ATLANTIS
Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies
47.1 (June 2025): 1-18
e-ISSN 1989-6840
DOI: http://doi.org/10.28914/Atlantis-2025-47.1.1

Ottessa Moshfegh and the "Mean-Lennial Anti-Hero" in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Alyce Corbett
Independent scholar
alyce.corbett@gmail.com

This paper considers the flourishing of the mode of millennial fiction, film and television within the last decade and the concomitant growth of the figure of the messy millennial woman. It does so primarily through the lens of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and her unnamed "mean-lennial anti-hero" protagonist. Moshfegh's myopic, mean and unmoored perennial "girl" serves as a litmus for understanding the complex identity politics of the postfeminist, late capitalist and neoliberal world which millennials occupy. The protagonist's distinctly anti-heroic yet deeply self-editorialised quest to do nothing also reflects the self-conscious process of self-definition that is embarked upon by young women in a paradoxically liberating and limiting age, and represents a growing form of literary expression unique to millennial-aged female artists in the twenty-first century. While Moshfegh's protagonist's experiences are deliberately confined by an, arguably, dislikeable mixture of narcissism and privilege, I propose that they work to establish broader contours of young millennial womanhood, both in fiction and in real life.

Keywords: millennial fiction; postfeminism; female anti-hero; chick-lit; contemporary bildungsroman; twenty-first century literature

. . .

Ottessa Moshfegh y la "anti-heroina milenial mezquina" en *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Este artículo analiza el auge de la ficción, el cine y la televisión milenial en la última década, y el surgimiento de la figura de la mujer caótica milenial. Lo hace principalmente a través del análisis de *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), de Ottessa Moshfegh, y su

protagonista anónima, una "antiheroína milenial mezquina". La eterna "chica" de Moshfegh, miope, mezquina y desarraigada, sirve como crisol para comprender la complejidad de las políticas de identidad en el mundo posfeminista, capitalista tardío y neoliberal que habitan los milenials. La búsqueda claramente antiheroica pero profundamente autoeditada de la protagonista por no hacer nada también refleja el proceso autoconsciente de autodefinición en el que se embarcan las mujeres jóvenes en una época paradójicamente liberadora y limitante, y representa una forma creciente de expresión literaria exclusiva de las artistas milenial del siglo XXI. Aunque las experiencias de la protagonista de Moshfegh se reducen, deliberadamente, a una mezcla, posiblemente desagradable, de narcisismo y privilegio, propongo que sirven para ampliar los contornos de la feminidad milenial, tanto en la ficción como en la vida real.

Palabras clave: ficción milenial; postfeminismo; antiheroina; chick-lit; bildungsroman contemporáneo; literatura del siglo XXI

"I was born into privilege. [...] I am not going to squander that.
I'm not a moron."
—Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* 2018

Towards the end of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), her "tall and thin and blond and pretty and young" unnamed protagonist (Moshfegh 2018, 27), who candidly espouses that she is quote-unquote "hot shit" (144), embarks upon her most concerted moment of chrysalis. After a moderately successful nine months of sedative-fuelled oblivion, she enters a final phase in which she plans to spend only forty hours "in a conscious state" out of a total of 120 days (266). The goal, ostensibly, is nothing less than transcendental transformation. Yet, despite her desire to enter this lengthy self-imposed hibernation and come out the other side new, Moshfegh's protagonist—who we by now know to be a frequently disparaging, desultory, emotionally detached and deeply superficial young woman—is self-aware and socially wise enough not to dispense entirely of her thin, blond, and pretty privilege, much less her financial privilege.

In doing so, I argue here, she affirms a type of contemporary young womanhood that is both completely cognizant of all that its cultural moment has conferred upon it, while being unapologetically dismissive of these benefits. That presents itself with a kind of ipso facto self-centred narcissism, while being utterly frank and forthcoming about its own shortcomings. This vision of young womanhood is challenging, and occasionally alienating, and yet it feels so very real, and so very *now*. It is a vision that has also become so very important as a growing generic archetype in narrative fiction, film and

television, particularly because it is being rendered with the most verisimilitude and resonance by young women who—like their protagonists—are typically millennials; meaning they were born between the years of 1981 and 1996 (Dimock 2019). In mid 2021, Cummins announced "the emerging canon of millennial fiction" (2021) in an effort to define the contours of a new mode of writing almost entirely authored by young women, and to which Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* undoubtedly belongs. There are many unifying qualities to this growing form of expression, but at its epicentre is a young woman, who—like Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist—is typically floundering through an extended coming-of-age period and is "bracingly, winningly and sometimes gratingly real" (Scott 2010). In Lahsaiezadeh's popular, yet critically incisive article on female millennial authors of the moment, she aphoristically dubs Moshfegh the master of the "mean-lennial anti-hero" (2019). In the same breath, she calls fellow millennial juggernaut Sally Rooney the master of the "morally grey millennial protagonist" (2019), but Aroesti might simply call them both creators of the "Messy Millennial Woman," or the MMW: a "a good-time girl who lurches from chaos to crisis, from euphoria to despair" and whose life is a "whirlwind of thrilling disarray" (2022).

Over the last decade, this increasingly prolific figure has been authored by acclaimed female millennial-aged creators across mediums. In television, Lena Dunham's *Girls* (2012-17)—the text with which the new era of the MMW most concretely begins—Phoebe Waller Bridge's *Fleabag* (2016-19) and Micaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* (2020), among other series, have collectively crafted a portrait of female protagonists who are "navigating or avoiding adulthood, usually desperate, disenfranchised, displaced, ironic, full of rage or grim humour that covers unbearable shame and sadness" (Sudjic 2019). As Olivia Sudjic—herself a noted author of the MMW in novels like her Instagram-focused debut *Sympathy* (2017)—bluntly states, the juvenile twenty-something 'girl' that has populated these series is also often "unlikable" (2019). In literature, the same preference for this compellingly messy girl is observable most famously in the Sally Rooney canon—*Conversations with Friends* (2017), *Normal People* (2018), *Beautiful World, Where Are You* (2021)—but also in novels like Stephanie Danler's *Sweetbitter* (2016), Halle Butler's *The New Me* (2019), Lara William's *Supper Club* (2019) and Amber Medland's *Wild Pets* (2021), and in non-fiction texts like Dolly Alderton's *Everything I Know About Love* (2018). Likewise, in cinema, films like Desiree Akhavan's *Appropriate Behaviour* (2014), Jenny Slate's *Obvious Child* (2014), Greta Gerwig's *Lady Bird* (2017) and Emma Seligman's *Shiva Baby* (2020) exhibit a similar predilection for the paradox that is this myopically self-aware and deliberately directionless young woman.

Aroesti contends that the MMW has become popular to the point of feeling ubiquitous (2022)—and I agree that our algorithmic era of streaming services has meant that she is increasingly being dished out in less critically commendable fare. However, in the realm of academic criticism she has not yet attained significant attention, outside perhaps of analysis of Dunham's *Girls*—as mentioned, the generally accepted popular

progenitor of all messy millennial women—which has been the subject of a couple of full-length studies (Watson *et al*. 2015; Nash and Whelehan 2017) and numerous essays. While the increasing popularity of this figure has led to a slew of representations that have arguably lost its essence as a "bracingly realistic proxy" (Aroesti 2022)—instead constructing diluted, less 'bracing', perhaps more popularly palatable iterations—in this paper, I am interested in exploring the darker (and, yes, meaner) version of the MMW as it is made apparent in key texts like Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. In doing so, I hope to place Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist in context amongst the work of other critically renowned female millennial-aged creators and to understand the messy, complex and complicated young woman at the heart of these works as a manifestation of and riposte to both the postfeminist milieu and sensibility.

In *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Moshfegh embodies the psyche of a twenty-six-year-old, in her words, "spoiled WASP" (2018, 35). When we meet Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist she is about to embark upon her eponymous year of rest and relaxation, a year in which she plans to use a cocktail of prescription drugs to lull her into a yearlong "self-preservational" period of hibernation (7). In her recent former life, she was a Columbia University art-history graduate working as a "gallery girl" at a pretentious contemporary art gallery, where her greatest asset was the fact that she "looked like an off-duty model" (35). Listless and uninspired, she had no "big plan" nor "great scheme for her life", and instead only hoped that through performative normalcy she could "starve off the part of [herself] that hated everything" (35). Through interspersed reveries and memories that the protagonist tries mostly to keep at bay we learn that her wealthy parents both died prematurely—her father first, from cancer, her mother subsequently, from an alcohol and psychiatric medicine cocktail suicide—and she now, effectively, lives off her inheritance. Her response to her increasing dissatisfaction with her post-college life and her jaded derision for the world around her is sleep, but her desire to excommunicate herself completely from life is not enough to keep it at bay.

In her so-called year of rest and relaxation, the unnamed protagonist's sleep is frequently intruded upon by her superficial and celebrity/status obsessed college 'friend' Reva—a relationship she harshly but incisively distils as being "a complex circuit of resentment, memory, jealousy, denial and a few dresses [she'd] let Reva borrow, which she'd promised to dry clean and return but never did" (7). As the novel progresses she also re-engages with her on-again-off again fling Trevor, a cavalier, careless and entitled banker, fifteen years her senior, who she refuses to acknowledge as a "loser and a moron" because she is "stuck on that bit of vanity" that doesn't want to have "degraded" herself for "someone who didn't deserve it" (76). Moreover, as she begins to experiment with increasingly potent drugs—prescribed by her deeply incompetent but also somehow likeable and occasionally astute psychiatrist Dr Tuttle—her subconscious self also begins to disrupt her hibernation, awaking to go internet shopping, walking, clubbing, and to get waxed, sext and "take aim at a life of beauty and sex appeal" (86). Ultimately, this hidden self carries her to Long Island for Reva's mother's funeral. It is here that

Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist must reckon with the depths of her meanness as she finds herself "sitting there full of disgust, wearing [Reva's] dead mother's shoes" (163) and understands that "sometime soon, [her] cruelty would go too far" (162). It is, in part, the inevitable decline of this friendship—despite her fundamental apathy towards it—that precipitates her final decision to shed all of her belongings and have artist Xi Ping, a poser and faux provocateur whose work was exhibited at the gallery she used to work at, lock her in her apartment and use her as a piece of performance art until she emerges as a "blank slate" (204).

Veronique Hyland, the woman who first drew the phenomenon of millennial pink to the attention of the cultural collective, has consistently associated the colour with what she labels "a generational mood of ambivalent girliness" (2022). Hyland describes millennial pink, a now ubiquitous shade that can be located in the cover art of the majority of the books mentioned in this paper, as a "non-colour that doesn't commit, whose semi-ugliness is proof of its sophistication" (2016). Like millennial pink, Moshfegh's protagonist is a woman defined by both her 'semi-ugliness' and her ambivalence. Keeble opines that the novel is best characterised by its "ostensible indifference" and that "the protagonist's strongest feelings seem to be her disgust," a feeling tempered only, perhaps, by her more common state of "mild annoyance" (2022, 7-8). He's not wrong. Moshfegh's unnamed narrator exhibits a very specific brand of twenty-first-century neoliberal ennui and a petty dislike for her world that leads her to a state of inaction rather than action. She is openly disdainful of almost everyone and everything, but not for any real reasons that matter. She scorns and ridicules the "alternative" young college and post-college male, not because their "self-serious" focus on "abstract ideas" has missed the pressing, actual issues of her milieu, but for their "hairy knuckles" and the fact that they don't "brush their teeth enough" and because they are probably just "afraid" of a vagina "as pretty and pink" as hers (Moshfegh 2018, 32-3). Strangers, likewise, like Tammy at Rite Aid, who has "the worst name on Earth," "make" her "hate" them for transgressions as non-existent as having an air of "clinical professionalism" (223), while those things that should actually make her feel something real, like the film *Schindler's List*, which she hopes would "depress" her, "only irritate" her (192).

Yet, I would suggest that Keeble errs when he suggests that she is "difficult to invest in" (2022, 7). Although it is impossible for me to fully step outside of my own bias as a female millennial-aged literary scholar—and therefore assuming a certain gendered and generational affinity—I still contend that her flippant apathy is a fitting manifestation of, and reaction to, the cultural conditions of contemporary young womanhood. Moreover, her "internalized cruelty" is concomitant with "a lively satiric wit" (Greenberg 2021, 195). And, this makes her, despite her manifold flaws, surprisingly easy to invest in. Key to both her affect and the affinity a reader can find with the unnamed protagonist, is Moshfegh's style. Moshfegh's pithy, uncluttered first person prose does not efface her authorial presence entirely, but rather it harmonises the

protagonist's alternately blank and histrionic manner and seems to let her protagonist offer herself candidly, on her own 'mean' terms, beyond judgement.

1. Messiness, Meanness and the Post-Millennium Condition: Understanding a New Anti-Heroic Model

This paper began with Lahsaiezadeh's playful suggestion that the unnamed protagonist is a 'mean-lennial anti-hero,' and there is certainly a great deal of truth to this claim. The anti-hero, by the simplest standard, is a figure "whom the reader is able to empathise with, but not admire" (Simmons 2008, 2), which certainly seems a fitting way of understanding the crude, brutally honest and rather broken protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Yet she complicates the moniker by her frequent and unequivocal espousing of her own failings and flaws, which in a strange way almost does make her admirable. Moreover, as Simmons, in one of the most comprehensive studies of the anti-hero phenomenon in literature explains, under more complex study, the anti-hero may reveal themselves to be capable of "expos[ing] the gulf between the heroic ideal and its reality" by "reinvoking" archetypal and heroic figures and "subverting, parodying and reconfiguring them as anti-heroic" (148). Joseph Campbell, of the originary *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* (1949), argues that the 'modern' world has "so transformed human life" that the hero myth "has collapsed" (2004, 704). Yet, since the post-war period in the mid- to late twentieth century, anti-heroic literature has frequently been used as a form of social and moral satire, honesty and truth-telling. So if Moshfegh's narrator is, as Lahsaiezadeh suggests, and as Campbell and Simmons may posit, fundamentally an anti-hero, we can consider what Moshfegh seeks to reconfigure through her and what her anti-heroic qualities speak to, even in a world beyond the hero myth.

I posit that the protagonist—as an emblem of the figure of the mean-lennial anti-hero and the new millennial form of generic expression that encases her—tells us something about the postfeminist, late-capitalist and neoliberal world which millennials occupy. In a more materially abundant yet messier world of 'cruel optimism'—in which the fantasy of the good life is "fraying", as Berlant proposes (2011, 3), notwithstanding the self-evident benefits of twenty-first-century life—Moshfegh's protagonist feels affectively born of the veritable "landfill" of "overwhelming" crises "of life-building and expectation" that have arisen in this fraying (3). However, the protagonist not only embodies these entanglements, but by virtue of her own candid cruelty, she seems uniquely equipped to subvert, parody and reconfigure them. The protagonist can likewise be read as a specifically postfeminist anti-hero; which, for the sake of this paper, is taken to be the governing feminist sensibility of the moment. In her glossy yet grimy messiness, she both embodies postfeminism's paradoxes and dismantles positively enshrined, virtuous female identities—both contemporary and traditional—revealing the 'gulf' between them and reality. Therefore, managing to be anti-heroic and heroic at the same time. Yet, in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, something interesting occurs. In a way that certainly marks a generational shift, the protagonist's myopic attention

renders this heroic/anti-heroic fission, her unflinching honesty and the text itself far richer as a form of personal truth-telling than a cogent work of social or political satire; a feature shared by most millennial works.

Greenberg describes the unnamed narrator's year of rest as "less a project than an antiproject," (2021, 191) a fitting literary (not-)quest for an anti-hero. He also describes how her 'anti'-ness is reflected in the quasi anti-narrative structure of the novel. As Greenberg incisively reveals, Moshfegh dispenses entirely with the young woman's conventional marriage plot, and its predicate of "happily ever after" is likewise "jettisoned" (192). Moshfegh also sets herself free from other dominant young women's plots like the social ambition plot, the Künstlerroman (or creative ambition plot), and, arguably, even the Bildungsroman form as we normally envision it is left unfulfilled (192). Instead, she creates a young woman who thinks that love is "gross" (Moshfegh 2018, 208), that marriage means being somebody's "live-in prostitute" (28) and that her only creative purpose is to be "hip decor" (36). She also creates a young woman who is very decidedly "not making a career move," who abjures almost all of her social contemporaries and who is not doing a very good job at growing up (55). As this very specific twenty-first-century version of an anti-hero, Moshfegh's disaffected and self/world-loathing unnamed protagonist finds herself comfortably amongst the menagerie of narcissistic and self-indulgent, hedonistic and self-stunted—yet curiously charming—Messy Millennial Women that have populated recent millennial female-authored fiction. Thus, although at the time of writing this article, in 2022, there was not yet a substantial critical body of work on *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, the text and Moshfegh's MMW had captured the attention of cultural commentators. Tolentino for *The New Yorker* stated that despite the "façade of beauty and privilege" around her, the protagonist is defined by her "laziness, uselessness, and misanthropy" (2018). Cutter for *Women's Review of Books* described her as a "hip nymphette" who "slouches through her lonely, overpriced life, spraying snark like bullets" and author Joyce Carol Oates for *New York Review of Books* said she is "a narcissistic personality simultaneously self-loathing and self-displaying" (2018, 25). However, although she is "defiantly unlikeable" she is also appealingly "uncensored, unapologetic" and "despairingly funny" (24).

Like the other stunted and self-absorbed adult girls in this nascent but expanding canon, Moshfegh's narrator is perhaps both at her most irredeemable and most relatable when she evinces her deliberate ignorance about the world of serious news beyond her fundamentally privileged bubble. In the opening pages of the novel, the protagonist proclaims that:

> Things were happening in New York City—they always are—but none of it affected me [...] It was easy to ignore things that didn't concern me. Subway workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. It didn't matter. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn't have worried. (Moshfegh 2018, 4)

Characteristic of Moshfegh's writing and of other works that showcase the MMW is that the young women in them archly air and bemoan their arguably trivial and petty problems. Yet, as Tolentino ascertains from reading the novel, in a "world that swings between tragic and banal", it is "shallowness" and "emptiness," not "authenticity or engagement," that may be the most logical response (2018). Although Moshfegh, like her millennial contemporaries, mostly employs realism as her governing aesthetic, she does not do so for its heavy verisimilitude, because these are first and foremost works of personal not social realism. Even as the narrator tries her hand at evolution and embarks upon what Sudjic would term her self-aware process of "self-definition" (2019), she develops no greater interest in the world that exists outside her own. Much later in the novel, when a speech from then President George W. Bush airs on television, she tries to understand whether his words meant that people should "take the blame for all the ills" of their "own world," only to resolve "who cared?" (Moshfegh 2018, 236). At the same moment, the fundamentally vacuous and self-absorbed Reva—who is, in her own way, another MMW—has only one takeaway from his words: that "this Bush is so much cuter than the last," "like a rascal puppy" (236).

Certainly Moshfegh's unnamed protagonist is a little more extreme in her messiness and in her meanness than the outwardly nicer Reva, even though Reva, like the protagonist, occupies a "shallow universe" of "petty gripes" in which her principal interest is herself (228). Likewise, she has a harder edge than any of Rooney's drifting, self-editorialising and bad decision-making millennial female leads. Yet, as Greenberg attests, to interpret her hibernation project and state of malaise "as *merely* a manifestation of a neurosis" diminishes "its larger significance" (2021, 196; italics in the original). Moshfegh's lead is undoubtedly in a state of melancholy borne of unresolved trauma at her parents' abrupt passing, but this is only one dimension of her experience, and is not the essence from which all of her complex messiness derives. The irrefutable truth, that the modern world is "gauche and ridiculous" and "nothing" in it is "sacred," is emphasised by the Whoopie Goldberg films that the protagonist watches on repeat on VCR, and is made equally apparent in the flawed characters and social worlds that orbit around her (Moshfegh 2018, 196). And thus, it exists in a relationship with her own absurdity, her self-declared "stupidity," "vanity" (225) and "ice queen" coldness (204).

My contention is that, although the protagonist is blind to the world beyond her own personal reality, as an MMW, she is still inviolably a product of "a particular femininity born of a particular cultural moment" (McDermott 2017, 46). As Tolentino argues, although the book is set at the beginning of the twenty-first century in a pre-*Girls* epoch, just as the oldest millennials were coming of age, "it's tuned to a hyper-contemporary frequency" (2018). As such, although the protagonist is not herself political, she exists as a manifestation of the real life twenty-first-century figure of the twentysomething-year-old perennial (white) 'girl', and in dialogue with current socio-political commentaries about this figure. As a postfeminist subject, her self-interest and self-scrutiny, although problematic (and caustically satirised both by Moshfegh and

the narrator herself) also seem to show us that traits of contemporary girlhood that are often derided—vanity, shallowness, insecurity, compulsiveness (Genz & Brabon 2009, 86)—may actually be emancipatory and necessary. As a generation, millennials have been described as "self-conscious," but its women have been singled out in particular for their focus on "self-image" and "peer approval," and their reliance on "crowdsourced opinions" (Carson qtd. in Berger 2018, 123). Taking this as an irrefutable fact that inheres in contemporary young womanhood, perhaps what Moshfegh understands is that a lengthy process of self-editorialising and self-expressing is now concomitant with the extended coming-of-age process of our milieu; and, maybe, this isn't an entirely or inherently bad thing.

Interestingly, even given her blatant vanity—which she also freely attests to—Moshfegh's narrator writes about herself and her experience in frank, unappealing and strangely non-egotistical terms. In doing so, she reveals herself—and other young women of her ilk—to be much more than a pointless or incurable narcissist. From the way she draws attention to how her post-sleep "huge bush [...] puff(s)" out of her "sexy underwear" and wishes she had her "Polaroid camera to capture the image" (Moshfegh 2018, 159), to her deadpan descriptions of sex—of the "drips and splats on [her] belly and back" from Trevor, and the "gobs" in the "fake eyelashes" of the girl in the porno she watches on silent with only a modicum of interest because "procreation" is "the circle of life" (175)—she reveals herself to be a figure with a surplus of messiness and meanness, yet surprisingly without pretension or guile. Kotsko, in his shrewd study of awkwardness, which he plausibly posits as the dominant cultural state of the twenty-first century, suggests—in a way Moshfegh's narrator would likely find pleasing—that the phenomenon perhaps began with the "apparently ontological awkwardness of George W. Bush" (2010, 17).

Although the above is a throwaway remark, Kotsko's central argument—that in contemporary society awkwardness "threatens to engulf everything" (3)—is telling, because it is in the recognition of this awkwardness that the MMW seems to speak to us most resonantly; as a woman who constantly makes us cringe but who equally reveals that *everything* is cringey. Moshfegh's protagonist's behaviour certainly makes us feel awkward, and despite her outer beauty, the dissonance between her physical figure and the "bum" that she "*felt*" herself to be (Moshfegh 2018, 35; italics in the original) also marks her as awkward. Yet, her eagerness to pore over and candidly detail her awkwardness—as well as the unalterable awkwardness of the world she tangentially relates to—showcases her certain knowingness; her ability to find a strange yet fitting attunement to a gauche world.

The fact that, in a cultural moment that is—to a relatively large extent—allowing more young women the freedom of artistic expression, Moshfegh and her millennial-aged female contemporaries are electing to craft the often awkward, mean or juvenile MMW is compelling. Sudjic suggests that these texts, and the messy anti-heroes at their core, lambast the millennial generation's "need for external validation

and commodified selfhood" even as they "acknowledge their complicity and the impossibility of extrication" (2019). It's an insight reminiscent of one of the narrator's own, when she states that she "did crave attention" but she "refused to humiliate [her] self by asking for it" (Moshfegh 2018, 65), and it is one that requires further analysis.

2. The Postfeminist Project of the Self in Millennial Fiction: Creating an Affective Form for Contemporary Young Womanhood

There is a strong correlation between the parameters of late capitalism and the texts that these millennial women are creating, which I have alluded to but have not yet specifically addressed in this paper. There is no mistake that like Moshfegh's WASP, their young female characters are typically the beneficiaries of twenty-first-century materialism and their realities are acutely tied to the nature of twenty-first-century Western life. However, rather than harshly skewering or eschewing their characters' typically wealthy, white, straight, cisgender, pretty privilege, these female novelists, filmmakers and showrunners—who also typically hold the same types of status—create texts that unashamedly exhibit and embrace their characters' privilege. Therefore, these young women's journeys towards—what may best be described as—being a little less messy or towards—what Greta Gerwig herself would term—them "occupy[ing]" their "personhood" (qtd. in Zuckerman 2017) rarely involves a rejection of the fundamental tenets of their privileged life or an avowal of their idiosyncrasies.

Genz might suggest, as she did with Dunham's *Girls*, that crafting these kind of women "adheres to a narcissistic and self-important individualism that authorises entitlement and self-absorption and insists on [its protagonists'] right to be heard and rewarded" (2017, 18). However, like Genz, I would contend that the ability to engage in this "neoliberal reflexive 'project of the self,'" (18) or to adhere to a shamelessly self-important type of individualism, is something which has only recently become available to women. Moreover, the decision to craft wilfully myopic women who uphold the worth of their own experience feels like an affirmation that the experiences of these kinds of women—who according to both antiquated and modern societal dictates are often ascribed with little value—are, in fact, worthy of being emulated and captured in art. For instance, millennial precursor Sheila Heti in her discursive quasi-autobiography *How Should a Person Be?* (2010) deliberately sets herself in opposition to her male contemporaries, whom she mocks for being "so serious" about their desire to tell 'real' stories (Heti 2012, 218). Instead, in recounting her own messy twenties, she puts "great blow-job artists" on the same level as male nineteenth-century novelists (11) and offers the perspective that self-indulgent navel-gazing art that is fundamentally "humiliating, banal, low" (Thomas 2013) is just as real, and just as valuable as something 'serious'.

It is a sentiment that the ostensible queen of millennial fiction Sally Rooney also expresses in *Beautiful World, Where Are You* when one of her protagonists, Eileen, asks the professionally successful yet personally struggling writer Alice whether "the

problem of the contemporary novel is simply the problem of contemporary life?" as "it seems vulgar, decadent [...] to invest energy in the trivialities of sex and friendship when human civilisation is facing collapse" (Rooney 2021, 111). Yet, both Rooney and her fictional Alice forge on, writing novels about just that: sex and friendship in young millennial womanhood. If Hyland's millennial pink represents "a generational mood of ambivalent girliness" (2022), then millennial fiction like Heti's, Rooney's and Moshfegh's often adopts a similarly ambivalent position, acknowledging the requisite perception of what a 'worthy' text should do but finding an alternate position in which aesthetic realism is used in service of texts that are neither edifying nor moralising, but are simply real. In this way, these texts both satirise and emulate "the supposed death of 'serious' feminist thought at the hands of 'millennials' who are dismissively presented as engaging in 'identity politics'" (Rivers 2017, 49), which—whether accurate or not—has become reified as a kind of sine qua non of postfeminism and its generational attachment.

It is, therefore, in evaluating and understanding this relationship between the millennial experience and postfeminism that the characterisation of Moshfegh's captivating mean-lennial anti-hero becomes particularly meaningful. Taking postfeminism as a sensibility, as Gill (2007) proposes, allows us to see it for its plurality, for its "double entanglement" (McRobbie 2009, 6) and for the "contradictory nature" of its discourses (Gill 2007, 149). In short, for its—to use the millennial phraseology—inherent messiness, for the way it embodies both feminist and anti-feminist strains and liberating and limiting paradigms. Rivers cleverly captures this messiness through her coining of 'postfeminism(s)', and though she broadly critiques the anti-feminist tenets that have become imbricated by the sensibility she concedes to its current "pervasiveness" (2017, 144). In Gill's more recent work on postfeminism she likewise attests to the difficulty of tracing its "edges or borders" (2017, 5). In doing so, she opens up a new conversation regarding its affective and psychic life; particularly in the 2010s, the window in which this type of millennial expression was born. Borrowing Williams' nomenclature, Gill suggests that, in its now hegemonic status, postfeminism has produced a 'structure of feeling' (Williams 1977), one that has become internalised by the postfeminist subject to the extent that it governs her conduct, emotional state, psychic life and selfhood. What is most interesting in the context of this paper is that while Gill suggests postfeminism mandates a "gleaming and dazzling" selfhood (2017, 17), Moshfegh's protagonist—as an MMW—is distinctly the opposite.

Genz and Brabon would likely suggest that Moshfegh's protagonist is emblematic of the "'unmoored' postfeminist subject" (2009, 7). This subject is a 'girl', who is young but perhaps not as young as her lifestyle would indicate, and who occupies what Negra calls the "temporally unmapped" space relegated to women who are living outside "notions of temporal propriety and conformity" (2008, 50); in short, outside of motherhood and marriage. As an open critic of postfeminism, Negra's writing underscores that the movement's use of the 'girl' or young woman as the "marker of

postfeminist liberation" is an empty symbol (Tasker & Negra 2007, 18), one that stunts a woman's ability to find meaning in maturing. It is no surprise then that Moshfegh's narrator is so immature. In McDermott's discussion of Lena Dunham's pioneering *Girls*, she identified it as belonging to "an emerging genre navigating the contradictions and complexities that coming of age in a primarily postfeminist media era entails," and suggested that principally the show took aim at the fallacy of the "postfeminist promise of fulfilment" (2017, 46). This is also true of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, in which Moshfegh's narrator is evidently both liberated and trapped by the specific mores of her time; her 'frozen' youth both a freedom afforded to her in a postfeminist world and a—perhaps unshakeable—consequence of its dictates. And although Moshfegh, like her contemporaries, approaches the postfeminist frame with some ambivalence, her work seems to suggest that in the face of such vast cultural complexities, messiness may be the only realistic personhood or selfhood to occupy.

In narratively sketching out the contours of women's lives in the twenty-first century, it appears that these millennial female creators are also reacting to de Beauvoir's suggestion that, between the "clearly fixed poles" that men assigned to women "a multitude of ambiguous figures were yet to be defined" (2011, 386-7). Although much has changed since de Beauvoir's pre-Second Wave of feminism, it is arguable that the literary and artistic frame, especially when wielded by men, has broadly continued to hold women at those poles. So, despite her flaws and failings and floundering, and her meanness, the MMW is interesting—and even likeable—precisely because she is so morally ambiguous and because her personality occupies so many utterly differing poles. Although Gill proposes that contemporary girl and womanhood is now managed by a "self-policing narcissistic gaze" in which "the objectifying male gaze is internalized to form a new disciplinary regime" (Gill 2007, 258)—ergo, in which women continue to act out male-assigned identities—novels like *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* seem to speak to a different version of this truth. Just as Moshfegh's narrator scoffs at "one idiot" who assumes she was "broken by the male gaze" because she was wearing $500 "black suede stiletto boots"—when she was in fact wearing them because of "whatever it was that [she] was feeling" (Moshfegh 2018, 189)—the novel showcases a type of young woman who is both a product of postfeminism and who lives for herself distinctly on her own terms.

Felski, who has commented expansively on literary fiction written by women, helps me to place Moshfegh and her fellow millennial literary luminaries in context when she states that: "It is in narrative that the governing ideological conceptions of male and female roles are fleshed out, the configurations of plot mapping out the potential contours of women's lives as they can be imagined at a given historical moment" (1989, 124). Although McRobbie says this in a discussion of "wholly commercialised" mass market twenty-first-century chick-flicks and chick-lit—such as Sharon Maguire's film *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), based on Helen Fielding's novel—she reflects Felski's notion by proposing that these texts struck a chord among young female audiences for the way

they "normalise[d] postfeminist gender anxieties" and spoke to how "female desire", in all of its complexity, looked at that moment (2009, 22). She is right, Bridget Jones is also a messy young woman navigating a messy world. However, her messiness is offset by her "infectious girlishness" and is "endearing" (12) in a way that is distinctly unlike Moshfegh's more cynical and brittle unnamed narrator. Although it is not a widely held opinion, Modleski's instinct that much twenty-first-century chick-lit can actually be read as "novels of disillusionment" (2008: xxiv-v) certainly resonates with the tone of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*; and, in this light, Bridget Jones and other akin chick figures do possess traits that mark them as proto-millennials. Oates, for instance, commends Moshfegh's novel as "a perverse fusion of *Sex and the City* and *Requiem for a Dream*" (2018, 25), and it is a useful observation here.

While early 2000s texts were new in their focus on the lives 'twentysomething' women, they still embodied conventional strains, like the quest for "very traditional forms of happiness and fulfilment" (McRobbie 2009, 20), and thus were imbued with a level of hopeful fantasy. By comparison, MMW texts take a more gimlet-eyed view of twenty-first-century postfeminism and the messy entanglements of young womanhood it produces. McDermott reads this transformation and provides grounding for the new character archetype of the mean-lennial anti-hero extensively in her study of 'feel-bad' postfeminism. Using Berlant's relation of 'cruel optimism' and affective-aesthetic theory she articulates how the "amorphous" postfeminist sensibility and its affective structure is made tangible in texts, specifically charting millennial texts mentioned in this paper—like *Girls* and *Appropriate Behaviour*—that capture the "palpable" disintegration of the "postfeminist fantasy" (2022, 11-23). Taking up Berlant's idea of the 'impasse,' or a cul-de-sac in which "one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the same space" (2011, 199), McDermott cites a key textual aesthetic at play in this new millennial canon, a loop of "aspiration, frustration and recurrence" (2022, 24). It is one which is deeply evident in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and the protagonist's deliberate 'antiproject' or 'not-quest'. It is also one which speaks to the fact that this millennial form of expression deserves more critical excavation, from a thematic, aesthetic and affective standpoint.

When we leave Moshfegh's narrator, she has awakened a little more sparkly and somewhat new, although she remains just as unmoored. She returns to the world, or her world at least, and understands that her future "didn't exist yet" because she is "making it, standing there, breathing, fixing the air around [her] body with stillness" (Moshfegh 2018, 286). Moshfegh's narrator's trajectory is emblematic of that of the MMW, who is typically left in a liminal space, unfinished and incomplete, captured in a permanent process of self-definition and becoming. Although I agree with Tolentino's assertion that *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is "tuned" to the frequency of now (2018), its ending, where it intersects with the seismic event of 9/11, actually serves to add to this liminality, to this pattern of recurrence. Although this is not a typical 9/11 novel, and although the narrator responds to 9/11 with characteristic self-involvement—

she watches an image of a woman diving from the towers, who she imagines to be Reva, and feels pleased that "she is wide awake" (Moshfegh 2018, 289)—this reference encourages us to see the protagonist as almost a fin de siècle character. Like many late 9/11 novels, Moshfegh taps into a theme of "decline", one which reveals earlier 9/11 novels' focus on "restoration" to be idealistic nostalgia (Keeble 2014, 472-474). As Kotsko suggests, pre-2000 texts were often characterised by a "pure escapism" based on a form of irony that didn't seek to "produce" a "positive ethos" (2010, 25), and the pre-9/11 years are often discussed as a curious shuffle of optimism and cynicism, of anomie, hedonism and cultural malaise. Yet although 9/11 aligns with an affective shift in which, to put it colloquially, things meant something again, it did not evoke "a culture-wide turn to earnestness" (24).

As such, the way the protagonist, post-sleep, on the novel's final page, uses her VCR capture of the diving woman to encourage her whenever she "doubt[s] that life is worth living" or—as she states in her unapologetically compendious manner—just "when [she is] bored" (Moshfegh 2018, 289), showcases that her new state of wakefulness has not fully subsumed her fundamental solipsism or messiness. To return to Berlant, 9/11 today may be read as an impasse, as another catastrophe that has since "bled into ordinary life" (2011, 19), and Moshfegh's choice to make it "a minor end-twist" reveals the "self-absorbed" neoliberal world (Keeble 2022, 9) the protagonist occupies to be affectively and, effectively, endless. Taking Moshfegh's mean-lennial as this fin de siècle character thus emphasises her significance as a literary and lived twenty-first-century figure. More specifically, seeing her as a fin de siècle character who reads the defining event of the century on narcissistic terms, emphasises the boldness of her myopia and seems to tell us that the foibles of one young woman's self-centred life and her fumbling towards selfhood are indeed the story of our time.

3. The Messy Millennial Woman: Periodising a Literary and Lived Figure

Beyond a heavy dose of acerbic wit, a misanthropic outlook and her general ambivalence for life and everyone in it, it is arguable that Moshfegh's protagonist is more likeable than she is unlikeable. It is also arguable that many millennial women know someone like her, if they have not been, at least in part, like her themselves. Therefore, it is not a stretch to suggest they can relate to her very specific twenty-first-century angst, her self-indulgences and her reckless hedonism. As Aroesti explains, the MMW's "self-involved unhappiness" can be "strangely aspirational" and "the chaos she leaves in her wake is" is "entertaining" (2022). Therefore, she is also a "vaguely glamorous" figure; she's "dangerously fun, the spirit of rock'n'roll kept alive in extortionate taxi bills and explosive arguments with your best friend" (2022).

Moshfegh is also careful to sketch in a little bit of redemption for her narrator, some antidotes to her anti-hero meanness and millennial self-centeredness. Although the following passage is not particularly kind—it wouldn't be the narrator's if it was—it shares with us her rationale for being, the raison d'être for her messiness:

> Seeing Reva in full-blown Reva mode both delighted and disgusted me. Her repression, her transparent denial, her futile attempts to tap into the pain with me in the car, it all satisfied me somehow. Reva scratched at an itch that, on my own, I couldn't reach. Watching her take what was deep and real and painful and ruin it by expressing it with such trite precision gave me reason to think Reva was an idiot, and therefore I could discount her pain, and with it, mine. Reva was like the pills I took. They turned everything, even hatred, even love, into fluff I could bat away. (Moshfegh 2018, 166)

In this passage the protagonist clearly inhabits the MMW according to Aroesti's conception, as a 'girl' who "is self-destructive, irresponsible and determined to live life to the full—while drowning out any negative feelings by beckoning further emotional chaos into her life" (2022). Thus, though she may be flawed, she has her reasons.

With the oldest millennials now entering their forties, it is interesting to contemplate how the figure of this adult girl will continue to evolve in the coming years, and whether millennial-aged female creators will transpose the MMW into the realm of fully fledged undeniable adulthood or will simply leave her behind. It is also interesting to consider whether the mantle of the MMW will be picked up and adapted by millennials' Gen Z successors who are now entering and moving through the tumultuous period of change that is one's twenties. What is for certain, is that for now she remains messy, often mean, but also magnificent in her own way. And that, for now, like the colour millennial pink, she continues to populate our media landscape. As other commentators on millennial literature have observed, it is now beyond contemplation that there could be something so singular as *the* voice of *the* generation, and even as Hannah Horvath in *Girls*—the show that ostensibly started it all—wished to be, being *a* voice of *a* generation is perhaps an equal impossibility (McCann 2017, Sudjic 2019). Yet Moshfegh's portrayal taps into something that despite its nuances, and despite her anti-hero's worst parts, feels universal; at least to other WASP-ish young women who see themselves in everything.

Works Cited:

Akhavan, Desiree, dir. 2014. *Appropriate Behaviour*. Peccadillo Pictures.

Alderton, Dolly. 2018. *Everything I Know About Love*. London: Penguin Books.

Aroesti, Rachel. 2022. "How Messy Millennial Woman Became TV's Most Tedious Trope." *The Guardian*, June 9. [Accessed June 22, 2022].

Berger, Arthur Asa. 2018. *Cultural Perspectives on Millennials.* Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Butler, Halle. 2019. *The New Me*. London: Penguin Books.

Campbell, Joseph. 2004. *The Hero with A Thousand Faces*. 3rd ed. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. EPUB edition

Coel, Micaela, creator. 2020. *I May Destroy You*. BBC Studios.
Cutter, Kimberley. 2018. "Sleeping Beauty." *Women's Review of Books*, 35 (4): 6-7.
Cummins, Anthony. 2021. "*Wild Pets* by Amber Medland Review—An Enjoyably Arch Post-Campus Tale." *The Guardian*, July 5. [Accessed July 13, 2021].
Danler, Stephanie. 2016. *Sweetbitter*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
de Beauvoir, Simone. 2011. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Vintage. EPUB Edition.
Dimock, Michael. 2019. "Defining Generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z Begins." *Pew Research Center*, January 17. [Accessed October 3, 2022].
Dunham, Lena, creator. 2012-17. *Girls*. Warner Bros. Television Distribution.
Felski, Rita. 1989. *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
Heti, Sheila. *How Should A Person Be?* Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2012. EPUB Edition.
Hyland, Veronique. 2016. "Why Is Millennial Pink Suddenly So Popular?" *The Cut*, August 2. [Accessed April 26, 2022].
—. 2022. "Who Owns Millennial Pink?" *Elle*, February 14. [Accessed April 26, 2022].
Genz, Stéphanie. 2017. "'I Have Work... I Am Busy... Trying to Become Who I Am': Neoliberal Girls and Recessionary Postfeminism." In Nash and Whelehan 2017, 17-30.
— and Brabon, Benjamin A. 2018. *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Gerwig, Greta, dir. 2017. *Lady Bird*. A24.
Gill, Rosalind. 2007. *Gender and The Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press. EPUB Edition.
—. 2017. "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life Of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On." European Journal of Cultural Studies, 20 (6): 1-42.
Greenberg, Jonathan. 2021. "Losing Track of Time." *Dædalus, the Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences*, 150 (1): 188-203.
Keeble, Arin. 2014. The 9/11 Novel: Trauma, Politics and Identity. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc. EPUB Edition.
—. 2022. "The End of the 90s in Porochista Khakpour's *The Last Illusion*, Rachel Kushner's *The Mars Room* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation.*" *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 63: 1-14.
Kotsko, Adam. 2010. *Awkwardness: An Essay*. Winchester: O-Books.
Lahsaiezadeh, Kayti. 2019. "18 Millennial Writers You Should Be Reading Right Now." *BookBub*, October 23. [Accessed April 12, 2021].
Maguire, Sharon, dir. 2001. *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Universal Pictures.
McCann, Hannah. 2017. "'A Voice of *a* Generation': Girls and the Problem of Representation." In Nash and Whelehan 2017, 91-105.
McDermott, Catherine. 2017. "Genres of Impasse: Postfeminism as a Relation of Cruel Optimism in *Girls*." In Nash and Whelehan 2017, 45-60.

—. 2022. *Feel-Bad Postfeminism: Impasse, Resilience and Female Subjectivity in Popular Culture.* London: Bloomsbury.

McRobbie, Angela. 2009. *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*. London: Sage.

Modleski, Tania. 2008. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*. 2nd ed. New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2008.

Moshfegh, Ottessa. 2018. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. London: Vintage.

Nash, Meredith & Whelehan, Imelda, eds. 2017. *Reading Lena Dunham's Girls: Feminism, Postfeminism, Authenticity, and Gendered Performance in Contemporary Television*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Negra, Diane. 2008. *What a Girl Wants - Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism*. London and New York: Routledge.

Oates, Joyce Carol. 2018. "Sleeping Beauty." *New York Review of Books*. October 11, 24-25.

Rivers, Nicola. 2017. *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Robespierre, Gillian, dir. 2014. *Obvious Child*. A24.

Rooney, Sally. 2017. *Conversations with Friends*. London: Faber & Faber.

—. 2018. *Normal People*. London: Faber & Faber.

—. 2021. *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. London: Faber & Faber.

Scott, A. O. 2010. "No Method to Her Method." *The New York Times*, March 24. [Accessed My 25, 2021].

Seligman, Emma, dir. 2020. *Shiva Baby*. Utopia.

Simmons, David. 2008. *The Anti-Hero in the American Novel: From Joseph Heller to Kurt Vonnegut*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sudjic, Olivia. 2017. *Sympathy*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

—. 2019. "Darkly Funny, Desperate and Full of Rage: What Makes a Millennial Novel?" *The Guardian*, August 17. [Accessed March 22, 2021].

Tasker, Yvonne and Negra, Diane. 2007. "Introduction: Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture". In Tasker and Negra 2007, 1-26,

—, eds. 2007. *Interrogating Post-Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Thomas, Scarlett. 2013. "*How Should a Person Be?* by Sheila Heti – Review." *The Guardian*, January 11. [Accessed April 15, 2021].

Tolentino, Jia. 2018. "Ottessa Moshfegh's Painful, Funny Novel of a Young Woman's Chemical Hibernation." *The New Yorker*, July 11. [Accessed September 12, 2022].

Waller-Bridge, Phoebe, creator. 2016-19. *Fleabag.* BBC Studios.

Watson, Elwood *et al*., eds. 2015. *HBO's Girls and the Awkward Politics of Gender, Race, and Privilege.* Lanham: Lexington Books.

William, Lara. 2019. *Supper Club*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

Williams, Raymond. 1977. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ZUCKERMAN, Esther. 2017. "How Greta Gerwig Turned the Personal *Lady Bird* Into a Perfect Movie." *Rolling Stone*, November 6. [Accessed June 27, 2021].

Received 20 December 2022 Accepted 3 August 2023

Alyce Corbett is a recent graduate of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, where she earned a Cum Laude Doctorate in English Studies. Her early career research, including her recently published monograph for Routledge, *Postfeminist Film & Literary Aesthetics: In Search of the Female Gaze* (2025), has focused on film and literary aesthetics, postfeminist representations, and contemporary women's writing.