

## Happiness and the Female Identity in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*<sup>272</sup>

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### Abstract:

There are several academic works focusing on mental illnesses and the struggles of the female political body. Women's writing and theory become a central issue for feminist theorists such as Betty Friedan, Elaine Showalter, Simone de Beauvoir or Hélène Cixous. These theorists denounce the detrimental consequences of a patriarchal reality on the mental health of women. These two issues have often been intrinsically connected to one another. This essay attempts to explain the mental issues that women have struggled with due to female oppression and discrimination. In this essay, the analysis of Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* will provide an insight of the female experience based on the protagonists' personal pursuit of happiness and well-being as well as the analysis of their gender oppression. I illustrate the connection between the role of two ambitious young women and mental illness. Both novels will, thus, be examined through a comparative and critical analysis to understand the evolution of the female roles in society over the years as well as the question of happiness. Thus, the contextualization of these novels will foremost expose the impact of female reconciliation with the question of happiness.

**Keywords:** depression, femininity, happiness, mental illness, patriarchy, gender.

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## 1. Introduction

Otessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) are two narratives depicting young women in their twenties going through a distressing moment in their life. In these portrayals of the female experience, the different female struggles are explored, and the question of happiness is the essence of their search for identity. The protagonists of these novels go through distressing moments that shape their view of the world and their own interaction with it. Thus, the analysis of these two novels focuses on the evolution of these struggles into new forms of oppression for the female experience. *The Bell Jar* represents the oppression that women experienced in the 1960s and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* represents the distress that young women suffered in the 2000s. Despite being written years apart, both novels still explore the issue of female dissatisfaction and mental illnesses, and it becomes the centrepiece that characterizes these novels. Therefore, in these narrations Moshfegh illustrates the struggles of beauty standards in the 2000s through the image of perpetuated thin bodies and glamorization of drugs while Plath exposes the gender roles that oppress women in a context where domesticity is the norm. Consequently, women's acceptance or rejection of these norms will determine and shape the evolution of their identities as women in society which is the root of their happiness.

*My Year of Rest and Relaxation* narrates a first-person account of a young woman in her twenties who has no name. In such a manner, the female experience of the protagonist becomes universal, and her struggles resonate with the readers as it explores common existential sentiments of uncertainty and the pursuit of happiness. The premise of the novel depicts a physically gifted young woman: Blonde and skinny. She perceives herself as someone who fits the beauty standards of the time accepting/not caring about her physical appearance. However, she struggles with depressive symptoms. Moshfegh illustrates the important role of beauty standards and its negative impact on young women in the 00s. On the other hand, *The Bell Jar* is a well-known literary classic that delves into the dissatisfaction of the female protagonist Esther Greenwood showing a realistic portrayal of how the political status of young women in the 60s (domesticity, marriage and traditional gender roles) conditioned their

prospect of life. The second wave of feminism emerged in America in the 1960s as a response to the oppression that women experienced. These are the struggles described by Plath in *The Bell Jar*. Women's rights, their emancipation from the male dominance and their sexual liberation were the main goals of the feminist movement. The major feminist author that contributed to the movement in America was Betty Friedan, who published *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In this book, Friedan discusses issues concerning the oppressed professional and personal ambitions of women in a heavily stereotyped man's world. Friedan's feminist approach was the necessary germ for the future evolution of feminist theory into the third wave of feminism that began in the 90s. This new wave of feminism started focusing on the idea of not only middle-class white women's rights but also on the intersectionality of feminist theory. Inclusiveness was an important subject of analysis as the feminist theory expanded and started focusing on women's struggles of diverse minorities that were always marginalized.

*My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Bell Jar* illustrate the life of young women and the depressive symptoms that they go through such as substance abuse or suicidal ideations caused by an overwhelming strict lifestyle that is being imposed on them. The mental instability of these young women is fundamentally related to the political and social climate that surrounds them and the position that they occupy as women. These novels describe not only their hardships but also their dreams and ambitions while struggling to find happiness in a world that oppresses them.

## 2. *The Bell Jar*: The Trap of Femininity in the 60s

Plath wrote *The Bell Jar* as a direct reflection of society and the impact that it had on women of her time. The beginning of the second wave of feminism was essential for the achievement of women's rights such as workplace rights, sexual liberation and the critique of gender roles and the patriarchal ideals that women had to deal with. Women in the 60s were subjected to domesticity and the ultimate objective of a woman was based on family and marriage. The role of women at that time could only be described through the stereotype of a housewife. According to Ghandeharion, Bozorgian and Sabbagh, "marriage and having children, instead of nurturing a woman's true potential

to blossom as a human being, have turned into a state in which she becomes trapped.”<sup>274</sup>

The standard of becoming a mother and a housewife was used as a tool of oppression for the patriarchal society to delimit women’s ambitions. For Esther Greenwood, the dissatisfaction that she was experiencing had no name yet: “I knew there was something wrong with me that summer.”<sup>275</sup> It is *something* society refuses to see, *something* society refuses to catalogue. Even though the strict gender roles led her to experience symptoms of depression, Esther Greenwood cannot describe why she does not share the same ambitions as the girls that she considers her friends. This problem that she cannot name is closely associated with the analysis of the strict gender roles that women were subjected to. The complacency and the traditional gender roles are ideals that Betty Friedan and Plath question in their works. From this perspective, the girls that Esther Greenwood interacts with at her workplace are pleased with the idea of working in the fashion magazine editorial, and yet they have no other interests outside their looks and gossiping. They act in accordance with the stereotypes the patriarchal system designates for them. In contrast, characters like Jay Cee challenge the gender roles and stereotypes of a normative woman at the time. Some girls at the editorial dislike her attitude but despite the critiques, Esther considers that she is a likeable woman. Greenwood and Jay Cee are seen as “the Other.” They are seen as unconventional women that question the strictness of the gender roles that must rule their identity: “She [Jay Cee] wasn’t one of the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry. Jay Cee had brains, so her plug-ugly looks didn’t seem to matter. She read a couple of languages and knew all the quality writers in the business.”<sup>276</sup>

This is the problem that has no name for the protagonist in Plath’s novel. These women working at the fashion editorial were compliant of the gender roles that the patriarchal society was imposing on women. As Betty Friedan mentions in *The Feminine*

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<sup>3</sup> Ghandeharion, Bozorgian and Sabbagh, “A Mirror of American Fifties,” 64-70.

<sup>4</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Plath, 6.

*Mystique* (1963), “[women] could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity”<sup>277</sup> Therefore, any personality trait in a woman that was not focused on these strict ideals of femininity and eternal submission was not seen in a good light by the American society. Any woman who questioned these values, any woman who felt dissatisfied with these imposed ideals was considered neurotic, “they learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights.”<sup>278</sup> Therefore, an educated woman with different interests like Jay Cee would be considered strange and unattractive for men and for any participant in the patriarchal system itself. In fact, Esther Greenwood’s friends consider Jay Cee incapable of seducing a man, “I bet that old husband of hers turns out all the lights before he gets near her or he’d puke otherwise.”<sup>279</sup>

American women had no other option than to follow the rules of domesticity. The consequence of this imposition led to stop considering personal and professional ambitions altogether. What was defined as Respectable women, were those who prioritized a good husband and family over any personal interest. This is what Betty Friedan describes as “The problem that has no name,” and what Esther describes as “something” wrong in her and the problem that she dissects throughout her experiences in the novel.

Women in the 50s and 60s dealt with the imposition of finding a husband that would provide for them. Women were designated to become mothers and dedicate their life to the household and their children. America did not contemplate that any dissident movement could arise, any feminist movement was disregarded because the woman problem no longer existed.<sup>280</sup> It was based on the American Dream of an ideal family. Women who did not fit in the ideal of the American family were often ashamed of their behaviour.

Esther Greenwood describes how she felt in relation to this stipulated standard: “I guess I should be excited the way most of the girls were, but I couldn’t get myself to

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<sup>6</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Friedan, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Plath, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Friedan, 8.

react. I felt very still and very empty.”<sup>281</sup> Esther Greenwood’s attitude towards life was not considered complacent: “I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water one by one.”<sup>282</sup> A young woman like her embodies the experience that depressive women struggled with at that time. The depressive symptoms were a result of the feminine gender roles forced on women that led them to feel entrapped in a situation that had no name at the time. There was no solution and no visibility for this type of unnamed dissatisfaction in the American society. Consequently, life as a woman in America was reduced to either complacency to the patriarchal system or the categorization of women as neurotic patients. Unhappy and depressed women were undiagnosed as neurotic or simply ignored because in the American ideal society women had no problems if they fulfilled the role that was designated for them. This leads to the isolation of the female experience which is the main reason why depression and other mental illnesses became a problem for so many women in America.

The closeting of the female experience has always been discussed through the different waves of feminism. As Elizabeth Cady Staton mentions, “A woman’s solitude of self becomes a dramatic refutation of the argument that woman is dependent on man or that she can be protected by man.”<sup>283</sup> As a result, female isolation is caused by the oppressive patriarchal system. It became a unique and gendered struggle that women faced alone, and it is an attitude that essentially reclaims the sovereignty of the individual self and its separation from the male figure. Consequently, Plath describes characters like Esther Greenwood and Jay Cee reclaiming their female-self. Both are perceived as isolated female characters that do not want to be subjected to the imposition of the patriarchal system that surrounds them. Esther Greenwood considers Jay Cee a role model. She rejects the gender roles and the strictness of her society, and she becomes a protagonist that reclaims her own agency: “I wished I had a mother like Jay Cee. Then I’d know what to do.”<sup>284</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>. Plath, 3.

<sup>11</sup>. Plath, 169.

<sup>12</sup>. Campbell, “Staton’s ‘The Solitude of Self: A Rationale for Feminism,’” 304-312.

<sup>13</sup>. Plath, 39.

Fashion Magazines such as *Mademoiselle* or *Vogue* in 1950 were contributing to the reinforcement of the performance of femininity. These magazines were curated for women to reinforce their gender roles and indifference as well as beauty standards. It is known that Plath worked as a writer for *Mademoiselle* while she lived in New York. Therefore, Esther Greenwood's internship is a parallel and a direct demonstration of these feminine American magazines. Plath's personal experience working at *Mademoiselle Magazine* influenced her fictional narration of *The Bell Jar* and Esther Greenwood becomes an extension of Plath's personal life. Thus, *Ladies' Day's* workplace becomes a trap for Greenwood and the girls that work at the editorial and even though Esther actively questions her workplace environment and the feminine performance that she observes in every girl, she also becomes a forced consumer. She is compelled to participate in the process of this feminine performance, "women's magazines are made to seem part of a broader mass-cultural pathology and, more glaringly, to disregard the fact that Esther (and Plath) was herself a producer of their occasionally noxious contents."<sup>285</sup> For ambitious young women, the prospect of working in the harmful environment of a feminine fashion magazine could cost them their mental health. Those magazines become a tool for the patriarchal system, being the beguiling trap of femininity.

### 3. My Year of Rest and Relaxation: The Trap of Unattainable Beauty Standards in the 2000s

Feminine stereotypes have evolved and have been analysed by the feminist theorists throughout history. It is important to point out how these traditional gender roles have been replaced and changed to understand how patriarchy re-codifies the position of a woman's performance in society. The conservative American society from the 50s and 60s has evolved into new arrangements of gender stereotypes attached to the female body. The idea of what a woman is has always been closely linked to constrictive beauty standards that have been defined by a patriarchal society in which the female sex has to

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<sup>285</sup> Donofrio, "Esther Greenwood's Internship," 220.

adapt to fit in the standards of the time. Women must perform a role for the patriarchy from the idea of the perfect housewife of the 50s seen in Plath's novel, to the unwell and unhealthy beauty standards of the 90s and 00s depicted in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Women are socially constructed by these impossible standards and oppressed from birth. As the French feminist Simone de Beauvoir states "woman and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural act."<sup>286</sup> One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman. Thus, to be a woman is to perform and because of this performance, a woman must yield to the historical and social oppression of the female sex, allowing society to construct their identity without questioning the patriarchal ideas. Otherwise, the social construction of this homogenous image of a woman becomes conflictive and characterizes the conduct of madwomen. This is an experience that troubles the protagonists that Moshfegh and Plath describe in their novels *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

The performance of feminine gender stereotypes is attested in this period. This feminine social construction evolves through time and as such, the decades from the 80s and 00s contribute to the further liberation of women in the workplace and education but it also reinforces already existing stereotypes that are transformed into new beauty standards and gender roles. As scholars discuss, sexism remained a reality at all cultural and political levels in the 1990s and the hyper-sexualization of women and misogynist treatment of women in higher positions was still reinforced which led to the creation of organizations such as "Neither Whore Nor Submissive."<sup>287</sup> This hyper-sexualization and objectification is depicted in the novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* as the protagonist describes her sexual encounters with her romantic partner, "Trevor got out of the car [...] made me strip and put on his blazer before getting back into the car [...] he went in to buy me a new outfit. I acquiesced. For him, this was erotic gold."<sup>288</sup>

The idealization of women's looks, and the so-called glamorization of drug use was depicted in popular culture media like *Trainspotting* (1996) or *Skins* (2007). The use

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<sup>15</sup>. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 520.

<sup>16</sup>. Schaal, "Bridging Feminist Waves," 177.

<sup>17</sup>. Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, 64.



of heroin, LSD, cocaine, cannabis and other drugs are portrayed in several movies and series of the 90s and 00s. Protagonists are often young people introducing, and later, abusing, the use of drugs in their daily lives. They became objects of consumption in popular culture which led to the glamorization of their thin and fragile looks. It is a real representation of the social climate at the time where the abuse of substances was out of control. In fact, the term 'heroin chic' was coined when the fashion circles started consuming the drug. Photographers and models among other important fashion figures were consuming the substance. Newspapers such as *The New York Times* state that several magazine editors admitted that glamorizing the heroin addict's look reflected the use among young people in the industry and it became a menace because of its seductive power.<sup>289</sup> What does it mean to be 'heroin chic'?<sup>290</sup> It became a trend among models to have pale skin, dark circles under the eyes, a sharp jawline and a thin body. It was an idealised appearance. The heroin chic looks emerged in opposition to the image of 90s supermodels that walked the runway revealing their voluptuousness. This trend of 'sick models' was captured by famous photographers like Steven Meisel who worked for several American magazine fashion editorials. Meisel depicted it in *Super Models Enter Rehab* (2007) for *Vogue*. Models were found posing at a psychiatric hospital and forced to go through rehabilitation by the nurses. Young women who are seemingly struggling with substance abuse and mental illness are portrayed in an aestheticized manner. In brief, sickness and mental illnesses are now fashionable.

It is evident that the idealization of extremely skinny bodies and unhealthy looks was successfully introduced into popular culture. As a result, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* illustrates the unattainable standards of beauty for young people at the time. Moshfegh depicts a privileged and beautiful young woman of the 00s. The unnamed protagonist lives comfortably in New York after becoming an art history graduate. The novel aims to picture her as a woman with a perfect life and a perfect self-esteem. On the other hand, her best friend Reva struggles with an eating disorder. Their relationship is difficult, and Reva is constantly comparing herself to her perfect unnamed friend.

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<sup>18</sup>. Spindler, "A Death Tarnishes Fashion's 'Heroin Look'," *The New York Times*.

<sup>19</sup>. Schaal, "Bridging Feminist Waves," 177.

Therefore, Moshfegh's novel attempts to explain how these re-codified beauty standards impact on young women in the 00s and the conciliation of female friendship.

There is no doubt that the protagonist of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* embodies the idealization of the skinny models in the 90s and early 00s, "I looked like a model, had money I hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so I was cultured."<sup>291</sup> Moshfegh's protagonist embodies the perfect ideal of beauty which makes her become a narcissistic woman. Through the protagonist's eyes the reader can notice that these beauty standards imposed on women by these fashion trends and patriarchal perceptions are oppressing and creating a toxic environment between these two young women, "jealousy was one thing Reva didn't seem to feel the need to hide from me."<sup>292</sup> The protagonist and her best friend have a friendship based on jealousy and competitiveness. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* also exposes the EDs<sup>293</sup> that are generated by the oppression and competitiveness that the beauty canons force on women: "it's because I'm fat."<sup>294</sup> Reva confesses that she does not feel good because she compares herself to her best friend. Reva thinks that her best friend's privileges and her 'heroin chic' beauty are not fair. Thus, Reva represents and idolizes the harmful ideals of beauty in the early 00s. According to Bradford, young adults do not only compare themselves to the ideal images of fashion models, but they also generate a sense of insecurity and insufficiency when they compare themselves with those ideal images of skinny fashion models.<sup>295</sup> The images of extreme thinness from these idealized models become an issue for many young women and it eventually leads to create a toxic environment not only for the victims of these patriarchal impositions, but also for their close relationships with other women.

The protagonist abuses the prescription of sedatives that her psychiatrist prescribes for her, to sleep and avoid reality. Moshfegh's protagonist does not only have the appearance of a heroin chic model, but she engages in drug use that make her lose

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<sup>20</sup> Moshfegh, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Moshfegh, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Acronym for Eating Disorders.

<sup>23</sup> Moshfegh, 11.

<sup>24</sup> Choi. "Social Comparison in Fashion Blogging," 651-655.

track of time and gives her the sickly looks that fashion magazines glamorize. Hence, she is not taking care of herself properly. This attitude makes her become unhealthy which is an appearance that is adored by her best friend Reva. Despite the jealousy and competitiveness, Reva cares about the protagonist's well-being "I wish you'd take better care of yourself [...] She was right about me. I was 'on drugs'. I took upwards a dozen pills a day."<sup>296</sup> Moshfegh's protagonist is the perfect anti-heroine. Even though it seems that she has a perfect privileged life and perfect beauty, the dissatisfaction results from her non-fulfilled artistic ambitions, while her best friend Reva feels overwhelmed by her own ambition and envy towards the protagonist. The problem of Reva's jealousy stems from her inability to detect the harmful stereotypes that she is being bombarded with. Reva becomes the victim of the patriarchal system because she is being forced to perform and reach unattainable beauty standards to be accepted by society. On the other hand, the protagonist becomes exhausted and unsatisfied because despite her privileges, she is unable to obtain a meaningful purpose in life, 'being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else.'<sup>297</sup>

As it has been analysed by feminist scholars, the imposition of unattainable beauty standards forced on women results in the rise of women's insecurities. This constitutes a recurrent problem to analyse for feminist studies. This lack of confidence is often occasioned by the content of the same feminine magazines that young women are forced to consume. As mentioned earlier in the essay, American magazines like *Mademoiselle* influenced women's beauty standards and it reinforced certain feminine stereotypes in the decade 50s and 60s. These beauty standards gradually transformed into the heroin chic idealization of the 90s and 00s. At the same time, the magazine and media consumption together with movies and series in the late 90s and early 00s also led to the mass glamorization of the heroin chic looks. The ideal thin bodies of well-known supermodels like Kate Moss were photographed for fashion campaigns. These images of ideal pale and slender bodies were glorified, so they easily influenced young people to reproduce and imitate the ideals of the fashion industry at the time. This

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<sup>25</sup>. Moshfegh, 11-12.

<sup>26</sup>. Moshfegh, 35.

evidence of the toxic environment of the 90s and 00s is detailed through the eyes of the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*: “I was emulated and gossiped about. I was blond and thin and pretty — that’s what people noticed. That’s what those girls cared about. I learned to float on cheap affections gleaned from other people’s insecurities.”<sup>298</sup>

#### 4. Plath and Moshfegh: Societal Pressure, Depression and Female Dissatisfaction

*The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are two coming-of-age narratives of young women struggling with depression. Esther Greenwood and the protagonist in Moshfegh’s novel express their inner turmoil and psychological instability. These female protagonists are victims of the expectations assigned to their sex. They are not able to fulfil their expectations and ignore the social pressure that is shaping their identities. These young women wish to feel less exhausted. That attitude makes them suffer from depression, self-division and dissatisfaction. Esther Greenwood and Moshfegh’s protagonist value their own individuality, agency and personal ambitions, becoming the genesis of their mental instability.

Through time women have been deemed hysterical and neurotic and their troubles and individual ambitions have been disregarded. On the word of Sarah Rosenfield, “females have been found to have higher rates of neurosis, especially of depressive symptomatology and of manic-depressive psychosis.”<sup>299</sup> This is what Plath and Moshfegh’s protagonists are experiencing. The patriarchal American society in 1950 and 1960 led educated and ambitious women like Esther Greenwood to feel apathetic and depressed. This problem had no name in America as the patriarchal system tried to dismiss female dissatisfaction as a personal failure. Housewives and young women were often institutionalized with depressive symptoms, but their mental health was not taken into consideration since the dissatisfaction they were experiencing was meant to be

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<sup>27</sup>. Moshfegh, 65.

<sup>28</sup>. Rosenfield, “Sex Differences in Depression,” 34.

reformed instead of treated with care. Thus, the patriarchal system was never questioned. These women had to fix themselves or go through sessions of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) to repair their undiagnosed problems of ‘hysteria’ and ‘neurosis.’ The stigmatization of mental illnesses characterized the American society in the 50s, institutions and doctors conducted psychiatric practices such as ECT as the only solution for the correction of female dissatisfaction and mental illnesses.

The association of dissatisfaction and depression was commonly connected to the female sex. In *The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, both protagonists have individual ambitions. Esther Greenwood wishes to become a writer and following her artistic ambitions, she encounters herself working in an editorial, but she is not satisfied at her workplace, and she strives for a myriad of greater opportunities that she cannot achieve at once.

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 beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out [...] I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet.<sup>300</sup>

Esther Greenwood unfolds her desire to experiment, she manifests her will to have her own agency. She speaks of her craving for the creation of a family of her own, but she also desires to achieve personal artistic ambitions: she wants to become an artist, a poet. Esther Greenwood's wish for a family life is not compatible with her artistic ambitions. As Virginia Woolf rightly claims, “a woman must have money and a room of her own to write.”<sup>301</sup> Women had no room to think about their personal ambitions and they did not have the financial stability to be independent. Therefore, Esther's artistic ambition and her will of independence could not be conciliated with the expectations of becoming a housewife and mother. The impossibility of becoming an artist as a woman stems from

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<sup>29</sup>. Plath, 77.

<sup>30</sup>. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 6.

the lack of financial independence and the lack of room for women's thoughts in almost every field.

Esther becomes paralyzed by the idea of not being able to choose between her family and her personal aspirations. Women with personal objectives like Esther Greenwood were often paralyzed when they had to choose between the social expectations imposed on them or their individual-self detached from the normalized housewife lifestyle of their time. This dilemma has often been discussed by feminist theorists and the question of female madness was always attributed to defiant women. These women were deemed hysteric, neurotic or lunatic. Following the train of thought by feminist theorist Elaine Showalter, "hysteria was apt to appear in young women who were especially rebellious [...] Donkin (doctor) too had seen among his patients a high percentage of unconventional women — artists and writers."<sup>302</sup> This analysis of the historical oppression that the female sex suffered specifies that women with artistic ambitions are prone to be victims of mental illnesses. This condition of 'madness' is directly linked to the personal and artistic aspirations for the main characters in Plath and Moshfegh's novels. Esther Greenwood wishes to become a writer, just as the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* who wishes to become a respectable artist.

This personal and artistic interests lead the women in these two novels to feel trapped and depressed. Moshfegh's protagonist becomes very self-critical and becoming an art graduate is not enough for her: "at least I'm making an effort to change and go after what I want [...] besides sleeping, what do you want out of life? [...] I wanted to be an artist, but I had no talent."<sup>303</sup> The protagonist expresses that she has lost hope on becoming a respectable artist and she is defeated. Sleeping is what helps her to face reality. Thanks to these symptoms, it can be clearly stated that she is in a depressive episode. The competitiveness of her environment and her own best friend's critical tone makes her become defeated and apathetic. Exhaustion and passivity characterize Moshfegh's protagonist, but she is willing to recover from her depressive episode.

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<sup>31.</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 145.

<sup>32.</sup> Moshfegh, 16.

Therefore, she plans her own rebirth, she takes sedatives to sleep for a year in a procedure that she calls *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. She takes an extreme decision to isolate herself from society, even from her friend Reva. She attempts to purge herself and fix her dissatisfaction and depression through sleep. For Moshfegh's protagonist, sleep is her mantra, sleep is her companion to recovery. Once again, Plath and Moshfegh's protagonists share similar experiences. While Esther Greenwood is forced to go through the high-risk procedure of electroshock therapy, the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* puts herself through an extreme and risky therapy of sedatives.

Unlike Moshfegh, Plath's protagonist suffers from depression, and the invasive electroshock procedures make her distrust the doctors and the institutions that are treating her as an experimental guinea pig. She despises what these psychiatric institutions force on young women like her. As Kneeland and Warren discuss, electrotherapy was associated with cases of hysteria in women and neurasthenia was associated with men. Yet, by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both diagnoses were only associated with the female sex.<sup>304</sup> Madness became a tool for the oppression of women. The invasive procedures of electroshock were mostly directed at the female sex, becoming the representation of the control that the patriarchal system had on women. It also evidences the harmful impact that these procedures had on the mental health of the patients. At the asylum, Esther Greenwood was told she would be taken care of, but the first ECT session that she receives is unsuccessful, it only harms her and causing more dissatisfaction and worsening her mental health.

The perception of recovery for society was a violent reformation of a woman's mind. Too very often a violent physical procedure that did not fix the mental illness of the patient. This procedure only worsened the apathy of a woman. As it is seen in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood's rebelliousness and apathy is apparent. she was a critical woman, and she could discern that the doctors at these mental institutions used women's bodies and minds as experimental dolls at their laboratories. At the same time,

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<sup>33</sup>. Kneeland and Warren, *Pushbutton Psychiatry*, 23.

Esther accepts that she has a problem that she wishes to fix: “Well, you were right. I am neurotic.”<sup>305</sup> She is aware of the self-fragmentation that she is experiencing. She considers herself neurotic for not being able to reconcile her ambitions with the social impositions. It is a derogatory term that her boyfriend Buddy Willard used to define her attitude towards life. Women are not expected to choose what they want, they are supposed to follow the rules to become respectable wives. Esther’s agency is taken away from her from the moment she meets Buddy Willard.

The pressure of their relationship becomes another imposition on her, she is expected to marry him instead of choosing her professional aspiration of becoming a writer. She constantly states that she wishes to have options: “If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I’m neurotic as hell.”<sup>306</sup> Plath describes the rebelliousness and the personal drive that Esther has as ‘neurotic’ to ironically expose the harmful stigmatization that she had to face when she dared to express her most personal desires. Even her own boyfriend considers that she is neurotic, he reinforces the damaging ideals that Esther rejects and criticizes. Ideals that are often reinforced by the figure of her own mother. Consequently, Esther’s ideation of change and opportunities leads her to think about death. She is not able to escape the patriarchal social impositions, and she finds no help around her. The world she lives in is a trap, it becomes a bell jar that is trapping her individuality: “The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower.”<sup>307</sup> Esther thinks about death while she goes skiing with Buddy Willard. She associates the feeling of dying as a way of self-liberation from her own troubled mind and the world that surrounds her: “this is what it is to be happy.”<sup>308</sup> As Susan Coyle asserts, the happiness that Esther feels stems from two personal urges, one is self-destruction — as she goes down the hill where no one is controlling her and she might die — while the other is the idea of rebirth as she goes down the hill; she is also rushing towards her birth.<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>. Plath, 94.

<sup>35</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup>. Plath, 97.

<sup>37</sup>. *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup>. Coyle, “Images of Madness and Retrieval,” 169.



This passage in *The Bell Jar* is a metaphor of Esther's wish for rebirth, the only way for her to achieve this rebirth is through death. She is aware of her mental instability and 'madness.' The only solution left for her to fix herself is to be born again: "the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly."<sup>310</sup> In this chapter, Esther metaphorically associates her happiness, liberation and comfort with the image of a baby in a mother's belly. This is Esther's reasoning for recovery.

The protagonists of Moshfegh and Plath's novel are clearly experiencing depressive symptoms. Moshfegh's protagonist is exhausted and not satisfied with her life and she states that she never had a good relationship with her mother. She lacks a role model. The two protagonists lack a female role model. Esther did not like the gender roles and impositions that her mother was pushing on her and Moshfegh's protagonist despises her mother for not being able to create a bond with her, "I did crave attention, but I refused to humiliate myself asking for it. [...] My parents barely seemed to notice I existed."<sup>311</sup> Eventually Moshfegh's character grows up and develops a low self-esteem. Her apathetic and depressive attitude originates from the lack of care and negative judgement from her mother: "I was interested in how 'art created the future'. It was a mediocre essay. My mother seemed unperturbed by it, which shocked me, and handed it back with the suggestion that I look up a few words in the thesaurus because I'd repeated them too often. I didn't take her advice."<sup>312</sup>

Both Esther and Moshfegh's protagonist have complicated relationships with their mothers because they represent an ideal that does not help them to achieve their personal ambitions. The figure of the mother becomes a symbol of an uncomfortable, untrustworthy and oppressive environment. The neglectful and repressive ideals of their families reflect the corruption of their society. Thus, Moshfegh's protagonist must face a lifestyle that submits her to a position of high expectations from her parental figures given the fact that they are already a highly accommodated family: mediocrity is not accepted. For that reason, her dissatisfaction, low self-confidence and depression stems

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<sup>39</sup>. Plath, 97.

<sup>40</sup>. Moshfegh, 66.

<sup>41</sup>. *Ibid.*

from demanding and critical parental figures that do not value her worth, especially the figure of her own mother.

There is a sense of hostility between mother and daughter, they are not able to conciliate their feelings for each other and this leads the protagonist to feel even more depressed and less valued while growing up. It is also important to highlight the fact that both parental figures lack any interest for their daughter's ambitions, as they do not consider artistic education such as writing, an English major or an Art degree as valuable as other potential professions that could keep the social status and wealth of the family. Artistic ambitions are still disregarded and stigmatized as a lower type of occupation in the capitalist postmodern world of the 00s.

These artistic interests are considered philistine and trivial. Therefore, they are less important and valuable because they are often associated with the figure of women. As for Esther Greenwood, the depressive episodes are also occasioned by the impassivity and old-fashioned intransigence of her mother that forces her to comply with the gender roles of the time. Tradition and prejudice are oppressing Plath and Moshfegh's protagonists. Thus, extreme acts of rebellion become the only reaction to the acts of extreme patriarchal oppression. In *The Female Malady*, Showalter turns the question around. She asserts that — instead of asking whether rebellion was a mental pathology — people should ask if mental pathology was a repressed rebellion in which the hysterical woman becomes a feminist fighting back against her own confinement. This is what Showalter calls the “daughter's disease,” which is applied to women who did not act in accordance with the roles of femininity at the time.<sup>313</sup> These women were categorized as hysteric and unfit for a normative life because of their rebellious nature. They were isolated from society. The emergence of their otherness challenged the misogynistic structure of their time. Both Esther Greenwood and the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* suffer from the “daughter disease.” Esther Greenwood seeks to break free from the confinements of gender roles and Moshfegh's protagonist seeks

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<sup>42</sup>. Showalter, 147.

to break free from the overwhelming beauty standards and the suffocating capitalist system of her time.

## 5. The Question of Female Happiness in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Bell Jar*

The feminist analysis has proved that female happiness is an impossibility for some women. The model of happiness that society designates for women becomes a trap of unattainable societal standards. Therefore, happiness is a social construct. It is only designated to satisfy the judgement of a few members of society, and it is not always consented by the majority. It is forced on the majority. Happiness becomes a consented act for a few individuals, and it is imposed upon society as an individual responsibility instead of a social one. As Sara Ahmed claims in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), the individual becomes responsible for their own happiness, and any failure to be happy is seen as a personal failure because in resisting or being different, the individual chooses unhappiness.<sup>314</sup> The pursuit of happiness is a need for every participating individual in society. Every individual — whether it is a man or a woman — seeks to find happiness. As it is stated in the American Declaration of Independence, the basic unalienable rights of the people are *Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness* yet certain social constraints that constitute their identity prevent them from achieving happiness. Happiness is often used as a tool of oppression depending on factors like race, sexuality, class or gender. In this essay the question of happiness will be analysed through the lenses of gender and from a post-industrial capitalist perspective.

In Plath's novel, the protagonist fails to find happiness; instead, she becomes depressed because her criticism is seen as a personal failure. Happiness becomes an impossibility for her because she is not actively contributing to the reinforcement of the social roles designated for her. Unhappy women are responsible for their own mental instability. It is their personal failure that is stopping them from finding happiness. Therefore, society does not consider it a social problem. Feminists and scholars have

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<sup>43</sup>. Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 83.

widely discussed the question of happiness, defining it as the ideals of social status for specific individuals, groups and nations.<sup>315</sup> The formula for happiness is relegated to a few people. Thus, happiness becomes a privilege. White feminists in the decade of the 50s were often conscious of the oppression but they were exclusively preoccupied about white middle-class women worries. White feminism was involved in the liberation of women from family life and the constraints of duty and housekeeping obligations, yet they failed to consider the existence of other sexualities or women of colour. On the other hand, the question of happiness and women's dissatisfaction gave voice to a different type of feminist thought. Intersectional feminism included women of colour, queer women and often black feminists and their consciousness involved stories of displacement and marginalization. At the same time, intersectional feminism examines the question of happiness including stories of marginalized groups. From this theoretical frame, the displacement and self-fragmentation that Esther Greenwood experiences is directly linked to the stories of dispossession and marginalization that become the basis of unhappiness. Esther is an unhappy and dispossessed woman in a world that stigmatizes her rebelliousness. her will to resist becomes her downfall, she is forced to become a marginalized figure. The only way for Esther Greenwood to recover would be to either accept her submission to the patriarchal happiness determined for her sex or the acceptance of the extreme practices at the mental institutions. She has the will to recover and obtain a normative happiness. She accepts to be treated with electroconvulsive treatments at a mental institution. Her happiness is directly connected to the success of her reformation at the mental institution. However, she will be obtaining a fake happiness. The promise of happiness is an illusion for a rebellious woman like her.

In the end, Esther seems to recover and despite attempting suicide she is reformed at the institution. Her own personal perception of happiness is not a valid option for society. The promise of happiness is to become a normative woman in a patriarchal society: "there ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice – patched,

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<sup>44</sup>. Ahmed, 3.

retreated and approved for the road.”<sup>316</sup> Esther states that she is being approved for the road, a metaphor for her reformed life. Someone else is controlling her and her happiness resides in the approval of the majority. It is the promise of an unhappy life according to her own principles, yet she still concedes and yields to the reformation of herself to be accepted by society.

The promise of happiness for the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* is the idealization of sleep. The protagonist often expresses that sleeping and not being aware of her surroundings makes her happy. In this way, she is stating that society as a whole and the norms that rule her life are not making her happy. The compromise that she has with happiness is not with society but with herself and her own comfort while she sleeps, avoiding the world she lives in, challenging the expectations that her friend Reva and those her family put on her. The protagonist defies the concept of happiness when she decides to take a year of rest and relaxation by evading reality with the prescribed medicines that she is taking.

The question of happiness is an illusion for Moshfegh’s protagonist as well. The normative happiness from her family is driven by capitalist motives. She is expected to become a successful and wealthy woman, and she is expected to maintain the social status of her family. The novel illustrates how her status is always questioned by society and by her best friend. For a second, she wishes to get rid of those ideals that are constraining her. The ideal of happiness for her is the ideal of unhappiness for her family and friends. There is an impossible conciliation between the concept that she has of happiness and the lifestyle that is being imposed on her.

The capitalist system paralyses Moshfegh’s protagonist. Looking back in time, when the industrial revolution takes place in America, the focus on productivity becomes a central part in the way people interact with their worth. The 19<sup>th</sup> century is plagued by utilitarian ideals. The worth that people have is directly linked to their ability to be productive and therefore, their happiness is openly linked to their productivity. Ironically, Moshfegh’s protagonist feels happier when she is less productive. The fixation

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<sup>45</sup>. Plath, 244.

on productivity of the 19th century rapidly evolves into the capitalist ideals of productivity in the 21st century. These unhealthy capitalist and utilitarian ideals become harmful for the society that Moshfegh describes.

The problem for Moshfegh's protagonist's attitude towards life lies on the social stigmatization of her unproductiveness. She is making herself unhappy while doing nothing to overcome her depressive episodes. Reva, her own best friend, often questions her apathy and inactivity. Ahmed analyses the principle of utility as dangerous for the government in which inequality becomes a measure of advancement and happiness.<sup>317</sup> Happiness is supposed to be reserved as a right for the people, but it only generates greater inequality when society essentially equals utility to happiness. Productivity and utility become a need that must be normalized within society, and without it there is little possibility for happiness. Thus, Moshfegh's protagonist is condemned to unhappiness from the perspective of the society that she lives in. The capitalist system and utilitarian society of the 2000s demands utility and production from her. Otherwise, she will not have the promise of happiness.

Moshfegh's protagonist takes a year of rest and relaxation as a way of liberation and recovery. This contemporary novel depicts the ambitions of young women and the consumerism that rules society. As Jonathan Greenberg argues, "Reva bound by the norms and narratives of her gender and class can only counsel a restorative break in the action – rest and relaxation – but cannot envision an end to action itself" and, in contrast, the protagonist takes that year of rest and relaxation to restore herself with hopes of achieving happiness.<sup>318</sup> While Reva accommodates to what is expected of her gender like reading *Cosmo* and watching *Sex and the City*, the protagonist does not feel a clear interest in Reva's hobbies. Although Reva wishes to find happiness in marriage because "Reva often spoke of 'settling down',"<sup>319</sup> the protagonist does not feel the urge to be married. In some way, she represents what the protagonist does not want to become. Reva becomes an extension and a victim of the shallowness, consumerism and

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<sup>46</sup>. Ahmed, 4.

<sup>47</sup>. Greenberg, "Losing Track of Time," 193.

<sup>48</sup>. Moshfegh, 28.

sexism of society. From the perspective of Moshfegh's protagonist, Reva does not represent her ideal of happiness. For the protagonist, happiness is not linked to marriage nor productivity. The worth and happiness of the protagonist does not rely on her ability to fit in the standards of marriage or productivity. It is the failure of society and the expectations on women that make the protagonist become dissatisfied, "I was plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to escape the prison of my mind and body."<sup>320</sup>

In a violent world and hostile reality towards women, the protagonists of these novels choose to rebel against that violence and in doing so they make people around them uncomfortable. They refuse to comply and be kept in place. They refuse to be controlled. They turn away from the society that cannot accept them. In a way, they are resisting and killing the oppressor's happiness to obtain theirs. Ahmed questions the illusion of happiness as inclusion. If happiness requires turning away from violence, happiness is violence.<sup>321</sup> Plath and Moshfegh's protagonists choose disruption by choosing to question social impositions, beauty standards and economical systems that are constraining their freedom and happiness. This situation fabricates violence that they inflict upon themselves, a violence that comes from social impositions. Violence that transforms their individuality. Violence as a transgression of the normative designations of happiness. Unhappy women are willing to transform their dissatisfaction with violent methods to finally reclaim a new self and achieve the promise of happiness: "This was how I knew the sleep was having an effect: I was growing less and less attached to life. If I kept going, I thought, I'd disappear completely, then reappear in some new form. This was my hope. This was the dream."<sup>322</sup>

In this excerpt, Moshfegh's novel evidence the young protagonist's mental illness. It plainly reveals she suffers from depression. Thus, her happiness and journey to recovery involve extreme methods of recovery as well. This promise of happiness compromises the ideal of recovery and happiness with harmful practices for women. The act of turning away from these ideals of happiness becomes a way of shattering the

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<sup>49</sup>. Moshfegh, 18.

<sup>50</sup>. Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*, 226.

<sup>51</sup>. Moshfegh, 84.

core of an oppressive system. These women shatter the expectations of happiness but are eventually forced to comply but their nonconformism becomes a challenge. Happiness is not a constant, and it is not a model without a fault. Then, to be unhappy does not make people less valuable. Women's unhappiness should be understood based on the knowledge that it is a social failure rather than a personal one. To be 'unhappy' equals defiance towards the normative promises of happiness that are oppressing Plath's and Moshfegh's protagonists. These protagonists want to prioritize their personal self rather than the social conventions. However, to be a functional member of society and to be *approved for the road* — as Greenwood describes when she leaves the mental asylum — women have to go through a tough process of recovery in which they must rehabilitate themselves to fit into the standards of society.<sup>323</sup> These extreme acts of violence that the protagonists take against themselves such as suicide or abuse of sedatives are forced by the promise of happiness that society designates for them. As a society, the inclusion of women's well-being and happiness should still be discussed and analysed to prevent their mental instability and to guarantee the right to the pursuit of happiness.

## 6. Conclusion

The question of female happiness, unhealthy and unattainable beauty standards evolve through time as it can be observed through the comparison of Sylvia Plath and Ottessa Moshfegh's novels in this essay. Madness and happiness are two sides of the same coin. While one is considered failure, the other is considered success. Failure or success lay in the way women interact with the world and their socialization in it. The authors of these two women stories illustrate and analyse what it means to be a woman in different decades. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Bell Jar* are real depictions of young women in the decade of the 50s and 2000s. Parallelisms between these novels and their protagonists are evident. Their oppressive environment is described as they both experience the same symptoms of mental illness and suicidal ideations. These stories

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<sup>52</sup>. Plath, 224.



reflect the preoccupations of young women within their societies and the patriarchal system. The accounts of these protagonists reflect the evolution of sexist gender roles and conceptions such as marriage and beauty and the recodification of these ideals that keep oppressing women through time. The transformation of these gender roles condition women's happiness. As a result, their mental health is put at risk. It is essential to understand the origin of these problems that are oppressing and overwhelming the protagonists of these novels.

*The Bell Jar* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are narratives that have the potential to transcend through time. As Marjorie G. Perloff states, *The Bell Jar* became important for the young women of the early seventies as an archetypal novel that mirrored their own personal experience and the sense of the general human condition.<sup>324</sup> The success of these novels is based on the depiction of a reality for many young women. These different stories become a source of representation for the complexity of the female identity and how it is shaped.

The protagonists of these two novels represent the self-division, the complex and unhappy women of their times. The life that they are forced to choose is a life of apathy, invisibility. It represents the dangerous side of a mental disorder. This invisibility and suicidal ideations that they dream of are a dangerous solution that women find for their problems and mental disorders. As it has been explored in this essay, in a world full of dangers, to be a potentially seeable object is to be constantly exposed to danger and the obvious defence against such a danger is to make oneself invisible in one way or another.<sup>325</sup> The ultimate way of defence is the ideation of suicide. Therefore, the debate on sensitive topics like mental health or suicide must be discussed along with the question of happiness to find ways to prevent it.

The discussion of female unhappiness and their mental health must be analysed from a feminist point of view for a more nuanced approach. These dangerous practices and ideations that these young women experience don't come in a vacuum. It is important to contextualize their mental disorders in their social and political background

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<sup>53</sup>. Perloff, "A Ritual for Being Born Twice," 508.

<sup>54</sup>. Perloff, 510-511.

for them to be de-stigmatized. In this essay, the analysis of their social environment and their socialization as women is discussed to specify the gender roles and social standards that are oppressing the protagonists and leading them to become unhappy and depressed women.

Moshfegh and Plath's novels both masterfully describe the worries of a post-war society in the decade of the 50s and of a post-modern capitalist society in the decade of the 00s. The political context in which they live in is also an important factor to understand their psychological turmoil. The protagonists and their socialization in this world are the key to discern why they become figures of marginality. The mental health of these young women should not only be associated to their sex but also to the general political structure of their time. While the condition of their sex and patriarchal institutions oppresses them, there is also a double risk seen in the anxieties of their political context. That is, the destruction of the II World War and the menace of a hyper-capitalist society in America. This political structure asphyxiates the protagonists of these novels, it reinforces the expectations imposed on them.

This paper analyses female stories that are important and valuable because they provide a truthful insight of a woman's mind and women's stories. The authors of these novels are creating a fictional narrative out of a reality that young women have to face. It also allows women to identify their own mental turmoil and to describe the risks of mental illnesses like depression or anxiety. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* and *The Bell Jar* not only provide an insight of the social pressure that women are forced to experience, but they also voice and give representation to the mental disorders that women suffer to de-stigmatize these mental illnesses. These female narratives truthfully describe the ups and downs of women with different personalities and social backgrounds. As described in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, it is also important to highlight that psychological disorders could influence women of different backgrounds whether they are privileged or not.

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