also only able to because she is intoxicated, and she cannot even remember it when she wakes up again. Her isolation results in the protagonist being incredibly lonely, which intensifies her misery and urge to escape. Consequently, due to her complicated relationship with her parents, her lack of meaningful, loving connections with people, as well as the trauma of her parents' death, I would assert that the protagonist struggles immensely with her mental health. The psychological stress is so intense that she even shows signs of suicidal ideation: "It wouldn't be that bad to die, I thought" (Moshfegh 170). To her, the only relief from her pain is sleeping it away because sleep saves her "from the miseries of my waking consciousness" (Moshfegh 46). "My hope was that I'd healed enough over half a year's hibernation, I'd become immune to painful memories" (Moshfegh 137). According to Barrett et al., the "[e]xposure to childhood trauma (CT) can have severe and enduring effects including the development of mental health disorders" (217). I propose that the protagonist has experienced trauma during her childhood, which still influences her mental health negatively. Moreover, it becomes visible to me that due to her mental health issues, the protagonist resorts to escapism to save herself. Through practicing escapism, she also emotionally dissociates. Her bad mental health and the painful memories of the

past that keep coming back to her escalate her misery. Through the medication, she numbs her thoughts and feelings:

Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything. I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the world around me. (Moshfegh 17-18)

This scene suggests that the protagonist's misery is unbearable, so she is forced to try to emotionally dissociate to hopefully be able to turn off her emotions and feelings, because, otherwise, they would become impossible to handle for her. "I kept my head down, away from the biting air and the joy of holiday. I didn't want to be reminded of Christmases past. No associations, no heartstrings snagged on a tree in a window, no memories" (Moshfegh 103). Her escapism through substance abuse and sleep makes it appear that she successfully managed to detach from her feelings. Even during the holidays, when she is completely lonely, the protagonist shows no signs of misery. The escapism allows her to dissociate completely from her feelings and emotions, and throughout the entire novel, she is unable to connect to and express them adequately. The text also prevents the readers from identifying and connecting to the protagonist's feelings. The readers are limited to the protagonist's rare display of emotions, which is also not always trustworthy due to her unreliability. When Reva's mother dies, she says that she just cannot bring herself to feel sad. When she sees Trevor, when she experiences blackouts due to the drug Infermiterol and has no idea what happened in the past three days, or even when she masturbates, she does not let on what or if she feels. The protagonist's lack of emotional display represents her complete detachment from and suppression of her feelings through escapism, which serves to soothe her misery. The only signs of emotions take place during the protagonist's blackouts:

The videos described were of me talking into the camera, seeming to narrate some personal stories – I cry in one – but Ping Xi had dubbed everything over. Instead of my voice, you heard long, angry voice mails Ping Xi's mother had left him in Cantonese. (Moshfegh 284)

The readers, like the protagonist, are unaware of what happened during the blackouts, which further emphasizes the image of the protagonist's suppression of her feelings through escapism. Additionally, at the beginning, her sleeping project works well to escape her feelings. However, as soon as she starts taking Infermiterol, all the other drugs become ineffective, and her hibernation gets disturbed. This results in the protagonist's misery heightening again. At some point in the novel, she imagines that she opens the door to her apartment and enters a new, happy, and not miserable life:

I suppose a part of me wished that when I put my key in the door, it would magically open into a different apartment, a different life, a place so bright with joy and excitement that I'd be temporary blinded when I first saw it. [...] I'd drop the keys and the coffee and wander in, spinning around with my jaw hanging open, shocked at the transformation of my dim, gray apartment into a paradise of realized dreams. But what would it look like exactly? I had no idea. When I tried to imagine this new place, all I could come up with was a cheesy mural of a rainbow. (Moshfegh 105-106)

This scene highlights the desire of the protagonist to experience true "joy and excitement" and to have a life that is worth living for and not only tolerable through escapism (Moshfegh 105). The obstacle to her plan and her happiness, as visible in this scene, is that she cannot even imagine a life in which she would be happy and how that would look. That is why she can only resort to escaping her reality to endure it.

In addition to the mental health issues, the protagonist's work at the art gallery and the circumstances of it do not offer support to her misery. However, instead it portrays a representation of capitalist-neoliberal America where labor and generating profit are valued and prioritized over the worker's mental health (Zeira 207-209). According to Zeira, neoliberal capitalism in the United States overall has caused "increased rates of mental illness, substance abuse, and suicide" (207). The working condition of the protagonist increases her suffering. The text illustrates how the protagonist herself is commodified to deliver profit:

Natasha had cast me as the jaded underling [...] I was fashion candy. Hip décor. I was the bitch who sat behind a desk and ignored you when you walked into the gallery, a pouty knockout wearing indecipherably cool avantgarde outfits. I was told to play dumb if anyone asked a question [...] Natasha paid me just \$22,000 a year. Without my inheritance, I would have been forced to find a job that paid more money. And I would probably have had to live in Brooklyn, with roommates. I was lucky to have my dead parents' money, I knew, but that was also depressing. (Moshfegh 36-37)

To cope with the work ethic and circumstances, the protagonist already practices escapism while she still works at Ducat during her lunch breaks by napping in a storage closet. Practicing escapism allows her to "achieve a balance between being physically present and emotionally absent," like many workers do to endure their work-life (Sharzer 75). Escapism enables her not to quit the job while she suffers mentally. However, when her mental health declines increasingly and visibly, her boss dismisses her from the job instead of offering her help, even though the protagonist visibly struggles:

Over the final few months, I had stopped dressing up for work. I just sat at my desk in a hooded sweatshirt, three-day-old mascara caked and smeared around my eyes. I lost things. I confused things. [...] Natasha couldn't hide her irritation. 'When people walk

in, you make an impression on my behalf. [...]’ She thought I was on drugs, I’m sure. (42-43)

This scene shows that her boss, Natasha, notices the changes in the protagonist’s behavior and her decline in mental health, but does nothing to support her. By firing her, Natasha removes the last source of stability, routine, and social interaction from the protagonist’s life.

In summary, this analysis suggests that the psychological distress caused by the protagonist’s mental health issues and increased through the superficial, capitalist-neoliberal characteristics of her job, results in her decision to escape her reality and feelings entirely through substance abuse and sleeping for a year as a coping method for her misery.

4.2.2. Consumption and Addiction as Forms of Escapism in *My Year*

My Year is an illustrative literary case of the practice of escapism, demonstrating how overconsumption and addiction function as deliberate and interlinked tools to escape one’s misery in capitalist-neoliberal America.

At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist explains how she starts seeing the psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle, which is the beginning of her addiction to psychotropic medication:

I can’t point to any one event that resulted in my decision to go into hibernation. Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything. I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the world around me. I started seeing Dr. Tuttle in January 2000. It started off very innocently: I was plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to *escape* the prison of my mind and body. Dr. Tuttle confirmed that this was nothing unusual. She wasn’t a good doctor. I had found her name in the phone book. (Moshfegh 17-18, emphasis added)

As the protagonist confesses in this quote, the initial goal of her visit to Dr. Tuttle is to get a prescription for sedatives because her mental pain becomes unbearable. Only later does things escalate, and she thinks that she can sleep her pain away through drug-induced hibernation. Dr. Tuttle never learns the protagonist’s true goal, but she also does not inquire much and happily prescribes her a vast mix of drugs. Consequently, shortly after her first visit to Dr. Tuttle, the protagonist develops a dependence on psychotropic medication. Dr. Tuttle is a key factor in the escapism of the protagonist since she provides her with a seemingly unlimited number of drugs. Throughout her visits to the psychiatrist, the protagonist fills prescriptions for and consumes numerous pills such as Trazodone, Ambien, Solfoton, Neuroproxin,

Seconal, Nembutal, Librium, Miltown, Noctec, Placidyl, Silenor, Valdigore, Maxiphenphen, Valium, Lithium, Ativan, Xanax, Klonopin, Seroquel, Lunesta, Percocet, as well as the fictional Infermiterol (Moshfegh). This long list of drugs includes different types of psychotropic medication, among others, there are antidepressants, anxiety medication, sleeping pills, as well as antipsychotics and sedatives.

The “side effects and warnings” on the Internet were discouraging, and anxieties over them amplified the volume of my thoughts, which was the exact opposite of what I hoped the pills would do. So I filled prescriptions for things like Neuroproxin, Maxiphenphen, Valdigore, and Silencior and threw them into the mix now and then, but mostly I took sleeping aids in large doses, and supplemented them with Seconals or Nembutals when I was irritable, Valiums or Libriums when I suspected that I was sad, and Placidyls or Noctecs or Miltowns when I suspected I was lonely. (Moshfegh 25-26)

This scene highlights how the protagonist uses the pills to escape uncomfortable feelings, like sadness or loneliness. She uses various drugs to drown out uncomfortable emotions, to avoid feeling them. Consequently, the protagonist uses her medication as escapism and eventually develops an addiction. I also previously argued that the protagonist seemingly suffers from PTSD due to childhood trauma and her mother’s suicide. According to Chilcoat and Breslau, PTSD “is highly comorbid with other psychiatric disorders, including drug dependence” (914). Consequently, if the protagonist indeed has PTSD, this would be a risk factor for her developing an addiction. Moreover, Jouhki and Oksanen argue that people who consume drugs as an escapist method want to “get out of” their troubling reality more than they want to get high (206). They further claim that this type of escapism enables the consumer to suppress negative experiences, memories or feelings while simultaneously feeling happier because of the drugs, which can often lead to an addiction and further sustain it (Jouhki and Oksanen 209). However, the protagonist denies her addiction:

But she was right about me. I was ‘on drugs’. I took upwards of a dozen pills a day. But it was all very regulated, I thought. It was all totally aboveboard. I just wanted to sleep all the time. I had a plan. ‘I’m not a junkie or something,’ I said defensively. ‘I’m taking some time off. This is my year of rest and relaxation.’ (11-12)

She admits that she is “on drugs” and that she takes numerous pills every day; nevertheless, she stresses that her drug consumption is “regulated” and even “totally aboveboard” and that she is not a “junkie” (Moshfegh 11-12). The protagonist feels good about her decision to sleep for a year, and she truly believes that she will get better due to the sleep project. For her hibernation to be successful, she needs the pills; otherwise, she would never be able to sleep so much. Therefore, she cannot

admit that she got addicted. Her mother also took lots of drugs, and it could be said that she also had an addiction. She even committed suicide by mixing alcohol with too many pills. The protagonist, consequently, has experience with people with addictions, and she most likely seeks to avoid becoming like her mother. However, this familiarity might also give her some feelings of comfort.

Since the drugs the protagonist consumes are psychotropic medications, which she gets prescribed by a doctor and therefore, are legal, one might question whether addiction or substance abuse is the correct term to describe the protagonist's consumption. According to Chilcoat and Breslau, addiction (or substance abuse/dependence) is diagnosed according to the following criteria:

A diagnosis of prescribed psychoactive drug A/D [=Abuse/Dependence] was based on symptoms due to 1 or 2 types of drug use: (1) extramedical use (e.g, used on one's own to get high) of 3 categories of drugs that often are prescribed stimulants (e.g, amphetamines), sedatives or tranquilizers (e.g, barbiturates, sleeping pills, Seconal, Valium, Librium, Quaalude, Xanax), and opiates other than heroin (e.g, codeine, Demerol, morphine, Percodan, methadone, Darvon, and Dilaudid), and (2) use as prescribed of a tranquilizer, sedative, pain pill, antidepressant, or headache medicine every day for 2 weeks or more. The second type of prescribed psychoactive drug A/D defines persons who became dependent despite adherence to medical instructions. (Chilcoat and Breslau 914)

Since the protagonist lies to Dr. Tuttle about her sleep project to avoid raising any concerns, the protagonist uses the "prescribed psychoactive" drugs not as instructed but for her own purposes (Chilcoat and Breslau 914). The protagonist's drug-consuming habits would therefore fall into the first category of prescribed drug usages that can lead to an addiction according to Chilcoat and Breslau (914). The protagonist also consumes two out of the three categories of drugs that, when used differently than instructed, could lead to an addiction, namely sedatives and opioids. Consequently, this suggests that the protagonist has developed an addiction to successfully escape her feelings and her life through the consumption of prescribed psychotropic drugs. The following scene stresses this argument that she has developed an addiction to escape reality. It shows how she reacts when she wakes up and cannot find her drug collection anymore, and assumes that her best friend, Reva, took them:

'Reva,' I said into her voice mail. She was a coward, I thought. She was an idiot. 'Are you a medical doctor? Are you some kind of expert? If my shit isn't back in that medicine cabinet by tonight, we are done. Our friendship is over. I will never want to see you again. That is, if I'm even alive. Did it occur to you that you might not know the whole story behind my condition? And that there would be harmful consequences if I just all of a sudden stopped taking my medicine? If I don't take it, I could go into seizure, Reva. Aneurysm. Neurotic shock. OK? Total cellular collapse! You'd feel pretty sorry if I'd died because of you. I don't know how you'd live with yourself then. How much puke and StairMaster would it take to get over something like *that*, huh? You know that killing

someone you love is the ultimate self-destructive act. Grow up, Reva. Is this a cry for help? It's pretty fucking pathetic, if it is. Anyway, call me back. I'm waiting. And honestly, I don't feel very well'. (242)

Throughout the entire story, the protagonist remains passive and rarely reveals her feelings, as she is often intoxicated. However, when the drugs disappear, and she cannot escape and suppress her feelings anymore, she starts to panic and becomes enraged with her best friend. "If Reva's body was hanging by the neck behind the bath curtain, I might have just gone home" (Moshfegh 252). Sudden bursts of anger and panic are common with addicts when they have no access to drugs, and they fear a withdrawal.

It is not enough for the protagonist to escape reality through drugs occasionally. She needs a permanent solution to change her life, which to her can only be a year of sleeping. The first half of her "year of rest and relaxation" she, therefore, consumes numerous drugs to be able to sleep fulltime and develops an addiction (Moshfegh). Then a change of plans occurs. Dr. Tuttle prescribes the protagonist the fictional drug called Infermiterol. At first, she is hesitant about consuming it; however, when her best friend's mother dies, she consumes Infermiterol for the first time. Reva's loss conjures memories of the protagonist's grief over her parents, causing desperation to sleep and feel nothing. When consumed, the Infermiterol seems to cause a blackout for three days. Only after waking up does the protagonist learn that she was awake during those three days without being able to remember anything upon waking. Gradually, she discovers that she engages in various activities during those blackouts, including online shopping, booking appointments, sexting with strangers on the Internet, and partying with people she dislikes, such as Ping Xi. At first, she feels uncomfortable with her behavior during the blackouts, but she continues to take it. When her cognitive awareness is suddenly restored after the blackout, she finds herself on a train going to Long Island to attend the funeral of Reva's mother, leaving the safe space of her apartment and not having any drugs with her to escape, she decides to stop taking the Infermiterol. Oddly enough, the consumption of Infermiterol makes every other drug ineffective:

In the past, this supply of medication would have been enough for a month of moderate sleeping, nothing too deep if I was conservative with the Ambien. But I knew in my heart that they were all useless now – a collection of foreign currency, a gun with no bullets. The Infermiterol had made all other drugs moot. (Moshfegh 218-219)

When her stash of drugs has disappeared after she wakes up after taking Infermiterol, she knows that she must change something. Since Infermiterol is the only drug left that

can put her to sleep, she develops the plan to lock herself into her apartment with Ping Xi as her 'prison guard'. In return, he is allowed to take photos and videos of her during her blackouts and use them for his new art project. Consequently, the protagonist plans and proceeds to sleep almost uninterruptedly for the second half of her "year of rest and relaxation", to be precise, for four months (Moshfegh). The text employs the fictional drug Infermiterol and the protagonist's final sleep project to illustrate her determination to transform her life through the ultimate form of self-isolation: self-confinement. The use of the drug in the novel stresses the protagonist's misery. She is willing to be locked up under the watch of Ping Xi, a former work colleague whom she neither likes nor trusts, to be able to sleep for four months to cure her misery. The Infermiterol also leads and determines the course of action in the novel. The protagonist initially planned to transform her life by staying in her apartment and doing as little as possible, while sleeping as much as possible. A mix of drugs induces her sleep, but mainly sedatives and sleeping pills, as well as the consumption of her comfort movies on her beloved VCR. However, as soon as she tries the fictional drug, the plan is disrupted and eventually changed.

When the protagonist notices that the Infermiterol has rendered all her other medications ineffective, simultaneously, her other sources of escapism stop working as well. "I thought I'd watch *Braveheart* again so I put it into the VCR and pressed "rewind." And then the VCR broke (Moshfegh 196)." Besides her escapist addiction, part of the protagonist's escapist routine to ensure her year of sleep is to consume movies from the 1980s and 1990s, such as *The Fugitive*, *Frantic*, *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, *Burglar*, *Soapdish*, and *The Player* on repeat (Moshfegh 72). At the beginning of her hibernation project, the protagonist also engages in excessive and compulsive online shopping. This consumption of goods can also be interpreted as an escapist method that she uses to alleviate her misery, and it also appears as a direct hint at the overconsumption that is promoted in and by capitalist-neoliberal America (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 105). However, later, due to her extreme substance abuse, most of the time, the protagonist is either sleeping or trying to sleep while lying on her couch in front of her television, watching old movies.

The protagonist's consumption of these old movies on a VCR, in times when DVDs have almost completely replaced them, clearly indicates nostalgic media consumption (Wulf, Breuer, and Schmitt 258). Repeatedly watching one's comfort movies to feel better seems relatable and familiar; it highlights how consuming media, especially nostalgic media, is a prevalent coping method in capitalist societies in times

of crises, personal and national, to escape into better and safer times and worlds (Orazi et al. 1). According to Tanner, people “cloak themselves in the blanket of nostalgia, yearning for times when they were happy: as children perhaps, on summer trips long ago, on the roofs of friends’ houses, or when they were students” (137). The protagonist also constantly wraps herself in this “blanket of nostalgia” to find comfort (Tanner 137). However, it remains unclear whether she has experienced times in her life when she was happy, which she can yearn for, further stressing the feeling of hopelessness in finding happiness in a capitalist-neoliberal society. Consuming her favorite nostalgic movies enables her to “temporarily elude negative emotions through fantasies or vivid imaginations of personal success and social acceptance” and daydream better alternatives to her unhappy reality (Darrat, Darrat, and Amyx 105). She also thinks that by sleeping long enough, she can transform her miserable life into the better reality she experiences when she escapes. However, even after her “year of rest and relaxation” she is violently hurled back into the real, bitter world, which is why she needs to escape, again (Moshfegh). The protagonist, like other Americans, can only dream of this better, happier reality through escaping into it, but will never experience it. This is how the nostalgia industry operates: As Tanner argues, it has been “commodifying our collective ache, not just for the past, but for flawless worlds” (100). The repetitive binge-watching of old movies in *My Year* represents how capitalist-neoliberal America commodifies people’s longing for a different reality by selling them artifacts of the past while never letting them exist in a different world. The protagonist is stuck between her reality and her imagination, trying to cope with her misery in the hope of transforming her life, when in fact, she is merely escaping her feelings and herself.

In conclusion, this analysis proposes that the constant, nostalgic consumption of movies and the addiction to psychotropic medication are attempts of the narrator-protagonist to detach from her emotions and everyday life, fantasize better alternatives to her reality, and improve her well-being. Consequently, *My Year* shows how both addiction and (nostalgic media) consumption are escapist methods used to cope with the harsh realities of capitalist-neoliberal America.

4.2.3. Escaping Death: The Process of Grief in *My Year*

Death, loss, and grief are central themes that permeate the entire plot of Moshfegh’s *My Year*. The novel explores the death of the protagonist’s parents, the death of her best friend’s mother, and ultimately the death of her best friend, as well as the final loss

of her romantic relationship. The process of grief commonly involves behavioral symptoms such as insomnia, decreased appetite, increased irritation, increased or decreased activity, as well as the loss of interest in daily and pleasurable activities (McCoyd and Walter 158). Grief, especially in emerging adults or young adults like the protagonist, often involves feelings of loneliness, insomnia, feelings of guilt of not being able to prevent the death, avoidance of reminders of the lost loved one, anxiety, an increased participation in risky and/or compulsive behaviors like consumption of drugs or promiscuity, suicidal ideations, symptoms of depression as well as a reduced overall well-being (McCoyd and Walter 158; Boker 149, 277; Green 265; Schaadt et al. 2). The loss and grief of a loved one is one of the most natural and universal but at the same time also one of the most challenging experiences (Shear 119). If a person is not capable of continuing their life after a loss, then the grieving process transforms into complicated grief (Green 265; Shear 120). Complicated grief, also called “pathological grief”, “repressed grief”, “maladaptive grief” or “prolonged grief disorder”, means that the grieving process and its symptoms are prolonged and intensified (Sinha et al. 211; Peña-Vargas, Armaiz-Peña and Castro-Figuero 1, 3). Complicated grief often takes place when a person uses escapism as a coping method for grief and the emotions involved in the grieving process (Boker 145; Schaadt et al. 1). This means that when a person tries to escape and repress their loss and the feelings of grief and mourning, the death of the loved one cannot be adequately processed, resulting in complicated grief. Complicated grief involves the extension and amplification of the usual grief process and its symptoms. It can also cause major depressive disorder, addiction, inability to accept the loss, suicide, low self-worth, feelings of hopelessness, intense anger, rage and bitterness, emotional detachment, as well as difficulties to perceive life as meaningful (Peña-Vargas, Armaiz-Peña and Castro-Figuero 1; Boker 277; Schaadt et al. 2; Green 265; Shear 123). Moreover, the “[c]ontinuous use of escape-oriented coping strategies may also prevent the bereaved adolescent from gaining confidence in their ability to tolerate painful emotions, which feeds the cycle of continued avoidance” (Schaadt et al. 7). Risk factors that increase the likelihood of complicated grief are the lack of good social support, a background of insecure attachment patterns, and previous experiences of traumatic events or losses (Peña-Vargas, Armaiz-Peña and Castro-Figuero 3; Shear 126).

The story of *My Year* starts in the 2000s, with the protagonist being 26 years old. The first death she experiences is her father’s of cancer. Her mother dies shortly after by committing suicide. The protagonist struggles throughout her entire childhood

due to neglect and a lack of a loving upbringing. When her father dies, she is overwhelmed by her grief: "I had been very emotional when it happened. I figured any tears I still had left to cry might be about him. [...] For the rest of his life – around four hours – I sat on the chair and cried while my mother got drunk in the kitchen, ducking her head in every now and then to see if he was dead yet" (Moshfegh 137-138, 140). The protagonist does not experience any condolence or comfort from her mother after her father dies, as her mother is busy getting drunk, even involving her daughter in her self-destruction by making her buy alcohol for her. It seems that the protagonist cannot be near her mother, watch her hurt herself, and ignore her daughter's grief entirely. The protagonist wants to mourn: "I stayed home for a week after my father's funeral. I wanted to do what I thought I was supposed to do – to mourn." (Moshfegh 146). However, there is no room for her to mourn and grieve because her mother centers the discourse on her own experience and pain. Shortly after the protagonist leaves her childhood home to go back to University, she receives a call from her mother's best friend, who informs her that her mother is in the hospital in a coma due to a drug and alcohol overdose. Losing one's parents is one of the most profoundly traumatic experiences; additionally, her mother does not die from a natural death but decides to end her life (Schaadt et al. 1). According to Peña-Vargas, Armaiz-Peña, and Castro-Figuero, if the loss of a loved one happens due to an "unnatural or violent death", such as suicide, the risk of developing complicated grief is increased (3).

After both of her parents died, the protagonist stayed in her parents' house:

After she left, I spent days in the house alone, poring over my childhood photo albums, sobbing over piles of my mother's unopened packages of pantyhose. I cried over my father's deathbed pajamas, the dog-eared biographies of Theodore Roosevelt and Josef Mengele on his bedside table, a green nickel in the pocket of his favorite pants, a belt he'd had to drill holes in to make smaller as he'd grown sicker and thinner in the months leading up to his death. (Moshfegh 153-154)

This scene shows how the protagonist grieves her parents' deaths directly after. She has no secure social support system, besides Reva, whom she only meets later. She is entirely on her own in the grieving process, even experiencing suicidality: "Reva's frequent interruptions probably kept me from jumping out the window" (Moshfegh 156). Furthermore, since she developed an insecure attachment style during her childhood due to her parents' neglect, she does not know how to cope with her grief healthily and consequently resuppresses it, developing complicated grief. Seven years after her parents' deaths, when the protagonist practices her year of sleeping, she still has not

processed their deaths. She repeatedly dreams and constantly relives memories about them, even though she tries her best to avoid any reminder of them altogether. Memories of her parents are painful, and consequently, she wants to chase them away: "By this point, Reva's mother was in hospice care, in and out of consciousness. I was tired of hearing about it. It brought back too many memories" (Moshfegh 89). It seems as if the protagonist is insensitive towards her best friend. However, this analysis suggests that the protagonist's resuppression of any memories of her parents, as well as her grief, can be characterized as an escapist coping method. Because of her grief and attempts to escape it, the protagonist shows signs of depression, has developed an addiction, shows signs of suicidal ideation, feelings of hopelessness, and tries to detach from her own emotions since she cannot handle the painful feelings triggered by her grief. All these symptoms indicate that the protagonist has developed complicated grief. The death of Reva's mother finally triggers all the emotions and memories connected to her parents' deaths. The resurfacing of the grief ultimately results in the protagonist's decision to resort to more drastic measures by emotionally distancing herself from Reva and escaping her grief through sleep.

Another loss the protagonist experiences in *My Year* is not by death, but the end of her relationship. As stated by Peña-Vargas, Armaiz-Peña, and Castro-Figuero, "[t]erminations of romantic relationships, such as break-up or divorce, are also forms of social loss from which individuals could experience grief" (3). Not too long before the protagonist's year of sleep, her boyfriend, Trevor, breaks up with her. Their relationship has been dysfunctional throughout. He is fifteen years older than her, and he breaks up with her repeatedly, telling her that she is too immature for him, only to then come back to her to use her to satisfy his own needs. Despite his visible shortcomings in character, the protagonist remains emotionally attached to him: "For the next few days, thoughts of Trevor called me out of sleep like rats scrabbling inside the walls. It took all the self-control I had not to call him. It took Solfoton and a bottle of Robitussin one day, Nembutal and Zyprexa the next" (Moshfegh 99). This scene illustrates how the protagonist continues to grieve the end of her relationship with Trevor and is not strong enough to resist reaching out to him. However, he only uses her for his sexual satisfaction and has other girlfriends besides her. Consequently, the protagonist will not achieve a healthy, functional relationship with Trevor.

Finally, the protagonist also experiences the loss of her best friend, Reva, at the end of the story in the 9/11 attacks. Already before 9/11, after the protagonist ends her year of sleeping, Reva distances herself from the protagonist, who feels that she is

losing her only friend. However, she still tries to reach out: “Then I called Reva. She answered on the fourth ring, panting and tense. ‘I’m at the gym,’ she said. ‘Can we talk later?’ We never did” (Moshfegh 288). After that, Reva dies, and the protagonist is unable to say goodbye. In summary, the protagonist struggles to cope with loss after her parents’ death, such as the loss of her relationship with Trevor, but also the death of Reva’s mother and Reva herself, because she only adopts escapist coping methods to escape and resuppress the painful feelings and memories involved in the grieving process which hinders a healthy grieving process to take place. The pain of her losses still lingers and will not go away until the protagonist faces her emotions and process her grief first (Schaadt et al. 6).

Additionally, the text represents how neoliberal capitalism in America impedes and complicates grieving processes and hinders healthy mourning. Grief in capitalist-neoliberal America is viewed negatively due to the perceived loss of productivity and consumption it entails, as grieving people are unable to work and produce profit for a specific period, during which they are also rarely able to boost their consumption. Capitalist societies are “governed by the high value placed upon productivity, competition, and consumerism” (Harris 247). As stated by Harris, grieving people are limited in their capacities to both produce and consume due to their mourning. A prolonged grieving process, therefore, is frowned upon in capitalist-neoliberal America and beyond, as it threatens the foundational structure of capitalism (Harris 247). Grieving people will only “be allowed a brief, temporary exemption from functionality and the expectation of being consumers and producers for a limited period of time” (Harris 247). Some employers in the United States provide so-called Bereavement Leave Policies, which enable employee to receive paid days off after a loss, but these policies are not mandatory. According to the U.S. Department of Labor survey, “56% of civilian workers have access to paid bereavement leave,” but it is dependent on the employee’s income (Levesque et al. 427). “81% of the top 10% of wage earners in the U.S. have access to the employer-sponsored benefit, compared to just 19% of the bottom 10% of earners” (Levesque et al. 427). This means that there are neither mandatory nor fair and equal requirements and conditions for the Bereavement Leave Policies. More importantly, the “average length of bereavement leave in the U.S.” is a brief and inadequate three-day span (Levesque et al. 427). Afterwards, the employees are required to return to their capitalist duties of producing and consuming promptly.

Moreover, capitalist patriarchy values “male-dominated patterns of stoicism and denial of emotionality” over vulnerability, which becomes difficult in times of grief (Harris

247). Therefore, in capitalist societies, grief, loss, and mourning are dealt with by distraction, minimizing the loss, and regaining discipline over one's "vulnerability and emotionality" (Harris 247). I suggest that this is also the protagonist's goal. She wants to escape her grief entirely to regain composure over her emotions. She believes that only if she achieves that she will be able to have a 'normal' and happy life. To be a successful and productive participant in a capitalist American society, she needs to regain control over herself, especially her emotions, which is what she hopes to accomplish through her escape into sleep. However, as Harris explains, this capitalist concept of denying and offering no space for grief is a form of oppression (248). Capitalist societies aim to regain control over their members to make them productive again, rather than facilitating their grieving processes. If a bereaved person does not stick to these grieving rules of capitalism and gets over their grief as quickly as possible "the cost of noncompliance can be very high, manifest[ing] through job loss secondary to loss of productivity, loss of support, loss of status, and shame if one appears weak in a competitive market or is not pulling one's weight as expected" (Harris 248).

However, grief under neoliberal capitalism also offers the opportunity of the commodification of grieving and the emergence of a grief market. One branch of this grief market and a capitalist strategy to enable an accelerated grieving process is the utilization of pharmaceuticals. Mourning people, especially people who struggle to get over their grief or develop complicated grief, are prescribed antidepressants, anxiety medication, as well as sleeping pills to control their grief, which is also visible in the overprescription of psychotropic medication as an attempt to regulate the protagonist's misery in *My Year*. According to Alves et al:

There is an alarming reduction in the space reserved for experiencing the pain and working through losses, with a worrisome and growing medicalization of natural life phenomena [...] The medicalization of emotional responses to loss may represent not only important ethical dilemmas but also an opportunity to leverage the prescription of psychoactive drugs and promote pharmacological interventions, or "pharmaceuticalization" applied to daily reality. (2)

Consequently, this means that instead of a healthy grieving process, Americans receive pharmaceuticals to recover from losses quickly (Alves et al 2). However, this medicalization of grief often leads to an overuse of psychoactive drugs and dependence and can lead to even more "harm to the individual's social life" (Alves et al. 2).

Moreover, the myth of the pursuit of happiness is also used to motivate grieving Americans to end the grieving process as soon as possible and to get back to being a

productive member of society. The myth of the pursuit of happiness is closely connected to the American myth of the Self-Made Man, which “strongly affirms an ideology of expressive individualism as well as individual achievement and success that conceptualizes the “pursuit of happiness” as the pursuit of property” (Paul 405). This means that by believing in these fundamental American myths, people are deceived into thinking that their happiness is their individual responsibility, which they can only achieve by working hard and generating profit and property.

Lastly, the text critiques the prevalence of escapism and alienation as coping methods in capitalist-neoliberal America to manage grief, loss, and death. On the final page of the novel, after the protagonist learns of the 9/11 attacks, she purchases a recorder to document the news, leading her to consume the coverage repeatedly. In doing so, she transposes the national trauma from the external world onto a screen, thereby gaining a sense of control and creating emotional distance from the events of 9/11 as a means of self-soothing:

On September 11, I went out and bought a new TV/VCR at Best Buy so I could record the news coverage of the plane crashing into the Twin Towers. [...] Reva was gone. I watched the videotape over and over to soothe 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, or when I need courage, or when I am bored. (Moshfegh 289)

This scene, which occurs on the last page, illustrates the failure of the protagonist's sleep project. Her use of escapist methods to cope with and alienate herself from her painful feelings tied to the presence of grief, loss, and death in her life is unsuccessful. At first, after she wakes up from her hibernation, she feels better and believes that she has permanently altered her mood through her year of sleep, embracing happiness. By mentioning 9/11, especially at the very end of the novel, the text stresses that grief, loss, and death are omnipresent in the lives of human beings and that they are inescapable. The novel's reference to the 9/11 attacks, according to this analysis, represents the protagonist's sudden reawakening to an inescapable reality.

My analysis of *My Year*, finally, proposes that death and the process of grief occupy a crucial position in the text since the narrator-protagonist's misery is caused by the numerous deaths and losses she has experienced but never properly grieved. The circumstances of capitalist-neoliberal America and its use of emotional repression and escapism as the only coping method to deal with grief and death, as well as the protagonist's lack of a role model in her life, stress her inability to grieve adequately. The text represents the protagonist's reliance on escapism as symptomatic of a broader cultural condition in capitalist-neoliberal America, where grief is systematically

avoided and escapism is framed as the coping strategy individuals are socialized to adopt to suppress resistance and maintain the status quo, ultimately obstructing the protagonist's capacity for authentic emotional fulfillment.

5. Conclusion

The primary goal of this research was to investigate and demonstrate how Ottessa Moshfegh's novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* represents and critiques capitalist-neoliberal America and its use of escapism as a coping mechanism at the turn of the 21st century.

By conducting a close reading analysis of the text, this research suggests that the novel utilizes early 2000s New York City as a setting to create a space where the values of capitalist-neoliberal America and its consequences for American citizens are visible and perceptible. NYC in *My Year* is portrayed as a place that superficially appears to be inhabited by wealthy, successful people. However, upon closer examination, it is found to be full of misery. The story is also filled with nostalgia for another, better reality, due to the omnipresence of loss, systemic loss of the 'American Century', as well as personal losses in the protagonist's life. Misery is caused by the adverse effects of neoliberal capitalism and its values, such as classism, competition, consumerism, and individualism, as well as the promotion of coping methods like escapism to deal with both societal and personal struggles.

The role of escapism to cope with misery, personal and communal, is highlighted in *My Year* through the protagonist's use of sleep and drugs, but also through the lack of genuine, successful professional help. In neoliberal capitalism, escapism is not only a coping method preferred by individuals to help with personal pain, but it is also a method promoted by society. Even though the protagonist seeks professional help, the psychiatrist she visits regularly further enables her unhealthy goals of escapism. Moreover, the work ethic and conditions represented in *My Year* also encourage the practice of escapism. The protagonist attempts to dissociate herself and detach from reality by retreating entirely from the public sphere into the private realm and isolating herself completely.

Furthermore, the protagonist hopes to transform herself and her miserable reality through the consumption of nostalgia-inducing movies from the 80s and 90s and pharmaceuticals that promote her hibernation, but she fails. The protagonist's failure of her escapist project to self-transform highlights the inescapability of one's reality, but more specifically, the inescapability of human feelings and emotions,

including misery, death, and grief. It also emphasizes one's privileges, particularly the pervasive influence of neoliberal capitalism and its associated concepts in society. This inescapability culminates in the novel's final scene. The protagonist is at home when the 9/11 attacks occur, and she experiences it only indirectly through the news coverage of it. The novel's last page emphasizes that the deeply ingrained misery represented in *My Year* is neither solely a personal matter nor something that can be changed by one person alone. The misery is a systemic, societal, communal matter that affects everyone and can only be transformed together. The protagonist attempts not only to cope with but also to overcome the misery she experiences by escaping into a different reality. However, as becomes visible, the protagonist cannot escape this reality, just as she is unable to escape 9/11 by isolating at home, since the attacks had and still have extensive global consequences. Consequently, she still suffers from the aftermath of the attack, such as the death of her best friend.

Even though *My Year* is a fictional story, the findings and implications of its analysis suggest and emphasize the negative consequences neoliberal capitalism has on people's mental health, the inequalities and discrimination created by it, as well as the preference of capital and profit over human needs and wellness in capitalist-neoliberal America. It also shows how these harmful conditions of neoliberal capitalism create the need to use escapism as a coping method in individuals.

While this thesis has explored the effects of capitalist-neoliberal America and its use of escapism on American citizens, further research could expand on these findings by conducting comparative research with other contemporary novels or novels written and set in the early 2000s that examine these topics as well. The explicit gender differences in neoliberal capitalism, neoliberal feminism, but also white privilege and racism in capitalist-neoliberal America could be studied by further analyzing *My Year* as well.

In conclusion, while Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* may initially appear to be merely a humorous and eccentric anecdote, this analysis has shown that the text effectively serves as a critical commentary on crucial societal and systemic issues within contemporary capitalist-neoliberal America.

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7. Appendix

7.1. English Abstract

The United States has a long history with neoliberal capitalism, a socio-economic system which prioritizes, amongst others, privatization, individualism, reduction of welfare, and commodification of nearly all aspects of life. This thesis argues and presents that, under such conditions, escapism emerges both as a necessary psychological reaction to the stressful demands and hardships of neoliberal capitalism as well as an efficient method for sustaining individual productivity and profit-generation. By analyzing Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, set in early 2000s capitalist-neoliberal America, this thesis aims to illustrate how the text is a significant and critical representation of the social conditions of capitalist-neoliberal America and how these conditions require escapism as a coping method. After outlining the theoretical background of capitalist-neoliberal American society in the early 2000s as well as the concept of escapism, the second part of this thesis presents the close reading analysis of the novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* written by Ottessa Moshfegh. For this part the methods of Marxist and feminist literary analysis were adopted to critically investigate the roles of capitalism, competition, classism, alienation, work ethics, as well as gender roles and expectations in the novel to demonstrate how capitalist-neoliberal values influence the narrator-protagonist's escape into sleep.

7.2. German Abstract

Die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika blicken auf eine lange Geschichte des neoliberalen Kapitalismus zurück, einem sozioökonomischen System, welches unter anderem Privatisierung, Individualismus, den Abbau von wohlfahrtsstaatlichen Leistungen, sowie die Kommodifizierung nahezu aller Lebensbereiche in den Vordergrund stellt. Die vorliegende Arbeit vertritt die These, dass Eskapismus unter diesen gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen sowohl als notwendige psychologische Reaktion auf die Anforderungen und Belastungen des neoliberalen Kapitalismus entsteht als auch als wirksames Mittel dient, um individuelle Produktivität und Profiterzeugung aufrechtzuerhalten. Anhand der Analyse des Romans *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* von Ottessa Moshfegh, der im kapitalistisch-neoliberalen Amerika der

frühen 2000er Jahre verortet ist, wird aufgezeigt, inwiefern der Text eine bedeutende und kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den sozialen Gegebenheiten dieser Epoche darstellt und wie diese Gegebenheiten Eskapismus als Bewältigungsstrategie notwendig machen. Nach der Darlegung des theoretischen Hintergrunds zur neoliberalen Gesellschaft in den USA sowie zur Begrifflichkeit des Eskapismus widmet sich der zweite Teil der Arbeit einer Close Reading Analyse des Romans. Dabei werden marxistische und feministische literaturwissenschaftliche Ansätze herangezogen, um die Darstellung von Kapitalismus, Wettbewerb, Klassismus, Entfremdung, Arbeitsethos sowie Geschlechterrollen und Geschlechtererwartungen kritisch zu beleuchten und aufzuzeigen, wie neoliberale Wertvorstellungen den Rückzug der Erzählerin/Protagonistin in Schlaf und Isolation beeinflussen.