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**“I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE HAVING THE TIME OF
MY LIFE”: *THE BELL JAR* AND *MY YEAR OF REST
AND RELAXATION* AS NARRATIVES OF
DISSATISFIED WOMEN**

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I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story.

From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked.

One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out.

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose.

(Plath, 2005, p.73)

Acknowledgements

For my family, who taught me resilience and perseverance.

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For Lara, who has been essential in the writing process of this paper.

And for Cristina, who has pushed me to do my best at all times and has been an inspiration every step of the way.

Thank you.



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ABSTRACT

Title: “I was supposed to be having the time of my life” *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as Narratives of Dissatisfied Women

Abstract: This paper attempts to state the differences and similarities between *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh. Focusing on the two female main characters, the research carried out has been focused on analysing the situation of feminism in each novel –one set in the 1960s, the other in the 1990s– and the inability of these women to comply with their prescribed positions in society. To achieve a fruitful analysis of the aforementioned topics, the books have been read and compared through three different scopes: the impossibility of female friendship, frustrated ambition and the effects of motherhood. The paper concludes that these main characters are dissatisfied with their positions in society because of their frustrated attempts to live by feminist ideals.

Key words: feminism, postfeminism, community, motherhood, ambition

Títol: “I was supposed to be having the time of my life”: *La Campana de Vidre* i *El Meu Any de Repòs i Relaxació* com narratives de dones insatisfetes

Resum: Aquesta recerca intenta assenyalar les diferències i semblances entre *La Campana de Vidre* de la Sílvia Plath i *El Meu Any de Repòs i Relaxació* de l'Ottessa Moshfegh. Centrant-se en les dues protagonistes femenines, la recerca realitzada s'ha centrat a analitzar la situació del feminisme en cada novel·la –una ambientada als anys seixanta, l'altra als noranta– i la incapacitat d'aquestes dones per complir amb les posicions prescrites per la societat. Per aconseguir una anàlisi fructífera dels temes esmentats, els llibres s'han llegit i comparat des de tres àmbits diferents: la impossibilitat de l'amistat femenina, l'ambició frustrada i els efectes de la maternitat. El document conclou que aquests personatges principals estan insatisfets amb les seves posicions a la societat a causa dels seus intents frustrats de viure segons els ideals feministes.

Paraules clau: feminisme, postfeminisme, comunitat, maternitat, ambició

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs)

This paper aims to investigate how *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* portray women who are deeply affected by the patriarchal pressures of society and the limitations these entail. This project brings to the surface the metamorphosis of patriarchal oppression and also how its effects have transformed over the years, specially for women who want to have a successful career that has been typically catered as “masculine”.

The SDG of this paper, thus, fits into the Goal 5 “Gender Equality”, specifically within the target 5.5. “Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decisionmaking in political, economic and public life.”

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INTRODUCTION

When I was fifteen my literature teacher came up to me and told me to read *Ariel* by Sylvia Plath. She said that I would appreciate her writing and it would probably resonate with me. From that point on, Plath's writing became a pillar to my development as a lover of literature, a feminist and a researcher. I did not dare read *The Bell Jar* until I was much older because I wanted to be mature enough to enjoy it. I decided to read it when I turned 19, that way I would be –more or less– as old as Esther. It is safe to say that it quickly became one of my favourite books as it dealt with everything that resonated with me on a deeper level of my being; Esther's troubles about self-worth, her intrusive thoughts about her own worth as a writer or her worries about her place in society were –and still are– a mirror of my own worries and concerns.

Not much later I stumbled upon Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*¹, where I found a main character who embraced her own unlikeability and did not, at any point, even at the risk of loneliness, censor herself. Through books such as this one or movies such as *Midsommar* (2019) or *Promising young woman* (2020), pop culture had been bringing to the surface the concept of “female rage”, through which women started to embrace and express their anger, leaving behind the smiley and correct woman they had been taught to be. To me, Moshfegh's main character was the ultimate representation of a woman who is deeply frustrated with the society she lives in and the life she has been given. Despite being deeply aware of how incorrect and petty the main character is, I could not help but sympathise with her and almost envy the way in which she decides to unapologetically be herself.

Once I had finished reading Moshfegh's novel I felt like there was a deep connection between Esther and MYORAR's main character. To me, both characters were troubled because of societal pressures and their own family lives, which made them essentially unable to establish fruitful friendships or romantic connections. I have been moved to figure out what these two women have in common ever since.

The initial questions that came to mind when starting this research were; What brings a woman into a state of self-destruction? Where does this sense of dissatisfaction with your own life originate? Who is to blame? How do you get out of the isolation room you have built for yourself?

¹ From now on, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* will be referred to as MYORAR to make the reading of this paper more fluid.

These two novels present two young women in their 20s who have no desire to become wives but who also feel that their artistic ambitions –Esther wants to be a writer and MYORAR’s main character² wants to be an artist– will not bring them happiness either. Furthermore, both of them have deeply troubled relationships with their parents, especially with their mothers. *The Bell Jar* is set in the 1960s, so Esther is much more socially restrained than X, who lives in New York in the 1990s. However, both of them live in really convoluted times in terms of women’s rights and the societal pressure towards women.

This research attempts to demonstrate how *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* represent women who are dissatisfied with their place in their community and that there are parallelisms between these two novels despite being set in different time frames. It is my belief that both Esther and X could have dealt with the dissatisfaction they both feel about their own lives better if they had had a community of people they identified with or a ‘safe place’ to go to. Furthermore, I believe that these two novels are a representation of the struggle of feeling like a feminist killjoy, the woman who “spoils the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness” (Ahmed, 2010, p.581) in a society that is not prepared to face the reconsideration of the narratives she live by.

Researchers have been theorising about Sylvia Plath’s works for decades now, and most topics of her writing have been analysed and written about from multiple perspectives. Due to the popularity of Plath’s life story and the constant publication and re-edition of her journals, most criticism is centred on relating Plath’s life to her poems or novels. It is my aim, however, to follow Barthes’s ideas in “the Death of the Author” (1967) theory and separate the novel from the novelist, as I think comparing Esther to Plath would lead to a very shallow study of her texts. Many critics have, however, successfully analysed *The Bell Jar* without mentioning Plath’s life as an inspiration or a referent for Esther’s personality. My aim is to carry out my research from the articles written by these critics. When it comes to *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* there is much less academic criticism due to its relatively recent publication. Furthermore, since the book quickly became popular, what one finds when researching the reception of the book are mainly magazine reviews or newspaper articles rather than academic criticism. However, the little analysis this book has received is quite exquisite and useful for my own research. When it comes to the comparison of the two books,

²From now on, MYORAR’s main character will be referred to as X, to make the reading of this paper less burdensome.

there is only one paper from the University of Stockholm that deals with both of these novels, which has not been published but to which I was given access after contacting the University. This paper, however, has been of little use for the research I wanted to carry out.

To prove my thesis, I decided to carry out the research through the scope of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which explains the situation of women in the 1960s, and which helped me understand Esther's society and therefore get into the analysis of the book from a feminist point of view. Zygmunt Bauman's *Community: Seeking safety in an insecure world* has also been a crucial starting point to grasp the need and impossibility of community nowadays and therefore to conceive how both Esther and X have the same ache for comprehension and embrace from the people surrounding them and how total assimilation in a community is essentially impossible.

1. FEMINISM IN THE 1960s AND THE 1990s: THE METAMORPHOSIS OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION

For more than a century feminism has shaped the lives of women in Western societies. As nations evolved, the movement did too, it changed form and objectives as it gained popularity. However, it also triggered resistance and harsh criticism. This research will be partly focused on how the different portrayals of feminism affected community building in the decades of the 1960s and the 1990s in the United States.

In the 1960s, second wave feminism was caused by the return of men to the workforce after World War II. Women, who had been pushed to work in all positions and capacities in the absence of men so as to keep the countries' economies afloat, were forced to return to their homes and convince themselves that their role was to be good wives and mothers. Once the Cold War took hold, "a sense inside the United States [pushed its citizens] to build a national community; to naturalise the relation between people and the country" (Fejer and Talif, 2014, p.2). This political situation created some contradicting discourses in American society, which was divided between a feminist movement that was working to liberate women and the political ideologies which encouraged them to comply with domesticity (Fejer and Talif, 2014, p.2). This conflict was very much present in the lives of American women, as they were bombarded with incompatible narratives among which they had to choose. This was made evident in women's magazines such as *Mademoiselle*³, which on the one hand pushed for women's independence and professional careers but also featured several ads and articles promoting domesticity (Smith, 2010, p.4). Women who aimed for professional careers were considered unlovable and ugly, while the ones who expected marriage and domesticity were thought of as ideal and beautiful. As Leonard wrote for his article in the magazine *College Literature*: "A girl is either 'nice' or she is not; she is either loved for denying her needs, or she is abandoned as punishment for exploring the world on her own, for using her unprecedented emotions and desires as a guide" (1992, p.70). Thus, women were pushed to accept the prescribed femininity to avoid possible ostracism. These contradicting narratives on women's lives caused them profound unhappiness which often led to mental breakdowns. According to Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*: "Of the growing thousands of women currently getting private psychiatric help in the United States, the married ones were reported dissatisfied with their marriages, the unmarried ones suffering from anxiety and, finally,

³ Where Sylvia Plath worked for a while.

depression” (1963, p.14). Therefore, in the 1960s women were rarely happy regardless of their position in society. While married women had to settle for domesticity and motherhood, unmarried women had to face harsh societal judgement.

In the 1990s this narrative had lost relevance thanks to the work second wave feminists had done, which gave women reproductive rights⁴ and equal opportunity legislation⁵. Gradually, women were leaving domesticity behind and assuming important positions in their workplaces. It is no coincidence that this started to be noticeable in the 90s, when the Cold War had ended and therefore the political pressure for women to be the ones who kept their homes –and by extension the nation– stable, was relieved (Fejer and Talif, p.2).

However, this stepping into the public sphere did not happen easily and the public did not receive it lightly either, as feminism was starting to face the rise of postfeminism, which claimed that equality had been achieved by then and there was no need for a feminist movement anymore (Genz and Brabon, 2009 p.13-14). This belief could not be further from the truth, because having achieved many legal advances towards equality in its second wave, third wave feminism focused on opening the movement to women of colour and other representations of gender and sexualities which were also affected by the pressures of patriarchy. Thus, feminism was still very much necessary in society. This internal conflict within the women’s liberation process gave the opportunity for the rest of society to objectify women, who after fighting for their sexual liberation were facing a disproportionate sexualisation from society which essentially meant to take power away from these women who were on the rise.

As women gained power, or simply showed up in public, society pushed back by reducing them to gruesome sexual fantasies and misogynistic stereotypes. Women’s careers, clothes, bodies, and families were skewered. Nothing was off-limits. The trailblazing women of the 90s were excoriated by a deeply sexist society. That’s why we remember them as bitches, not victims of sexism. (Yarrow, 2018, p.13)

The woman of the 90s was no longer bombarded with the narrative of the ideal domestic woman but instead was objectified by her society. No matter how talented or how intelligent

⁴ The first contraceptive pill was FDA approved in 1960 and *Roe v. Wade*, which allowed pregnant individual’s right to have an abortion was approved in 1973. (*A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States: Women's Reproductive Rights* 2023)

⁵ The *Civil Rights Act of 1964* condemned the discrimination based on race, religion or gender in employment, education, public accommodations and voting. (*Legal highlight: The civil rights act of 1964*)

these new working women were, their value was always limited to their appearance, which led, yet again, to a generation of depressed young women, with the only difference that now they were criticised not only for their life choices but for their physique, too. In Yarrow's words, referring to Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts's "Objectification Theory"; "Because society values female bodies primarily for their function and consumption, women and girls are more susceptible to suffering as their bodies change (...). This objectification enables discrimination, sexual violence, undervaluing women, and depression" (Yarrow, 2018, p.41). Thus, the women of the nineties were pushed, just like the women in the 60s, to choose whether they were for or against feminism, which essentially meant to be against their excessive sexualisation or be okay with it.

The sociological context of American women is especially important in the analysis of *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. These novels portray two female main characters who suffer from depression due to the effect of societal pressure to be perfect according to expectations set on women.

Plath and Moshfegh create two female main characters –Esther and an unnamed woman respectively– that suffer burnout caused by this social situation. Both women are incredibly intelligent and ambitious, have a college education and artistic ambitions for their future, but hit a wall when the societal pressure of their times becomes too much for them to the point that it paralyses them. Their ideals have isolated them from the rest of their community and have forced them into an asphyxiating loneliness. Their situation is similar in that deep down they both long for companionship but with individuals who will comprehend the difficulties they face as women who want something more than a husband and children. Both of them are surrounded by women who decide to comply with their expected motherhood and wifeness; women who have no professional ambition or intellectual or artistic interests. Furthermore, these women have grown up in homes devoid of healthy affection and understanding. Thus, our main characters have to teach themselves to be independent women in a society where they are expected to just be wives and mothers. Esther and X grow up without guidance, which leads them to faulty friendships, toxic romantic relationships and general numbness to any emotion.

2. THEMATIC PARALLELS IN *THE BELL JAR* AND *MY YEAR OF REST AND RELAXATION*

2.1. *The impossibility of female friendship*

Esther Greenwood tries to fit in with the girls in her college dorm, in the Amazon –the hotel she is staying at during a summer internship with *Ladies' Day* magazine– and eventually at the asylum. However, she always ends up drifting away from the friendships that she tries so hard to build because she considers her companions to be incompatible with her. At the Amazon, Esther doubts whether to be friends with Doreen or with Betsy. The relationships Esther has with these two girls are crucial to understanding how Esther is unable to make real friends due to her doubts about whether to act according to feminism or to the prescribed femininity of her time.

Doreen impersonates a woman liberated from the “Feminine Mystique” but also one who, without the guidance that this prescribed narrative set in her life, has wandered off to walk on thin ice; she has continuous sexual encounters with an older man who seems to be taking advantage of her, comes back to the hotel drunk and neglects her duties as an intern. Despite the fact that Esther feels Doreen is often “a secret voice speaking straight out of (her) own bones” (2005, p.7) in aspects such as marriage or conforming with the prescribed femininity of the time, she also knows that Doreen’s hypersexuality and latent alcoholism are not exactly what she wants for herself, even if they sound better to her than married life.

I made a decision about Doreen that night. I decided I would watch her and listen to what she said, but deep down I would have nothing at all to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy who I resembled at heart. (2005, p.21)

Although Esther also wants to avoid domesticity, she does not want to suffer the judgement Doreen faces which comes partly from Esther but mainly from the rest of the girls at the Amazon, who have been indoctrinated in the belief that women must strive for domesticity and avoid aiming for independence. While Esther does not want to be somebody’s wife she doesn’t feel comfortable either with the exercise of freedom Doreen offers her.

Concurrently, Betsy seems to be the girl who everyone is *supposed* to be. She impersonates a woman living by the rules of the “Feminine Mystique”; pretty, obedient, modest and familiar.

Esther describes Betsy as some kind of mother figure, who is “trying to save [her] in some way” (2005, p.6).

Towards the end of the internship Esther is beginning to comprehend that she simply does not *fit in* with Betsy and her stifling expectations nor with Doreen and her unfiltered recklessness. This paralyses Esther and makes her isolate herself: “I wondered why I couldn’t go the whole way doing what I should any more. This made me sad and tired. Then I wondered why I couldn’t go the whole way doing what I shouldn’t, the way Doreen did, and this made me even sadder and more tired” (2005, p.28).

As Sakane argues in “The Mother, the Self, and the Other”, Esther is unable to identify with either Betsy or Doreen because she reduces both of them to one aspect of their personalities (1998, p.32). Furthermore,

To Esther, mind and body, career and family, intelligence and sexuality are incompatible and contradictory. She sees these women as the inferior Other, and grotesquely reduces them to images of whore, virgin, unattractive intellectual, and so on. In doing so, Esther is desperately trying to protect herself from becoming the stereotypical woman. (1998, p.32)

It is my belief that Esther is stuck in a place of exhaustion because she has come to the realisation that her ambition is worthless in the society she lives in and because she finds no speck of happiness in the life prospects that Betsy and Doreen offer her. Her in-betweenness⁶ sentences her to numbness and insecurity due to the lack of role models and friends.

Contrasting with Esther’s efforts to fit in with her society, X focuses on isolating herself from the rest of the world and the people she knows. In MYORAR only one female friendship is portrayed and it is also deeply troubled. Reva and X met in college where they were roommates. After a few years of friendship, however, their differences become evident and their friendship ends up being untenable. Reva’s and X’s main differences are that Reva embodies the postfeminist ideals whereas X maintains the ideals of feminism despite the possibility of being rejected by society, which at the time was more favourable to postfeminism. It is important to say, however, that the judgement that feminists suffered in the 1990s is practically nothing compared to the ostracism that women who did not follow

⁶ Here, “in-betweenness” is mentioned as coming from Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, which develops on how subjects can exist in “in-between” spaces, spaces which are not defined or in identities that are not yet established. (Bhabha, 1994, p.1-2)

the femininity prescribed for them faced in the 1960s. The judgement in the 1990s was more focused on the sexualisation and mockery of women rather than their complete exclusion from society.

Reva and X are opposites in almost everything; Reva comes from a stable working-class family of South Asian origin, longs for a nuclear family and a pink-collar career⁷ while X is a WASP who wants nothing to do with domesticity and wants to be an artist. X rejects the idea of settling for a domestic life and explicitly mentions how marriage sounds like death to her (2018, p.28). She does not find happiness in her job as a gallery receptionist, which would instead be a great fit for Reva. It is interesting how, despite Reva being the one who is underprivileged, she is also the one that defends and portrays postfeminism (which was mainly led by white privileged women) while X occupies the position of the feminist.

Reva's role as the postfeminist woman is made evident by X's description of her where the reader can discern Reva's superficiality:

She was a slave to vanity and status, which was not unusual in a place like Manhattan, but I found her desperation especially irritating. It made it hard for me to respect her intelligence. She was so obsessed with brand names, conformity, "fitting in." She made regular trips down to Chinatown for the latest knockoff designer handbags. She'd given me a Dooney & Bourke wallet for Christmas once. She got us matching fake Coach key rings. (2018, p.9)

Reva longs for a perfect appearance and the acceptance of others, and X feels trapped by society's perception of her. Thus, X is resentful of Reva's values, as she explicitly says on page 14: "I wasn't interested in competing with her, but I resented her on principle" and Reva is resentful of X's dismissal of her own privileges, which are the only thing she longs for.

However, as the representative of feminism in the novel, X is aware of her privileges and the differences between herself and her friend:

Compared to me, she was "underprivileged." And according to her terms, she was right: I looked like a model, had money I hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so I was "cultured." Reva, on the other hand, came from

⁷ Pink-collar jobs are the ones that were typically done by women, such as secretaries, teachers, housekeepers or nurses.

Long Island, was an 8 out of 10 but called herself “a New York three,” and had majored in economics. “The Asian nerd major,” she named it. (2018, p.13)

While X does represent feminism, it needs to be stated that X is in no way a *good* representative of feminism, because she lacks empathy and is mainly worried by white-people-problems. X is completely clueless and sometimes even offensive when describing lower-class people or people of colour. Nonetheless, I believe that X’s character is deeply influenced by the postfeminist society of her time and once her separation from it becomes successful after her hibernation she also evolves as a feminist, being more aware of what is right and what is wrong.

By choosing to hibernate and be alone, X is openly rebelling against the life that the American society at the turn of the millennium prescribed⁸ and therefore everything that Reva represents (Stoner, 2018). Still, Reva is extremely maternal towards X and tries to look after her even if X is cruel to her. It is not until Reva really sees how incompatible they are that she leaves X alone. This gives the reader a glimpse into their relationship, where both care for each other but in an authoritarian way: Reva from the stance of motherhood and X from the stance of moral superiority. Neither of them are willing to let the other win and therefore they destroy each other in the process.

By having X end up alone at the end of the novel, a contrast is created with *The Bell Jar*. After her stay at the asylum, Esther opens her mind to several possibilities for her life; she can be a professional and also a mother, and therefore, she can befriend people who embrace either of these narratives. She creates fruitful friendships based on comprehension and empathy, while X ends up radically separated from the postfeminist side of her society and therefore from Reva (who eventually dies in the 9/11 attacks). She completely rejects the possibility of peace with postfeminism and capitalism and therefore she essentially ends up alone, apparently by choice, apparently happy.

2.2. Frustrated ambition and loneliness

After years of academic success, Esther decides that she wants to strive for a life of academia and writing.

⁸ The life prescribed at the turn of the century was focused on diet culture, perfect appearance and being a “good girl”, which was also deeply influenced by postfeminism. An example of a female fictional character who followed this prescription is Bridget Jones. (Genz, S., & Brabon, B., 2009 p.1)

All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true, I did everything well enough and got all A's, and by the time I made it to college nobody could stop me. (2005, p.29)

When she is awarded the internship at *Ladies' Day* magazine, Esther feels like her life as a journalist is taking off and she has no doubt that she will also get accepted to the summer writing course at her college. Nevertheless, as summer advances and she gets rejected from the writing course, she feels no longer successful. Her confidence is shaken by the realisation that the path she had envisioned for herself is no longer possible or not as easy as she thought it would be. Pursuing professional success meant facing possible ostracising and loneliness and Esther longed for company and inclusion. In Linda Wagner-Martin's words, "Esther believed firmly that there was no way, in the American society of the 1960s, that a talented woman could successfully combine a career with homemaking" (1992, p.38).

In an interview with Jay Cee –the editor at *Ladies' Day*–, where she is asked what she wants to do after she finishes her college degree, she finds herself not knowing what she really wants (2005, p.30) due to the haunting prospect of loneliness if she continues down the ambitious path she had envisioned for herself.

During her stay in New York, and as she drifts away from her college colleagues and her friends at the Amazon, Esther fades away from the world. Plath uses several metaphors to describe how Esther's loneliness makes her feel as if she is disappearing. Esther names herself Elly Higginbottom when out with Doreen (2005, p.11), – a name which she uses further down the line, when flirting with a sailor (2005, p.126) –, aware that it would not be beneficial for her if anyone knew she was being wild and flirting with strangers. By using another name to present herself, Esther starts to fade away. She also writes that "[She] felt [herself] shrinking to a small black dot (...). [She] felt like a hole in the ground" (2005, p.15).

Esther feels unseen and unnoticed, a feeling which is aggravated when she goes back to her town. Her frustrated attempt at being a writer makes her feel unsuccessful and worthless, invisible to the eyes of professionals in the field. By not complying with the narrative of prescribed femininity nor with the narrative of the 'ugly feminist' she is stuck in a position of in-betweenness which sentences her to invisibility.

Back in her hometown, where her depression worsens by the minute, she feels herself fade away because her mother sees neither the woman she has become nor how sick she is. This is aggravated when she goes to the beach with Jody and two boys and her “friend” does not see how depressed she is. “I thought Jody would notice the change in me, and that anybody with half an eye would see I didn’t have a brain in my head” (2005, p.148). By the time Esther attempts suicide, she feels completely invisible to everyone.

Just like Esther, Moshfegh’s main character is frustrated with her career prospects. X states at the beginning of the novel that she wanted to be an artist but “[She] had no talent” (2018, p. 16). To this statement, Reva reacts with “Do you really need talent?” With this intervention the author allows the reader to perceive how X feels about the art world. Whereas Reva buys into the capitalistic belief that art is just another product to buy and sell, X sees art as a practice that demands talent and therefore, since she feels like her work would be mediocre, she does not participate in the artistic world. Later in the novel, X develops her opinion concerning the art world:

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. (2018, p.182)

Thus, X rejects the possibility of being an artist not only because she feels like she has no talent for her work to be considered art but also because she feels like the contemporary art scene is focused on consumerism rather than on artistic expression. X only wants to be considered an artist if she really feels that her art is deserving of being considered as such. To X, who deep down is an art geek, an art piece is only valuable when separated from the influences of capitalism and the world they live in. Since she is unable to separate herself from her society and her personal worth is determined by societal opinions or prejudices of her, X as a person is as invaluable as her artistic career.

Coming from a wealthy family from whom she has inherited a large amount of money and a house, X has everything she needs to survive without having to work. However, it seems that if she does not work her only other choice is to become a stay-at-home-wife and a slave to

consumerism. However, she openly rejects marriage and the consumerist role that capitalism tries to impose on women.

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. I met interesting men at the gallery from time to time. I slept around in spurts, going out more, then less. (2018, p.28)

By rejecting consumerism she also rejects the prescribed ideals of beauty that were only achieved through expensive treatments or clothes. However, she fits perfectly well with the beauty standard of consumerism, which makes everyone perceive her as beautiful and privileged and nothing more. She is imprisoned by her appearance and her wealth.

Moshfegh makes a point of mentioning how people see X. In several instances throughout the novel, X's incredible physique is mentioned as a barrier no one can look past. X's own boyfriend tells her "Blondes are distracting. Think of your beauty as an Achilles' heel. You're too much on the surface. I don't say that offensively. But it's the truth. It's hard to look past what you look like" (2018, p.35). Not even the people who are supposed to know her and really see her do so.

Mid-hibernation, when she occasionally goes out to buy some food at the nearby bodega, she knows people won't see how she really is doing because of her physical appearance. "But I was tall and thin and blond and pretty and young. Even at my worst, I knew I still looked good" (2018, p.27).

When she was in high school she was only known for her looks "I was emulated and gossiped about. I was blond and thin and pretty—that's what people noticed" (2018, p.45). When she starts to notice how people see her, she becomes frustrated by her invisibility and the inevitability of being appreciated for her looks, not for her personality: "Trevor was right about my Achilles' heel. Being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else" (2018, p.35).

She is aware of people's assumptions about her because of how she dresses or where she lives. She openly rejects this perception of her which imprisons her in a role that she has not

chosen for herself. Growing up pretty and wealthy, she has always been either loved or hated for her image instead of her personality. However, neither of these traits are things that she has achieved for herself or things that she feels define her because they were given to her at birth. She is surrounded by people who appreciate her wealth and are really focused on the materialistic side of her life instead of her own personality or her precarious mental state and addiction to narcotics.

Rejecting artistry, consumerism and wifehood, X falls in a position of in-betweenness amid the choice for a professional or a domestic life, which ends up making her invisible to society.

The real X has been invisible all her life, no one, not even her mother, saw what she was truly like. To my belief, she decides to sleep for a year so her physical disappearance can align with the invisibility of her real self. She is rebelling against a society which roots for appearances and consumerism instead of real personality and talent. In Stoner's words "our narrator's determination to sleep for a year, to truly drop out, seems like a respectable rebellion" (2018). X's sleep is a rebellion in the sense that, by sleeping for a year, she stops participating in society and therefore she rejects everything it entails: when she stops working and buying into consumerism, she stops being a productive member of society and thus starts rebelling against it. Since postfeminism was deeply rooted in capitalism and the marketing of women as productive members of society –or rather, products of society–, through sleeping X also rejects postfeminism and performs her freedom in the way that she desires and not in the way imposed by the beliefs of her community. Sleep is, therefore, an anti-capitalistic and feminist action. As Bauman said in *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*: "There is a price to be paid for the privilege of 'being in a community'—and it is inoffensive or even invisible only as long as the community stays in the dream (. . .) Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom" (4). By sleeping and exercising her freedom, thus, X is rejecting not only her community's beliefs but her place in the community itself.

Esther and X, therefore, both go through a process of rejection of their community and their place in it, but just as it was previously mentioned, Esther ends up embracing all the aspects of her society and being a productive member of it –she eventually becomes a mother, as hinted in the first page of *The Bell Jar*– despite being aware of its limitations and X ends up rejecting completely the postfeminist community and beginning her search for a community that welcomes her as the person she wants to be, not the person that she was pushed to be.

2.3. Motherhood and parental absenteeism

In the city, Esther felt invisible due to her evident in-betweenness amid the girls at the Amazon, but at home she ends up fading away and attempting suicide because she is suffocated by the prescribed femininity that reigns over the town and the house. Mrs. Greenwood loves her children. She embodies the ideal woman of the 1950s, striving for domesticity and motherhood. Her sole role in the world is to take care of her children and make sure they follow the proper path to a happy life. However, this comes out as pushy and out-of-touch to Esther. Mrs. Greenwood does not understand Esther's ambitions and worries and therefore she is unable to comprehend the reasons behind her depression.

According to Irigaray and Petersen, "When a woman is reduced to the maternal role, the daughter lacks a female identity with which to identify. It is difficult for a daughter to look up to her mother if being her mother is all that this woman is; she is reduced to a mere function" (2017, p.64). The main problem between Esther and Mrs. Greenwood is that Mrs. Greenwood offers no role model for Esther to look up to. While the main character is unsure about what path to choose for herself, her mother only offers her the possibility of domesticity, and that does not satisfy Esther's needs. Apart from not offering any alternative narrative for Esther to follow, Mrs. Greenwood is often cruel with Esther due to her inability to conceive Esther's condition.

Esther's depression worsens and her mother takes her to a psychiatrist but offers no support apart from paying for the sessions and driving her to them. This is not to say that Mrs. Greenwood does not love her daughter, she simply does not love her the way Esther needs her to. Instead of offering her consolation and patience, Mrs. Greenwood is constantly pushing Esther to "decide" to be better, as if her depression was a chosen one. During her visits to Esther at the mental hospital, Mrs. Greenwood blames Esther for her condition and its consequences (2005, pp.169 - 173).

As Esther hits rock bottom with her suicide attempt, it becomes clear to her and to the reader that Mrs. Greenwood is a key factor in her depression and numbness: "She looked loving and reproachful, and I wanted her to go away" (2005, p.166). This is later confirmed by Dr. Nolan, who forbids Mrs. Greenwood from seeing Esther so as to ensure her recovery. Once Esther is considered stable enough and is allowed to leave the asylum, Mrs. Greenwood visits her and once again minimises the seriousness of her condition by comparing it to a bad dream and hoping for it to be forgotten (2005, p.227).

However, it is important to point out that Esther's recovery helps her understand how her mother is wrong and forgetting about this period in her life will not be beneficial to her. The main reason why Esther is able to get back to her regular life is because she now has friends and a role model to look up to. In the mental asylum Esther has learnt to appreciate the company of women who are different from her and has found in Dr. Nolan the affectionate and compassionate mother figure she never had. In Petersen's words, "Differently from the other women, Doctor Nolan has a life of her own that is not consumed by motherhood, and, unlike Mrs. Greenwood, she seems to listen to Esther's needs" (2017, p.65). Her recovery also allows her to connect with parts of herself that she didn't know she could access because she had never seen her mother access either, for example the grief for her father, whom she had never visited at the cemetery but does so once she begins to acknowledge her own emotions (2005, p.158).

Mrs. Greenwood's inability to empathise with Esther and offer her the comfort she needs can be understood through Friedan's "Feminine Mystique", in which she explains that "being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women" (2010, p.246). Embodying the role of housewife-mother could be a numbing experience for women who had to suppress other ambitions in the process of becoming a wife and a mother, which essentially could turn them into nurturing emotionless robots. Their only worries were their children and they were unable to express emotions outside of their role as mothers. This would also explain why Esther's mother has not openly grieved her husband, because after his death, Mrs. Greenwood is more affected by the change of role she undergoes –from mother to provider– than by losing her partner. Thus, Mrs. Greenwood's problem is not a lack of empathy towards Esther or her inability to express emotions, but a lack of fulfilled identity in her role as a mother. In Friedan's words,

by choosing femininity over the painful growth to full identity, (...) these girls are doomed to suffer ultimately that bored, diffuse feeling of purposelessness, nonexistence, noninvolvement with the world that can be called anomie, or lack of identity. (2010, p.145)

When she is pushed into the workforce, Mrs. Greenwood has to face the reality of society and develop an identity outside of the one she had buried herself into. She has to find a new definition for her identity apart from the one imposed by society; as a middle-aged woman in the 1960s, what was her place in society once she started to work and become a provider

apart from being a mother? Mrs. Greenwood is unable to identify her role in her community and as a result she is also unable to guide Esther towards any role either.

This explains one of the main problems Esther has regarding her mother, and that is that she does not offer her a role model. Mrs. Greenwood is unable to empower Esther to have a successful career because she does not comprehend what life is away from motherhood, she fathoms no identity further from being a mother, even after she becomes the provider of the house, which does not give her a deeper sense of identity but rather weakens her identity as a mother. Thus, Esther is forced to look for role models outside of her home.

This makes Esther feel alone in her own home. She is suffocated by the lack of understanding her mother shows to her and daydreams about being an orphan.

I would be simple Elly Higginbottom, the orphan. People would love me for my sweet, quiet nature. They wouldn't be after me to read books and write long papers on the twins in James Joyce. And one day I might just marry a virile, but tender, garage mechanic and have a big cowy family, like Dodo Conway.

If I happened to feel like it. (2005, p.127)

Esther believes that the only thing that would set her free is being orphaned because she wouldn't have the constant presence of her mother pushing her to domesticity or the gnawing feeling that she has to be academically successful. She would simply be "sweet [and] quiet" and maybe she would choose domesticity, but not out of motherly pressure.

X grew up in a wealthy neighbourhood with her parents. From an outsider's perspective, she lived in a perfect nuclear family. However, both of her parents were absent. Her father was a physical absence described as a "nonentity" (2018, p.47) and her mother was an alcoholic who spent her days sleeping and taking care of X only when she could. X's mother is described as often mad or drunk, while her father is simply described as someone living with them. However, this environment comes to an end when they both die; X's father dies of cancer and her mother commits suicide a few months later. After their deaths, X does not grieve her parents but her official orphanhood: the loneliness she had always felt was now confirmed by the absence of her family.

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. They were too busy to want to imagine my life in Manhattan. My father was busy dying— within a year of his diagnosis, the cancer had spread to his pancreas, then his stomach—and my mother busy being herself, which in the end seemed worse than having cancer. (2018, p.69)

X's mother had been a passive and depressed alcoholic who, just like X, was "trapped in a world that valued looks above all else" (2018, p.35). The difference between X and her mother, however, is that X has become aware of this entrapment and has no desire to end up like her. "Wondering if one day I'd be like her, a beautiful fish in a man-made pool, circling and circling, surviving the tedium only because my memory can contain only what is imprinted on the last few minutes of my life, constantly forgetting my thoughts" (2018, p.212). X, thus, resents her mother not only for the lack of affection she has shown her throughout her life, but also for complying with the expectations that are set on her as a woman and further on, trying to impose these practices of looking perfect for men onto her. Here we can perceive how X's resentment towards her mother is very similar to Esther's resentment towards Mrs. Greenwood because both mothers focus the care of their daughters on making them desirable for men: Mrs. Greenwood insists on Esther learning shorthand and focusing on finding a man and X's mother insists on X having a perfect appearance.

Having dropped out of college to marry and have a daughter, X's mother is the perfect example of a woman who is haunted by Friedan's "problem that has no name" "a sense of dissatisfaction" (2010, p.5) of emptiness and distress that women who were trapped in the role of housewife-mother felt, whose effects were felt more strongly if these women had gone to college and dropped out to get married. Just like Mrs. Greenwood, X's mother is unable to express emotions due to her role as a wife and mother which sentences them to a lack of identity⁹ outside of their roles.

X's mother only managed to have moments of intimacy with her daughter when she was either drunk or asleep. "I'd always loved sleeping. It was one thing my mother and I had enjoyed doing together when I was a child... We got along best when we were asleep" (2018 p.46). According to Dirschauer this is due to the fact that when they are asleep they are free

⁹ By lack of identity, here I pretend to describe the lack of personality traits that are not tied to their motherhood and its effects. X's mother is deeply depressed because of her dissatisfaction with her role, but she does not manifest any other fact about her life apart from her role as a housewife-mother. Mrs. Greenwood does work, but it is only because she has to do so to provide for her children, she has no motivation outside of being a mother.

from the pressures of society and the world (2022, p.50-51). They are distanced from their roles as mother and daughter in a society which constantly tries to prescribe their narratives.

Aware that her mother never gave her proper care and that she never will now because she has died, X looks for an alternate role model that can offer her the affection she needs and alternatives to the life her mother and society prescribed for her. So X turns to Whoopi Goldberg for comfort. As Greenberg develops in his article "Losing Track of Time",

Goldberg is a benevolent if uncomfortably racialized mammy figure (...) Goldberg's honest, solid (and Black) way of giving life stands in contrast to the death-bearing birth canal of the narrator's biological mother. Her movies serve as a lullaby, playing on the VCR as the narrator drifts off to sleep, and her mere presence provides protection against the outside world. (2020, p.196)

Not only is Goldberg a nurturing woman, but also a woman who did not choose between being a mother or being an independent working woman, thus, a role model that offers X a peaceful and fulfilling life away from the pressures that society tried to impose on her. Here, Goldberg could be seen as a parallel to *The Bell Jar's* Doctor Nolan, a woman who is not defined by her role as a mother but by her profession, and essentially the woman who offers Esther the comprehension and nurturing that she was lacking from her mother.

CONCLUSION

Dissatisfaction defines the experience of thousands of women. Dissatisfaction with one's environment, with one's family, friends or romantic partners. Being dissatisfied with your life is like being followed around by a ghost that dims the light of every experience one can have. Women are often dissatisfied with their position in society and with the prospect this position offers them.

From being regarded as simple incubators and caregivers to being whores and beautiful objects to be looked at, women have been left out of important conversations for centuries. We have very seldom been considered an asset for politics or real societal change and evolution. We have rarely been considered good enough, strong enough or intelligent enough to be given proper attention and importance. Esther and X suffer deeply from the dissatisfaction of being women. Both of them have "manly" ambitions to succeed in their desired professional field, but both of them are aware of the difficulty of achieving that. Furthermore, Esther also wants to be a mother. She lives in an in-between space that chains her to depression and suicidal thoughts due to her inability to choose the "correct option". The underlying message of both of these novels is that dissatisfaction is a collateral effect of patriarchy. It is impossible for a woman to be satisfied with her life if she is in a perpetual state of submission. We are doomed to be dissatisfied, it is what we do with this dissatisfaction what matters. I believe that the main difference between Esther and X lies in the solution they find for their discontent. While X is extremely rude towards her loved ones and surrenders to the effects of the narcoleptics to separate herself from patriarchy, Esther seeks help and learns to make peace with the fact that she will have to live through this dissatisfaction.

This research has delved into the analysis of the main characters in *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, covering the types of feminisms each of them portray and how impossible they find it to be in each of their communities. From second to third wave feminism going through the effects of the "Feminine Mystique" and postfeminism, Esther and X find great difficulties in building significant relationships. This lack of friends, specifically female friends, makes them devoid of community and sorority, which becomes unbearable in societies where the oppressors/enemies are usually men. They are pushed to feeling invisible and worthless, a feeling that found its birth in each of their homes, where their fathers were absent and their mothers were unable to offer them the necessary comfort and preparation for society.

I believe that through this research I have been able to analyse the characters through a new scope. When reading *The Bell Jar* one expects to feel pity for Esther because she is depressed and suicidal, but we rarely think of the possible reasons behind this depression and inability of creating successful relationships with other people. In the case of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the reader is constantly waiting for the main character to become a good friend, a good girlfriend and overall a better citizen. Through my analysis I hope to have put forward the reasons behind both of these characters' miseries.

I find it important to point out that even though this paper aims at an analysis of both main characters and how they experience society, X's character is extremely controversial and disrespectful to people of colour and lower class people. Esther also has some unfortunate comments about people of colour and queer people in various instances of the novel. I think that a good way to further develop my research would be through the analysis of these comments and to see the evolution of racism in feminism.

Through this research I do not mean to justify the comments of the main characters, but rather to attempt to comprehend the intention or the impulse behind their actions. I believe that there should be more research done about unlikeable characters because I think that those are the ones that hide more information about the novels. In that sense, I think this research is a step into the direction of filling that gap. Furthermore, since MYORAR has yet to be exhaustively analysed and criticised, this paper poses new insights on friendship, motherhood and the possible interpretations of the disappearance of the main character.

Despite their adolescent rejection of society and community I have been able to connect with these women and their profound need of comprehension and sorority. Their need to feel alive through the numbing expectations of society, their will to persist through their misery, to fight their own negativity felt like looking in a mirror. Esther's need to feel alive and happy combined with X's need to wake up from the haze she has lived in all her life were like a warm embrace from a mother, an embrace of comprehension and sisterhood.

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