

Transcendence and Self-Transformation in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*: A Sartarian Reading

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Abstract:

Drawing on Jean Paul Sartre's Existential theory, the paper delves into applying his concept of "Transcendence" to Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). It explores how the main character, a privileged young woman living in the Capitalist American society in the early 2000s, is withdrawn from the world and alienated from both people and herself. It also aims to examine how the main character, as a representative of the American society, is in a quest for a state of transcendence through a year-long sleep experiment. It essentially deals with how the author uses various literary techniques to convey her protagonist's transcendence. Through using analytical and theoretical approaches, this paper finds out that the main character goes through a journey towards achieving her authenticity in an unauthentic world, while significantly grappling with the ways she employs to achieve it, mainly her self-chosen alienation through drugs consuming.

Keywords: Authenticity, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Ottessa Moshfegh, Sartre and Transcendence.



Introduction:

The postmodern era brought about a great feeling of alienation from society and uncertainty about the stability of the humankind's place and function in the world. Due to both the Second World War and the Cold war along with the rise of nihilism, the influence of the Phenomenological studies and the inability of traditional philosophies to address the crucial concerns of the human existence, people were in a situation of isolation and absurdity which led them to ponder about the value of life and existence. Existentialist philosophers were vocal about this alarming situation because they believed

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that the postmodern individual experienced a kind of existential crisis that features the same level of mistrust, alienation and loneliness. The emergence of Existentialism as a philosophy can be traced back to the late 19th century in Europe, led by its earliest figures including Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. These existentialists showed a huge interest in studying human existence from an unconventional perspective and emphasized on the importance of overcoming the meaninglessness and absurdity that was brought into people's lives in that period to achieve meaning and to find purpose.

In the 20th century, Jean Paul Sartre joined these figures as one of the prominent developers of existentialism. Sartre's famous statement "existence precedes essence" is the basis of his perception of the human existence. Through his writings, he insists on the individual's responsibility for creating meaning and purpose to his lives and his existence without any external intervention. He emphasizes the individual's freedom of choice and self-creation as part of the quest for authenticity. Sartre devoted his studies to develop his concepts of anguish, absurdity, facticity, death, estrangement and transcendence. These latter extend to the field of literature where many novelists have echoed back these ideas and the quest of individuals to authenticate and transcend their social norms and values. The quest of self-discovery and authenticity becomes a recurrent theme in postmodern works. In this respect, the present paper examines the concept of "Transcendence" in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) using Sartre's existentialist perspective.

This research aims to explore how the Sartrean existentialist concept of transcendence is represented in the novel, highlighting how the main character reaches it to achieve authenticity despite the absurdity surrounding her life. It also aims to accentuate how the main character is considered to be a representative of the American society that suffers from an existential crisis. And finally it deals with how the author uses various literary techniques to convey her protagonist's transcendence. It is worth mentioning that the study is significant in the way it uses Sartre as a philosopher and his studies on existentialism as his ideas reflect the postmodern condition portrayed in the novel through the main character. As an illustration, the idea of drug dependence/addiction in American society and the American pharmaceutical culture in general are shown through the main character and are related in particular to Sartre as an individual. In other words, the study highlights that Sartre himself as an existentialist suffered from drugs consumption. Thus, the study contributes to the already existing scholarship on *My Year of Rest and*

Relaxation. Studies on Existentialism in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are less trodden; they have sparsely approached this novel from the standpoint of Sartre's concept of transcendence. Therefore, this study is original in the way it tackles the representation of transcendence in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* from a Sartrean perspective. In order to achieve these aims, the study seeks to answer the following questions: How is Sartre's definition of Transcendence portrayed in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* in general? How is existential transcendence manifested in the actions and the behavior of the main character? And finally how does the main character reach authenticity?

Otessa Moshfegh (1981) is an American author whose works are often characterized by a sense of darkness, unsettlement and a satirical commentary on the contemporary American society. She is well known for her spare and unflinching prose style. This brings forth the choice of the novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. The novel revolves around an unnamed, beautiful, young, white Columbia-educated girl who lives on the East Coast. She has a considerable inheritance from her dead parents and a wardrobe full of designer clothing. Despite her possessions, she is not content; she considers her privileges and wealth as meaningless. Therefore, she decides to withdraw from the world by consuming a massive amount of medications and drugs and to sleep as much as possible for an entire year. This young, unnamed protagonist embodies the collective and deep exhaustion of the embattled American populace. Nothing seems more authentically rejuvenating than deep, restorative sleep; an escape and a dropout from this all-consuming, exhausting life to reach a sense of transcendence and authenticity.

Since its publication in 2018, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* has been scrutinized differently by several authors and critics. Camilla Brent's thesis entitled *Into the Abyss: Self-Destruction as Feminist Resistance in Otessa Moshfegh's My Year of Rest and Relaxation and Han Kang's The Vegetarian* (2021) is a comparative literary analysis whose main focus is to show how self-destruction is a mode of feminist resistance against the patriarchy in the two novels through methods of social deprogramming, the embodiment of vegetal and animal alterity and the recuperation of the maternal semiotic. There is also a study that tackles the theme of alienation in the novel. In "Sleep as an Action? World Alienation, Distance , and Loneliness in Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*" (2022), Marlene Dirschauer studies the Protagonist's relationship with herself and the world as she is affected by 9/11 attacks what led to the narrator's world alienation using Hannah Arendt's critique of modernity as developed in her seminal work, *The*

Human Condition. It also explores how the protagonist's choice of sleep reflects her participation, freedom and self-worth in the capitalist society.

In her undergraduate thesis *Active Passiveness: Sleeping to Escape Trauma in Ottessa Moshfegh's My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2022), Malena Beamoonte Ferbandez analyses the personal and societal trauma found in the novel, highlighting the role of the protagonist's plan for sleeping for an entire year in escaping from this trauma and from her own emotions. Additionally, the researcher emphasizes on the importance of establishing relationship with the surrounding world to overcome the traumatic experiences that the protagonist went through. In *Worlds, Dress and Things in Moshfegh's My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2022), Lina O Noren explores the representation of the dress in the novel from Thing theory lens and the Heideggerian concept of "World." The thesis examines the ontology of dress as an object fixed in time and how it is encountered as a thing manifested through time to study the relationship between things and being in the novel, and how they are dependent on the protagonist's perception of time. The previous review of related literature enlightens the study in the way it uses certain points in the above-mentioned studies particularly the notion of trauma and alienation. In spite of the fact that existentialist aspects are clearly displayed in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* particularly transcendence, none of the previous researchers analyze the novel from an existential lens. On this basis, this study takes from this fact its topic of research and tends to apply Sartre's existential concept of transcendence to the novel using an analytical approach.

1. Transcendence and the Transformative power of Sleep:

Sartre argues in *Existentialism is a Humanism* that "Existence precedes Essence" (p. 20); the individual's life is neither predetermined nor pre described. He means that once the individual is born, he is free to choose all his life aspects and to identify himself far from any social or moral pressures and to make any decision he finds suitable to fully exercise this freedom. Therefore, the individual is what he makes of himself, how he chooses to identify it, and what he makes out of his existence. In *Being and Nothingness*, he maintains that the human being is "at once a facticity and a transcendence" (Sartre., 1943, p. 56). Facticity refers to "everything about a human that is pre-given", while transcendence is "synonym with freedom and refers to the sum of ways, in which an individual surmounts his facticity" (Amireh., 2017, p. 15). In other words, facticity stands for the conditions and circumstances the individual is born into and the characteristics he is born with including his social status, cultural background and physical appearance,

in addition to his past experiences; hence, transcendence is the individuals' ability to go beyond and surpass this facticity and liberate themselves from the limitations it imposes on them. Once an individual disregards his power to transcend the given circumstances and surrender to live as a facticity, he is acting in bad faith as facticity which restricts his freedom and possibilities leading to neglecting his responsibility for constructing his reality.

In his writings, Sartre connects transcendence with the notions of freedom and responsibility since they are the basis of achieving authenticity as he states "man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (Sartre., 1948, p. 29). Thus, this paper is devoted to deal with the main character's metamorphosis from a passive person to an individual who overcomes daily facticity. Before deciding to spend a year-long asleep, the main character was seemingly living in passive acceptance of her predetermined destiny as a privileged wealthy pretty young woman; and accordingly, living as a facticity and in bad faith. The latter led her to live a meaningless life, alienated from the world, others and even from herself.

However, once she realized the responsibility upon her shoulders to create meaning for her life and to reestablish connection with herself and the world, she comes to understand that "man is nothing but that which he makes of himself [...] man is, indeed a project" (Sartre., 1948, p. 28). Therefore, she decided to take action to surmount living in bad faith and started her journey towards authenticity through transcendence. Hence, she resorted to sleep as an outlet to exercise her freedom of choice because she believed that "nothing else could ever bring such freedom", and she thinks that sleeping is seen as a mechanism to transcend "the miseries of [her] waking consciousness" (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 27). So, she chooses to take responsibility to build her own reality and identity through sleep because she believed she would wake up as a renewed version of herself: "Life was fragile and fleeting and one had to be cautious, sure, but I would risk death if it meant I could sleep all day and become a whole new person" (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 16).

Throughout the novel, the main character frequently states that her goal behind her hibernation is to emerge as a new person free from all that is keeping her away from being her authentic self. She has a certain vision about what her life should be like once she finally transcends and goes beyond everything that was pre-given to her, including the identity the society had

forced upon her, her past memories and her parents' home. Through applying Hannah Arndet's notion of natality on the novel, Dirscauer states:

The ability to start something new is what makes humans free, so that action as the realization of freedom is intricately linked to natality. Despite the narrator's reverse conception of action- and therefore of freedom- her desire for a new beginning, not death, is the driving power of her project. (Dirscauer., 2022, p. 58)

1.1 Transcending the Past Memories:

Accordingly, the main character puts all her hope in her hibernation project to take full control over her life starting with transcending her traumatic past. In a very young age, the unnamed narrator experienced a parental indifference. As she grew up, she was abandoned and neglected by her own parents what eventually left a great impact on her present life because the memories of their toxic relation kept haunting her and was behind her absurd relation with life and the people around her. For instance, a memory of her being harassed by her father's friend in front of her mother kept haunting her, as she recalls: " I guess my mother was too aggrieved, too drunk, or too medicated to see the man's other arm snake over from his knee to mine at some point during the conversation" (Moshfegh., 2018,p. 87). Additionally, she was also haunted by the memories of their death since they both died when she was in college; first her father with cancer and then her mother with an over dose. She asserts that:

They turned off the machine and I sat there, waiting, watching the screen blip, then stop. She wasn't resting. She was not in a state of peace. She was in no state, not being. The peace to be had, I thought, watching them pull the sheet over her head, was mine. 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., 2018, p. 89)

It is also worth mentioning that the author uses different literary techniques enabling the reader to have a deep insight into the protagonist's thoughts and

impressions. The above mentioned quotes show that the author uses different literary techniques to convey the protagonist's fragmentation. The heterogeneity in the narrative techniques manifests itself through the employment of interior monologue and a deviation from the grammatical rules of language and the use of the personal pronoun "I". In different incidents, the protagonist's interior monologues reveal her psychic breakdown due to the dysfunctional relation with her parents. Here, one can say that the author uses interior monologue to focus on her character's inner voice. This idea can also be related to Sartre's concept of the "Existential Angst."

In his *Existentialism As Humanism*, Sartre refers to the term "Existential Angst" to refer to the individual's ability to achieve meaningful existence, create freedom and overcome emotions of fear, anxiety and loss. In other words, he maintains that angst is necessary for the existence of the individual to take responsibility for his choices, actions and develop a sense of self awareness and authenticity (p.10). Using Sartre's concept, one can say that the main character is suffering from angst as her parents died. As the protagonist did not have a normal relationship with her parents, her reaction towards their death was also abnormal. Her emotions were a mix of grief, peace and a desire to be liberated from her memories with them. She thought that their death will bring some rest and forgetfulness to her childhood traumatic memories, but in fact, their loss only brought more sorrow and suffering to her. Therefore, when she thinks of her past, she would "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 digressions—but it never worked. [she] was always still [her]" (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 23). However, she still hoped that if she slept enough it would enable her to get over her predetermined identity and the past holding her back; she expressed this desire by saying:

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., 2018, p. 30)

This illustrates the significant role sleep plays in the main character's quest for a complete transformation and for overcoming the past and moving on in her life. She also believes that sleep would help her achieve her dream to "disappear completely, then reappear in some new form" (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 49). She was even afraid to do something illegal while unconscious because it would ruin her chance for a new and better life; she would assert: "If I committed a crime or got hit by a bus, the chance for a new and better life would be lost" (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 49)

As a strategy to problematize the main character's angst, the author uses the unnamed protagonist and her fragmented identity as a fictional character who is often alienated and disillusioned. She also shows that this character is in a quest for meaning in an age of meaninglessness and absurdity which is reflected through the fragmented narratives, the nonlinear storytelling and the unreliable narrators. In other words, as a postmodern writer, Moshfegh tries to emphasize on the character's responsibility for constructing meaning and finding her place in the world. This character is represented as anti-hero who is under a constant pressure because she is in an age where her existence depends on what the society presupposes for her. Her actions, desires and decisions are predetermined. This often leads the character to suffer from an existential crisis; accordingly, she must transcend the given and transform her own reality.

In the context of discussing Sartre's existentialist concept of "Transcendence," it is important to refer to his concept of "Temporality." Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), explains that the past, present and future are interconnected rather than separated; hence, the present is influenced by the memories of the past and the projection of the future. He clarifies,

Temporality is not solely nor even primarily separation. We can account for this by considering more precisely the notion of before and after. A, let us say, is after B. Now we have established an express relation of order between A and B which supposes therefore their unification at the heart of this very order. Even if there had been no other relation between A and B than this, it would still be sufficient to assure their connection, for it would allow thought to go from one to the other and to unite them in a judgment of succession. If, then, time is separation, it is at least a separation of a special type-a division

which reunites. (Sartre., 1943, p.131)

In the novel, the author persistently manifests how the narrator seeks to go beyond her past memories and transcend her present reality through planning for a future project. In her attempt to transcend her old self and her reality, the protagonist exists simultaneously in three time dimensions. She exists as annihilation of her past; at the same time, she questions and criticizes her current reality in attempt to transcend her present moment where she considers herself heading to her visionary future. In other words, the main character, here, represents the American society which lives in a postmodern capitalist world, as being characterized by the rapid growth of mass media and consumerism, had a great impact on the American individual's identity which was manipulated by this new cultural and ideological system, leading the individual to be schizophrenic and fragmented. The features of the postmodern capitalist society contradict the nature of the American individual who is a self-conscious and an autonomous being. In such era, the American individual starts to question the meaning and the purpose of his life, often suffering from an existential crisis and being marooned in time.

Again, in surpassing her past, the protagonist embodies her ability to transcend her facticity, part of which is her childhood memories. In her first step to go beyond her past, the narrator goes back to her childhood first as being considered the root of her existential crisis because her early relationship with her dead parents defined her perspective of the world as it highly affected how she copes with her emotions and memories. This is reflected on the novel when the protagonist decides to sell her parents' house:

How many of my parents' hairs and eyelashes and skin cells and fingernail clippings had survived between the floorboards since the professor moved in? [...] I should have felt something—a pang of sadness, a twinge of nostalgia. I did feel a peculiar sensation, like oceanic despair [...] I felt just a tingling feeling in my hands, an eerie tingle, like when you nearly drop something precious off a balcony, but don't. My heart bumped up a little. I could drop it, I told myself—the house, this feeling. I had nothing left to lose. So I called the estate lawyer. "What would make more money?" I asked him. "Selling the house, or burning it down?" There was a breathless pause on the phone. "Hello?" "Selling it, definitely," the lawyer said. (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 131)

Selling the house symbolizes her desire to be free from her parents' toxic

legacy. She even asserts earlier in the novel that, "I'd feel sorry for myself, not because I missed my parents, but because there was nothing they could have given me if they'd lived. They weren't my friends. They didn't comfort me or give me good advice. They weren't people I wanted to talk to. They barely even knew me" (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 40). The parental house also stands for her old life and her traumatic past memories with her parents.

Again Sartre in, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), refers to the existence of the three dimensions of time: past, present, and future simultaneously: 'The For-itself is a being which must simultaneously exist in all its dimensions [...] Each dimension is the For-itself's way of projecting itself mainly toward the Self, of being what it is beyond a nothingness' (p.160). Here Sartre employs the term For-itself to discuss that each being for itself perceives himself as a subject. This idea is reflected in the novel through the narrator's use of time as a weapon to cure herself. As another attempt to go beyond her facticity and surpass her past memories, the main character's for itself aimed at going over her sadist relationship with her ex-boyfriend Trevor. She admits:

But I was still anxious. Trevor Trevor Trevor. I might have felt better if he were dead, I thought, since behind every memory of him was the possibility of reconciling, and thus more heartbreak and indignity. I felt weak. My nerves were frayed and fragile, like tattered silk. Sleep had not yet solved my crankiness, my impatience, my memory. It seemed like everything was now somehow linked to getting back what I'd lost. I could picture my selfhood, my past, my psyche like a dump truck filled with trash. Sleep was the hydraulic piston that lifted the bed of the truck up, ready to dump everything out somewhere, but Trevor was stuck in the tailgate, blocking the flow of garbage. I was afraid things would be like that forever. (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 58)

In this passage, the protagonist clearly describes her desire to throw away her past, considering it as garbage that she can only get rid of through sleeping; however, for a fully liberation from her past, there was still one obstacle, her boyfriend Trevor. In this way, the narrator is able to set herself free from the shackles of the past which is holding her back from normally functioning in life. In her current moment, the protagonist's for itself is able to refer to her past and to transcend it to move forward to another dimension of time.

To completely transcend her unpleasant past, the protagonist decides to let go of everything materialistic that was part of her old identity and her past to be able to start a new including the brand clothes she gave Reva “I never want to see any of these clothes again,” I told Reva when she arrived. She adds: ‘I want to forget it all existed. Whatever you don’t take, I’ll donate or throw away” (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 151). She insists that she wants to get rid of the furniture of her apartment besides all her belongings: “I wanted nothing but white walls, bare floors, lukewarm tap water. I packed up all my tapes and CDs, my laptop, unmelted candles, all my pens and pencils, all my electric cords and rape whistles and Fodor’s guides to places I never went” (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 153). So that she could exist as a free individual from the materialistic objects of the society.

1.2 Disconnecting from the Present Situation:

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre mentions that every act should include this organization “cause-intention-act-end” (p.437). Past and present are the cause or the motive behind this end which is the realization of the future goal. He asserts:

Indeed the case could not be otherwise since every action must be intentional; each action must, in fact, have an end, and the end in turn is referred to a cause. Such indeed is the unity of the three temporal ekstases; the end or temporalization of my future implies a cause (or motive); that is, it points toward my past, and the present is the upsurge of the act. To speak of an act without a cause is to speak of an act which would lack the intentional structure of every act. (Sartre., 1943, p. 437)

This idea is reflected on the novel in the way the protagonist’s past traumatic memories keep haunting her current life preventing her from continuing to endeavor in life. Becoming aware of that and having an abnormal connection to her present time, the protagonist comes to realize the necessity for a better life than what she currently lives. Thus, she starts to plan for a future project which is to be a totally new person, having a new and pure relation and vision towards life. Her current situation becomes an upsurge behind her future plan which its origin is, in fact, rooted back to her past.

The present is another time dimension that the protagonist needs to go beyond in order to reach her goal of being renewed and having a fresh sight towards life. To do so, she decides to rebel against the present situation and against the capitalist society. From Sartre’s lens, one can say that the main character’s realization of her project should include the unity of the three

ecstasies of time: past, present and future. Therefore, the main character's past and present caused her to intentionally take action to reach the end she planned for: a future of her own. The protagonist also referred to this transcendence as a "quest for a new spirit" (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 156).

Interestingly, in some cultures, a shaman is believed to have access to the spiritual world, capable of helping individuals to heal and undergo their self-transformation quest. It is also worth mentioning that in some of these cultures, this metamorphosis or transformation can take place through a fire ritual. In an article entitled "Symbolism of Fire in Greek and Japanese Creation Myths," Steve McCarty highlights the dual role fire plays as both a purifying and transformative force when tamed and also as a burning force once untamed. He further illustrates how this fire is used in various rituals, where lightening a fire symbolizes "the fulfillment of a need felt for purification or regeneration" (MC Carthy., 2021, p.1). Moreover, when comparing Japanese and Greek mythologies, the article shows that "fire has played a major role in representing transformation, purification, and benediction" in both mythologies (MC Carthy., 2021, p. 3). Therefore, it could be claimed in the novel, that the protagonist, through her year of sleep, undergoes a spiritual metamorphosis to renew her mind and soul and rebirth as a new transformed person, transcending the absurdity of her relation with the outside world and with herself. In the novel, the main character describes a certain situation she pictures herself in by saying:

I smelled the smoke of a fire burning deep inside. Something had to be burned and sacrificed. And then the fire would burn out and die. The smoke would clear. My eyes would adjust to the darkness, I thought. I'd find my footing. When I came out of the cave, back out into the light, when I woke up at last, everything—the whole world—would be new again. (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 154)

In this quote, the main character describes the ritual where she figuratively sacrifices something as a symbol of letting go of the old self and the world, embracing the new one leading to her spiritual metamorphosis and transformation. What ensures that the main character's metamorphosis is spiritual is that she was aware that she will keep the facticity of her name and appearance even after she acquires a new spirit. She declares:

Needed [her] birth certificate and [her] passport and [her] driver's license. At the end of [her] hibernation, [She]'d wake[s] up—[She] imagined—and sees[her] past life as an inheritance. [She]'d need proof of the old identity to

help [her] access [her] bank accounts, to go places. It wasn't as if [she]'d wake up with a different face and body and name. [She]'d appear to be the old[her].”(Moshfegh., 2018, p. 156)

Even when she asked Ping Xi for help, he asked her about the point of all this if she will eventually wake up as the same person; she replied “it's not about ID cards. It's an inside job. What do you want me to do? Walk out into the woods, build a fort, and hunt squirrels” (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 157). He told her that for him “that would be a more authentic rebirth” (Moshfegh., 2018, p.157). In the same background, other changes occur on the main character's face; however, when she looked in the mirror, she could not point out what was different:

My face in the mirror startled me. I leaned in and looked to see if it had shifted anymore since Dr. Tuttle's weird assessment. I did look different. I couldn't put my finger on how, but there was something that hadn't been there before. What was it? Had I entered the new dimension? Ridiculous. (Moshfegh., 2018, p.142)

Although ironically stated that the main character felt like she moved to another dimension, this can be regarded as a slight sign of the success of her hibernation since some changes started to occur in her life. Moshfegh gives a detailed and a vivid description of what the main character felt by the end of her hibernation and during the last step of her transformation:

My stomach turned and I was cold with sweat, and I started writhing [...] tumbling [...] The gray mist obscured my vision. Had I crossed the seal? Was the world crumbling? Calm, calm, I told myself. I could feel gravity sucking me deeper, time accelerating, the darkness around me, widening until I was somewhere else, somewhere with no horizon, an area of space that awed me in its foreverness, and I felt calm for just a moment[...]I tried to remember my life, flipping through Polaroids in my mind. It was so pretty there. It was interesting! But I knew that even if I could go back, if such a thing were possible with exactitude, in life or in dreams, there was really no point. So I traveled more peacefully through outer space, listening to the rhythm of my respiration, each breath an echo of the breath before, softer and softer, until I was far enough away that there

was no sound, there was no movement. There was no need for reassurance or directionality because I was nowhere, doing nothing. I was nothing. I was gone. (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 162-3)

This passage perfectly describes what the protagonist felt in her sleep during one of her last days of hibernation due to the amount of drugs she was taking where she experienced a sense of disconnection from her physical body and the space surrounding her. In other words, the unnamed protagonist in this scene is sartarian in the way she resembles Sartre's consumerism of drugs to transcend the reality he lives. In the biography entitled *Jean Paul Sartre: A Life* (1987), Annie Cohen Solal asserts that Sartre was a big consumer of drugs and alcohol. She depicts him as a consumer of cigarettes and several pipefuls of tobacco drink more than a quart of alcohol (wine, beer, vodka, whisky...). He was bursting with ideas that he was desperate to share with the world, so he popped pills and drank coffee to increase his focus and enable him to keep writing at a breakneck pace without the need for rest (p.15). The author adds that when he finished writing; he was too revved up to sleep, so he would swallow barbiturates to knock himself out. When he finally awoke the next day, he'd pop more amphetamines to cut through the fog of sleep. He wanted to embrace the unlimited freedom of being, to experience life in a radically different way. To put it differently, he strives to overcome the ordinary life seeking to reach transcendence (p.16-17).

It is projected in the novel that the moment the main character encounters the gray mist, she transcends the spatial boundaries of the physical world she is part of and reaches out to an outer space where her consciousness becomes disembodied floating outside her body that was soundly sleeping in her apartment. This idea can be approached by Martin Heidegger's concept of "Spatiality," in *Being and Time* (1927). Heidegger states that "nowhere does not mean nothing; rather, region in general lies therein, and disclosed-ness of the world in general for essentially spatial being-in" (Heidegger., 1927, p. 174). By being "nowhere," the main character in fact transcends the concrete meaning of region and moved to a different spatial dimension. Therefore, giving space for a different conception of the relation between the being-in and the world reflecting on the subjectivity of her existence in relation to the world she inhabits. Also, by recognizing the pointlessness of holding back to the past and the desire to relive it, she is able to peacefully transcend it. Additionally, she is able to transcend her being and accept her state of nothingness by going beyond the limitations of her existence and pre-given essence and embracing her responsibility of

authenticating her own existence and re-finding herself after being gone. Dirschauer in "Sleep as Action?" states that in the novel, the use of "the metaphor of sleep as a distancing from earth conveys a similar sense of freedom" (p 51). She further explains that "the subject alienating herself from the world risks not mattering- however, in Moshfegh's novel, this is the very thing the narrator desires" (Dirschauer., 2022, p.51). Thus, one can say that sleep is considered as an action of participation in the process of freedom in the late capitalist society. In this sense, sleep can be considered as a path towards search for meaning. The main character's situation resembles the situation of the main character in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) which reflects on the theme of identity and the search for meaning and purpose in the consumerist society. The depressed protagonist joins an underground fight club in an attempt to escape emptiness and create meaning for his life.

2. Reconnecting with the World: Self Transformation and Acceptance:

After one year of rest and relaxation, the unnamed narrator wakes up. By approaching the end of the novel, the reader comes to realize that some changes started to occur in the main character's personality. These changes are particularly related to her new perception of life, re-establishing relations and deep connections with the people and the world she was alienated and disconnected from. By embracing her emotions and past, she paves the way for achieving her authenticity. Although her goal was to escape from reality and from the complexities in her life, she finally comes to realize that the answer is not escaping but accepting. Prior to her hibernation, the main character used to keep distance from everyone she encountered because she always found something to criticize and dislike about them. However, after leaving her apartment, for the first time at the end of her hibernation journey, she felt dizzy. So, when the doorman and her neighbors offered her help, she realizes that 'people were so nice' (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 164). On this basis, she begins to form new connections with these people. She also points out that she finally starts to have a normal relation with sleep: 'every night at nine, I lay down on the smooth hardwood floor with a stretch and a yawn, and I had no trouble sleeping. I had no dreams. I was like a newborn animal' (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 165). Moreover, she started to leave the house and wander outside more often, and was slowly reconnecting with the world around her and building new habits. Significantly, she begins to visit the park everyday where she enjoys feeding the squirrels corn flakes and listening to the radio: "I got the habit of buying a box of Corn Flakes from the Egyptians each morning. I fed the Corn Flakes in gentle handfuls to the squirrels in the

park. I drank no coffee [...] in August; I bought a battery-operated radio and carried it with me to the park each day. I listened to the jazz stations” (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 165).

Another aspect that changes about the main character’s personality is her relation with her own emotions. She is finally able to deal with her emotional issues and could reconnect with her emotions. This idea is illustrated through her relationship with her friend Reva whom she thought she hated while she was disconnected from her emotions and alienated from everyone. After her hibernation, she, however, realizes that she actually loves her and feels something was missing with her absence; however, this realization was late. When they finally meet again, she could feel that Reva’s emotions towards her have changed. The protagonist even knows that ‘she was just trying to fill up the air, take up the time until she could go and leave me forever’ (Moshfegh., 2018, p.167). Surprisingly, she even admits that she felt hurt about the fact that Reva has changed and how she is indifferent to hear about what she has been up to, she confessed ‘I can’t say it didn’t hurt me that she held herself at such a distance’ (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 167). She knows that is the last time she would ever see her in person because she realizes they are no longer friends, so when it is time to go, she says: “ I didn’t want her to leave[...] She was beautiful, with all her nerves and all her complicated, circuitous feelings and contradictions and fears. This would be the last time I’d see her in person. “*I love you*”, I said. “*I love you, too*” (Moshfegh., 2018, pp. 167).

It is worth adding that when the protagonist tries to call her again later on, Reva does not call her back; they lose connection until the reader is surprised by an event that tips the scales in the novel and thus the whole American history, 9/11 attacks, when the protagonist keeps re-watching a videotape of a woman leaping off the Seventy-eighth floor, believing that this woman was in fact Reva: ‘I am overcome with awe, not because she looks like Reva, and I think it’s her, almost exactly her, and not because Reva and I had been friends, or because I’ll never see her again, but because she is beautiful. There she is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake’ (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 142). This quote highlights the main character’s admiration for the beauty of this woman’s experience of breaking free and taking risks as part of one’s life experience even if it means diving into the unknown possibilities of this life.

Fundamentally, being at peace with the past is another dimension of the main character’s change in her personality and behaviour. Instead of constantly trying to escape and to disconnect from her past trauma and

memories, she decides to confront them and to cope with them so that they no longer haunt her life experience. This new relation with the past started with her realization that she can survive without her parents' house. Once she found a buyer, she decided to sell it; she understood that 'it would soon be someone else's store of memories, and that was beautiful.' And she knew she 'could move on' free from the burdens of the past and the memories (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 170). Fernandez in her thesis *Active Passiveness: Sleeping to Escape Trauma in Ottessa Moshfegh's My Year of Rest and Relaxation* summed up the main character' transcendence experience by stating:

In short, we can draw the conclusion that in the face of traumatic disconnection, it is impossible to run away from society and the company of others completely. However painful it might be, one has to go through life, and this involves 'the ties we have to others' (Butler 22). Our protagonist has to think about her parents and accept their indifference toward her, which resulted in her lonely childhood to be able to form new relationships. She has to accept everything that society has to give her, both good and bad. She needs to realize that she craves the love that Reva can give her and that she is addicted to the disdain that Trevor offers. The Infermiterol is just a gateway drug into her subconscious, it helps her to finally open up, go through her past and finally be able to face her future. (Fernandez., 2022, p. 19)

Subsequently, the main character becomes aware of the changes that occurred within her and in her life; she even said: 'my sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things. This was good. This was my life now' (Moshfegh., 2018, p. 170). She is now able to deal with the world, others and her emotions more authentically and is finally able to find her place in the world and to discover what she actually enjoys doing. She finally decides to take responsibility for her life and for her actions starting a new self-improvement journey.

Conclusion:

The present study scrutinizes the main character's journey towards authenticity. It highlights that she experienced a major tenet of Sartre's existential philosophy: transcendence. To transcend her facticity and the absurdity and meaninglessness of her life, to reconnect with the world and her

own self and to reborn from the ashes of her past, the main character resorts to a year of rest and relaxation, in which she slept her life away. The study further finds out that the unnamed protagonist wakes up from this year-long sleep with a new perception of life, reconnected with herself and the outside world and aware of the challenges she must encounter in life to finally become her authentic self.

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