Narcissism and Self-Cohesion in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

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Abstract*: This study examines the depiction of Narcissistic Personality Disorder in* My Year of Rest and Relaxation *by Ottessa Moshfegh, using an approach that blends the diagnostic standards for narcissistic personality disorder from the* DSM-5 *with Heinz Kohut's Self Psychology. The unnamed protagonist's grandiosity, need for admiration, and profound lack of empathy are signs of narcissistic personality disorder. However, Moshfegh's storytelling goes beyond a label of clinical diagnosis to unveil a profoundly human story. Looking through Kohut's perspective, we delve into the protagonist's fragmented identity uncovering her search for inner unity and affirmation in a world that constantly disappoints her. Moshfegh's dark humor and detached storytelling mirror the main character's inner battle echoing contemporary society's obsession with self-improvement. Exploring the protagonist's interaction with others and her ways of dealing with challenges, this study sheds light on the cultural implications of narcissism and the constant quest for an idealized self. This study aims to enhance our comprehension of narcissistic personality disorder in the realm of literature prompting us to understand the quest for meaning and identity in a world marked by fragmentation. Through this examination, we gain not only a deeper insight into the protagonist's psyche but also a mirror reflecting our own societal and personal struggles.*

Keywords*: fragmented identity; narcissistic personality; self psychology;*

Introduction

Search for meaning in a completely ambiguous, seemingly meaningless, inherently aimless and restless world is the ultimate endeavour of humanity. Each person alone can fulfil this primary motivation of finding meaning in life as people themselves can achieve significance through the satisfaction of reaching the meaning. In other words, what makes life meaningful must be answered personally by experience and introspection. Psychologist Christopher Davis and his colleagues, in "Making Sense of Loss and Benefiting from the Experience: Two Construals of Meaning", argue that having any understanding of meaning is preferable to having none and that the content of that understanding does not seem to matter. In other words, having a meaning in life is the matter, rather than the content of that meaning. While some people find meaning in religious issues, others find it in a scientific endeavour. Some people will find meaning in the existence of loved ones, but some will find it in the memories of the lost ones. As Virginia Woolf

insightfully states, what is the meaning of life? That simple question tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come or never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations… (Woolf 45).

Having meaning in life creates a sense of equilibrium and peace, which is the prerequisite of healthy living. Paradoxically, searching or trying to reach a meaning arouses inner tension. However, this inner conflict is essential for mental health. It forces people to endure anything to reach fulfilment in life. If there is meaning in one's life, one can survive the worst conditions, face the most complex treatments, and leave behind the most traumatic experiences. A Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist, Victor Frankl (5), speaks about finding meaning in life by quoting Nietzsche's "he who has a life to live can bear almost any how" to show the importance of having meaning in life. Similarly, William James, in *The Principles of Psychology*, emphasises the significance of purposeful life in his many books and asserts that the most significant use of life is to spend it on something that will outlast it. It seems fitting to say that meaning and purpose in life are closely connected with our life instincts and shape our life experiences by forming our way of understanding reality. Moreover, a meaningful life is hopeful as it creates a gap between what one has already accomplished and what one desires to achieve. It clears the paths between what one has reached and the direction one moves.

The reaching for meaning in life results from having a coherent identity. The most common form of purposeless life results from a person's inability to choose to be oneself or unwillingness to accept the true self as it is. According to Kierkegaard, the most profound unhappiness comes when one continually chooses to be someone else. In other words, without meaning in life, people turn into whirling leaves, which they do not know which tree they belong to and try to reach meaning by clinging to different branches. However, being true to yourself and knowing who you are is the opposite of despair and meaningless existence. Therefore, having a coherent identity and potential meaning to fulfil is the most meaningful responsibility of a human being.

This study shows that the search for meaning is far more fulfilling than the pursuit of personal satisfaction by exploring an unnamed protagonist who has such a vast tension inherent within her that she aims to spend a year in hibernation to escape her meaningless existence. Therefore, the study reflects a broader shift in postmodern culture worldwide by highlighting the refusal of the gospel of happiness and focus on meaning. Ottessa Moshfeg's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* provides a dissatisfied protagonist overwhelmed by emptiness. She has a pathological grandiose self in which she internalises ideal aspects of herself and others while her need for others is denied and devalued. She experiences an existential crisis and engages in an ambitious meaning-making process, but her attempts result in a decision to hibernate to be born with a new version of herself. Thus, this study delves into the portrayal of a

woman with a narcissistic personality, using an approach that blends societal interpretations of narcissistic personality disorder with Heinz Kohut's Self Psychology. The main character's sense of grandeur, desire for admiration, and notable lack of empathy reveal her narcissistic personality. However, Moshfegh's narrative transcends the discovery of a narcissistic individuality and reveals a deeply human tale. From Kohut's point of view, in *Restoration of the Self*, the protagonist is living her identity at a marginal level and seeking inner harmony and validation in a world that consistently disappoints her. Moshfegh's mischievous sense of humour and detached narrative style reflect the protagonist's struggle, echoing society's preoccupation with self-improvement. Through examining how the main character interacts with others and copes with obstacles, this analysis highlights the impacts of narcissism and the ending pursuit of a perfect self. This research seeks to improve our understanding of narcissist personality disorder as portrayed in literature by exploring the pursuit of meaning and identity in a world contextually pushing into meaninglessness. This analysis explains the protagonist's mindset and reflects common societal and individual challenges in the postmodern age.

Understanding Narcissism in Modern Culture

Narcissistic personality was known as one of the severe personality disorders as it was first believed to be untreatable because of the barrier the patients build between themselves and their analysts. When it was discovered that the term is closely associated with the concept of identity, it became apparent that the strict defensiveness of the narcissist was only a defence against injury to a poor sense of identity. As a clinical subject, it is a defence mechanism against the fragmentation of one's self-conception and understanding of others. It also represents a struggle between the idealised and persecutory aspects of self. Narcissists tend to construct a pathological grandiose self, which is constituted by combining ideal aspects of themselves and the ideal aspects of others. They see themselves as a combination of all ideal aspects; They see themselves as so great that they do not need others. They live in an ideal internal world of grandiosity and self-sufficiency. The rest of the world is meaningless as depreciated, worthless people constitute it. However, what seems somewhat contradictory is that those worthless people are also seen as great as the narcissist still has to admire them in order to incorporate everything they have. Besides, they are also enemies the narcissist has to fight off. However, these characteristics are undoubtedly secondary compared to the overwhelming symptom of a lack of cohesive identity.

Sigmund Freud categorises narcissism into primary narcissism and secondary or pathological narcissism. Primary narcissism refers to the earliest developmental stage where an infant sees itself as a part object of its mother. The infant is incapable of perceiving its mother as separate from itself. Infants

experience intense self-love and self-obsession in this early stage as they see everything as part of and connected to themselves. They believe that their needs are fulfilled by their parts. There is no difference between self and others. As their first love object is their mother and they are also a part of their mother, their love is directed inwardly. They see themselves as the core of their world, and every other object is an extension of themselves. Although bizarre, this primary self-obsession is a normal part of human development. This self-investment is a prerequisite to the stage where they acknowledge that other people, even their mothers, have their separate existence. According to Freud, as children grow up and become aware of the separate identities of others as well as their mothers, they move away from this narcissistic phase and begin to develop the capacity to love, respect and relate to others. The transition from dependency to independence is crucial for the development of narcissistic personality disorder. If the change from this early developmental phase to maturity does not happen properly, it might result in what Freud termed secondary narcissism. In other words, a healthy development in which an infant's separation from the mother is an assertion of its independent existence as a whole person prevents the development of narcissistic personality disorder.

Secondary narcissism is a pathological condition which occurs when the infant is unable to free itself from primary self-centeredness, according to J. Smith. The necessary transition into independence from the caregiver is achieved when the infant takes adequate care, including love. When children experience disappointment in parental affection and care, they feel abandoned. Due to the lack of care, love, and safety, the infant cannot recognise itself as a separate whole object and cannot relate to the separate mother. It remains stuck at the level of lack of integration of the self and lack of integration of the other. The infant keeps seeing itself as an extension of the love object and creates fantasies of an omnipotent father and mother who merge their self-image. This internalisation is a defence mechanism against anxiety and disappointment as it creates a desired love relationship between the caretaker and the child to revise the child's awareness of the response taken from the first love object. In other words, secondary narcissism is living in an imaginary internal world where you believe that you are omnipotent and self-sufficient because of the integration of ideal aspects of the parents. Therefore, as the infant matures, it becomes obsessed with incorporating the ideal aspects of itself and others and cannot stand any idea of defect or devaluation regarding itself.

According to the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th ed., there are three classic signs of narcissism. The first and the most common sign is a grandiose self-conception. A grandiose self is not a true self-conception. It is a false conception of who I am and creates a feeling of emptiness and inauthenticity. In response to internal

conflicts, the child may fantasise about ideal aspects of wealth, beauty, power, omnipotence, and control. As the children mature, they internalise all these aspects and integrate them into their self-perception without making accurate evaluations. All ideal aspects of the self and others are incorporated and exaggerated as if it possesses them, and it has achieved all ideal aspirations while the need of others is denied. This false self-perception, where the child sees himself as superior, exceptional and entitled to admiration and unique behaviour, compensates for all the negative aspects internalised during early childhood. As a result, all internalised good and ideal self-images create megalomaniac ideal self-images.

The second characteristic common to narcissistic personality disorder is an insatiable demand for admiration. This personality is often characterised by craving admiration, typically associated with youth beauty, celebrity, power, and charm. The narcissists admire themselves and require admiration from the outside. As they live in an imaginary world of grandiosity and self-sufficiency, they perceive the rest of the world as constituted by worthless people who respect and approve of them. In other words, this process of self-appreciation and the need for external approval result from contempt for others. Their feelings of inadequacy, buried deep inside, search for everyone's attention and admiration upon themselves.

The last characteristic is the lack of empathy and love for others. They are unwilling to recognise and understand the feelings and conditions of others as they cannot put themselves into another person's shoes. They are also unable to mirror emotions and are not emotionally responsive to another person's emotional state compared to healthy people. However, they think their empathy skill is better than it is. They tend to show arrogant, critical and aggressive reactions towards other's feelings with a false belief in their capacity for empathy. According to object relations theorists, in favourable circumstances, the infant can love, understand and relate to people as they separate themselves from the caregiver and acknowledge them as differentiated individuals. However, secondary narcissism develops as they are stuck at an early stage of development, where they integrate the caretaker rather than separating themselves from her, according to Susan Adler. In favourable development, the child can acknowledge a sense of responsibility for others. However, without a nurturing environment, the child's perception remains limited to a more fundamental level of taking sensory information without actively engaging in existing knowledge and experience. The capacity to feel concern for the other is about engaging in a cognitive process of interpretation and meaning-making. In secondary narcissism, it becomes impossible to feel and understand other people's perspectives, as people with narcissistic personality disorder are filled with internal ambiguities and conflicts.

All these characteristics show, on the surface, a feeling of self-satisfaction, grandiosity and excessive concern with oneself, despite a desperate desire for admiration but inability to show empathy. There is an abnormal love of self and an incapacity to love others. They have an internal sense of grandiosity and emptiness at the same time. By looking at these ambiguous traits, Christopher Lasch, an American historical and social critic, appropriately points out, in *The Culture of Narcissism*, that contemporary American society has become increasingly narcissistic, characterised by an exaggerated concentration on self and a decline in community values. Ottessa Moshfeg's novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, uses the unnamed young protagonist to reflect upon the societal problem of self-obsession. It defines a culture of individual and social narcissism in which an unnamed protagonist is so severely controlled by a general feeling of emptiness and dissatisfaction that she dives into a year of drug-induced sleep to experience a remarkable metamorphosis and achieve the best self of her own. Moshfeg discusses this narcissistic culture in a pre-9/11 New York City atmosphere by forcing readers to understand how society, with all its apparatuses, encourages people to pursue fame, wealth, and status instead of cultivating meaningful relationships.

Narcissism and the Pursuit of an Integrated Self

From birth onward, the infant is exposed to two independent and parallel pieces of experience. The favourable one is to be in a happy world where a happy self relates to a happy other. Alternatively, there is a different world in which an unhappy self relates to an unsatisfactory and irritating other. Thus, the phantasy world of the infant is a mixture of bad and good experiences. These early conditions gradually and naturally get nullified as the child realises that these experiences are only disparate sides of the same experience. The ideal mother can sometimes be a frustrating mother, and the happy self can be horrible. So, as the child matures, it integrates excellent and bad aspects of itself into an integrated sense of self, and it integrates the representation of others into integrated neither good nor bad but mixed and modulated others. As a result, the child ends this process with an integrated sense of self and an integrated sense of significant others. This is a healthy identity development. However, if the predominance of bad experiences is so strong that the fusion of the bad and good aspects cannot be achieved, one is stuck with separating these experience segments. As such, the infant tries to keep them separate to avoid the persecutory experience contaminating the good ones that will make the world a nightmare. However, individuals have specific psychological defence mechanisms that separate good experiences from bad ones. They split an ideal internal world from a persecutory one and tend to project outside all bad things and try to control the bad ones. The main aim is to deny that there is anything terrible growing within themselves. All these primitive defensive mechanisms

are part of what is seen in psychologically unhealthy people. They are stuck at the level of lack of integration of the self and lack of integration of the significant others.

Moshfeg's protagonist is stuck at the level of disintegration of both good and bad aspects of self due to her traumatic childhood. She feels that hostile, depreciated, worthless people surround her world, her links with reality are broken and very painful and her capacity to link and integrate is disrupted. In order to exist and maintain under this condition, she splits everything, including people, into good and bad selves. She establishes herself and everything related to herself as the ideal objects containing all the good aspects, leaving others wholly devalued and depleted. The people with whom she had a relationship, such as her friend Reva and ex-boyfriend Trevor, felt dependent on her. Thus, she has a disintegrated sense of self because the greater integration of the ego means that the perception of people and objects is less distorted and devalued, so each person and the self are a combination of good and bad aspects. However, the protagonist experiences a deficiency in recognising and awareness of any goodness in the other. Her way of seeing people reveals that narcissistic characters' inner and outer worlds have few excellent objects. The negative aspects of the self and the mother are dominant, so the inner world is fragmented, as it is experienced as full of hate, rage, and envy, with a feeling of meaninglessness.

Heinz Kohut's (1971) theory of self-psychology explains the protagonist's need for equilibrium and integration as it emphasises the critical importance of empathy in developing and maintaining a healthy self. Kohut defines self and self objects as the cornerstones of a coherent self. In Kohut's view, self refers to the internal emotional state, including every unique life experience, ambition, goal and ideal. It is the core of an individual's identity and reflects the early relationship between the individual and the caretaker. The ability of the caretaker to understand and recognise the infant in the early developmental phase is responsible for forming a healthy self. For Kohut (1977), the child's caretakers are the first self-objects as they contribute to the emotional and psychological needs of the child from birth onward. A mother's emotional attunement and responsiveness are essential in developing a healthy self. The children come to know themselves through the empathic reflection of themselves that they can take from their mothers. In a favourable development, the mother's way of handling and nurturing the infant should reflect a look of concern and empathy, which helps the infant feel understood. As the children mature through this responsive kind of care, they develop a sense of trust and security to acknowledge themselves as a whole integrated entity.

Self objects might be anything or anybody external to self but inherent to its construction by providing support, affirmation and validation. In addition to parents, self-objects can encompass friends, mentors, groups and

constructive ideals. It seems fitting to assert that self-objects become the extension of parents as the child matures. The relationship between the child and the caretaker forms the basis of their future relationships with others. The transition from dependence on the caregiver to independence is crucial as it involves cultivating empathy and showing care for others. When the children start seeing their caregivers as separate beings with their desires and ambitions, they assume their individuality by becoming conscious of how their actions affect others and how other's actions affect them. Therefore, healthy subjectivity involves comprehending yourself and others as separate beings, combining good and bad aspects. This nuanced understanding of the individual as a complete whole of ambiguities is the prerequisite of healthy subjectivity. This comprehension plays a crucial role in shaping one's coherent identity as it enables the individual to form a sense of self closely related to their interactions with others. Recognising others as individuals with their desires and needs fosters empathy and a sense of duty towards others.

For Kohut, empathy is "the tool that gathers psychological information" (1971, 49). The individual should see the world as the extension of the self to put itself into the feet of others. When one recognises that it is not a part object but a whole separate entity similar to others, this one understands that the internal experiences of others are similar to its own. It is tempting to suggest that empathy is being open to collecting psychological information about the world, people, and each other. Empathy is significant for developing and maintaining a healthy self since an individual is a social and interactive entity that can reach its potential through the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. When one acknowledges that individuals can achieve integration by incorporating ambiguous aspects of themselves, they share someone else's experiences.

The Quest for Wholeness in Ottesha Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

Ottesha Moshfeg's novel starts with a poignant reflection on the heavy weight of existence in the late postmodern world:

> I CAN'T POINT TO any one event that resulted in my decision to go into hibernation. Initially, I just wanted some downers to drown out my thoughts and judgments, since the constant barrage made it hard not to hate everyone and everything. I thought life would be more tolerable if my brain were slower to condemn the world around me. (Moshfegh, 22)

In the passage, the unnamed protagonist emphasises that the individual's mind puts meaning into existence. Finding meaning in our lives influences how we

perceive the present, ease coming to terms with the past, and look at the future with hope. In other words, a meaningful life can transform the present and the future. Meaning constructs the story in your mind, the story you tell yourself and others about yourself. From this point of view, it seems relevant to point out that meaning constructs your identity as the identity is a coherent, cohesive and unified story of your life. However, the protagonist's sentences reveal a fragmented mind obsessed with the endless search for inner unity and affirmation, which prevents her from being a meaning-making individual. As the meaning-making process can emerge through an inter-relational context, Moshfeg's protagonist's narcissistic personality leaves her an isolated woman who dives deep into the dilemma of meaning and meaninglessness.

Moshfeg's novel not only tells a personal journey but also highlights a culture of narcissism characterised by a decline in community values, an increase in self-obsession and superficial relationships and, thus, widespread dissatisfaction and emptiness in life. Thus, the protagonist's journey is not a search marked by self-renewal but a mirror reflecting crucial social and cultural issues. Considering why the story's setting provides a backdrop to pre-9/11 New York City, it seems clear that authorial authority deliberately discusses the relationship between culture and personality. In his *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lash points out that contemporary narcissism is not only personal but rather a social and cultural phenomenon (1979). In each age, different forms of pathological disorders evolve, and each pathology mirrors the unique qualities of society. During Freud's time, hysteria and obsessional neurosis were seen as disorders as the outcome of the cultural and social situation characterised by a strong desire for material possessions, an intense dedication to work and suppression of sexual desires. However, psychiatrists have noticed a change in the type of psychoanalytic disorders identified and discussed after World War II. In the postmodern era, clinicians are now seeing an increasing number of patients who neatly fit into narcissistic personality disorder. This shift from previous character disorders to narcissism suggests that societal and cultural factors have played a crucial role in the rise of narcissistic disorder.

Christopher Lasch suggests, in *The Culture of Narcissism*, that the increase in narcissism in society can be attributed to a combination of changes over time, such as shifts in family dynamics and the impact of consumerism and mass media on individual behaviour and their attitudes towards self-image and others. The erosion of traditional family structure has led to diminished control and inadequate emotional support for children, consequently increasing their reliance on external validation. Joel Kovel (2007) proposes that the encouragement of childhood desires through advertising and the erosion of parental authority by media and schools have led to a shift in norms towards a new kind of individual who seeks personal satisfaction through self-

exploration but often finds disillusionment instead. The impact of media and advertising encourages desires and a fixation on self-image, resulting in a greater emphasis on personal appearance, prominence and achievement. The decrease in bonds between people and the trend towards prioritising personal interests may lead individuals to experience feelings of loneliness and a desire for approval. The growth of institutions that prioritise manipulation while discouraging solid personal connections and providing validation to narcissistic individuals to sustain their self-worth contributes to an increase in narcissistic personality disorder. The postmodern business world gives room to a culture of success games in which individuals with narcissistic tendencies discover a setting where they can excel and flourish effectively. Such cultural and social norm shifts have resulted in a society where people are more inclined towards self-centred behaviours.

The unnamed protagonist of Moshfeg is a young woman struggling with deep existential desperation and hopelessness. The novel creates an atmosphere in New York City where individuals focus on self-improvement and rush to reach a perfect version of themselves. It seems apt to express that Moshfeg creates a postmodern Narcissus, adding important psychological implications to Ovid's myth. Moshfegh's commentary on the challenges of people aligns with narcissistic personality disorder, characterised by the pervasive obsession with self-improvement and the quest for an idealised self. The plot may seem quite vogue as the protagonist plans to isolate herself from social life into one year of sleep induced by medical drugs to escape from the current state of meaninglessness. By incorporating such a technological medical detail, Moshfeg tries to show that changes in ego consciousness and cultural self-image require different attitudes toward narcissism. The protagonist is so unconsciously focused on her self-image that she chooses to escape into a drug-induced rest for a year as a form of healing from societal expectations and pressures. Thus, the narrative turns into a story of self-deception and the quest for a sense of self, while the character's loneliness reflects her internal chaos and disjointed sense of identity.

The reader's most peculiar impression of the protagonist is her being a woman who reflects a strong desire to be seen as the absolute centre of the universe. She indicates a self-obsession to a pathological level, while she paradoxically lacks self-esteem and a coherent identity. She continuously feels herself under threat by external social challenges and tries to compensate for them with fantasies of personal metamorphosis. As a young Colombia University graduate woman who works at an art gallery, the protagonist feels emotionally unresponded to and tries to overcome her depression and loneliness through grandiose fantasies. Due to the absence of meaningful interpersonal attachments, the protagonist's fantasies become intense devotion to self-transformation. She strongly believes in her unique ability to transform

beyond ordinary treatments. She disdains everyone around her, including her close circle, her best friend Reva, her ex-boyfriend Trevor, and her psychiatrist Dr. Tuttle. In her comments, she expresses her dislike and condemns their success, leading to their life goals' failure. Her grandiose self-conception is particularly evident in her thoughts about Reva, whom she criticises for emotional vulnerability and lack of sophistication. The protagonist's inner monologues reveal a profound arrogance as she reflects on her coping strategies and life decisions as more refined or insightful than others. She states that:

> Reva would show up at my apartment with a bottle of wine from time to time and insist on keeping me company... I loved Reva, but I didn't like her anymore. We'd been friends since college, long enough that all we had left in common was our history together, a complex circuit of resentment, memory, jealousy, denial and a few dresses I'd let Reva borrow, which she'd promised to dry clean and return but never did. She worked as an executive assistant for an insurance brokerage firm in Midtown. She was an only child, a gym rat, had a blotchy red birthmark on her neck in the shape of Florida, a gum-chewing habit that gave her TMJ and breath that reeked of cinnamon and green apple candy. (Moshfeg, 12-13)

The passage reveals a substantial devaluation of Reva and her personal choices, highlighting a self-obsession with greatness, a sense of self-sufficiency and denial of need for others. This configuration of grandiose self arises from the fantasy of the perfect self of the protagonist. Heinz Kohut likens the idealisation of grandiose self to "super-qualities of the comic strip superheroes" due to the exaggerated qualities of these characters (Siegel, 66). It reveals that the protagonist continuously projects all bad aspects she finds threatening for her social existence while introjecting all good images of herself and others to increase ideal omnipotent self-images. This is a self-idealisation process in which a person views herself as all-good, all-powerful, and wise and can serve as a defence mechanism against personally experienced negative feelings.

While the internalised and fantasised ideal image of the narcissistic self gazes at itself with awe and admiration, the external narcissistic self, in contrast, craves to be the centre of admiration and longs for others to view her with the sense of awe and reverence as they would look at the ideal image instead. The consistent search for approval of Moshhfeg's protagonist is evident throughout the narrative. Even though she distances herself from others, she still desperately looks for reassurance from individuals such as Reva and her therapist. This desire and urge for validation is an essential

hallmark of her narcissistic personality. Her need for admiration, validation and approval goes beyond an insatiable desire for recognition and praise and takes the form of belittling others and their efforts. It serves a defensive purpose, where it defends against the fragile inner self by upholding a facade of control and dominance to hide the vulnerabilities and sensitivity underneath. The narcissistic grandiose self's central trait is its capacity to exert control over others, in which others are used and forced to be mirrored. Moshfeg's protagonist feels a strong disdain towards her friend Reva's feeling of jealousy, while she simultaneously finds comfort in being admired by Reva despite not holding respect for her in return.

> Jealousy was one thing Reva didn't seem to feel the need to hide from me. Ever since we'd formed a friendship, if I told her that something good happened, she'd whine 'No fair' often enough that it became a catchphrase that she would toss off casually, her voice flat. It was an automatic response to my good grade, a new shade of lipstick, the last popsicle, my expensive haircut. 'No fair'. (Moshfeg, 16)

These sentences reveal the desire to witness the grandeur and perfection of the self by a close other. For the protagonist, Reva is important only insofar as it participates in her feeling of perfection; otherwise, Reva has no meaning in itself. This experience is intense for Reva, who is the object of narcissistic control. While Reva experiences difficulty maintaining her standpoint, the protagonist becomes the absolute centre of attention. Heinz Kohut (1966) describes this kind of behaviour as a narcissist's exhibitionistic need in which she yearns to be admired. Although exhibitionism is a normal feeling felt in childhood and necessary for healthy development, in narcissistic personality disorder, it turns into a fantasy of grandiosity. In normal development, it should be integrated into the ego as self-confidence; however, as a result of early traumatic experiences, this early tendency to exhibition becomes a fantasy of power and omnipotence to hide the fragility of the traumatic self.

To be understood and to feel that someone emphatically observes and follows our thoughts, feelings, and experiences is a significant lack in contemporary culture and a crucial deficiency in the narcissist. Moshfeg's protagonist is obsessed with her desires and displays a lack of empathy and concern for the well-being of others. She chooses to disengage herself from any care and concern for her friends' emotions, pain and distress while she deliberately concentrates only on her path to healing and change. More specifically, the protagonist cannot observe herself and regulate self-other awareness (Funder & Harris, 1986). She is not concerned about Reva's needs and emotions, facing her challenges. Although Reva's mother is critically ill in the hospital, she does not care and remains distant from Reva: By this point,

Reva's mother was in hospice care, in and out of consciousness. I was tired of hearing about it. It brought back too many memories. Plus, I knew she would expect me to go to her mother's funeral. I really didn't want to do that. (Moshfeg, 85) This inner monologue of the protagonist shows how her interaction with Reva is characterised by an aloofness and a lack of interest that underscore her difficulty in forming emotional bonds with others. Her apparent lack of concern is remarkable in how she manipulates Dr. Tuttle and other healthcare providers she meets. She treats them as means to accomplish her aims without concern for their welfare or the moral consequences of their behaviour. This insensitivity and exploitation of others highlights her narcissistic personality.

The ego's strength depends on an inner sense of being seen and understood, as the ego can achieve to develop toward greater wholeness and cohesion through external mirroring. Mirroring is particularly crucial in childhood when the mother or caregiver should respond to the infant well enough. If a mother is capable of being sensitive and responsive to the emotional and nurturing needs of the child, the adult child can develop the capacity and willingness to enter the world of others and reflect upon the experiences. In Moshfeg's novel, the protagonist withdraws from engaging in empathic relationships with her friends and parents to avoid losing control and appearing vulnerable. A disturbing coldness and lack of emotion mark her memories of her parent's passing. She gives a poignant and moving account of her feelings about her mother's death through such sentences:

> When she "had her accident," which is how they termed it at the hospital, Peggy was the one to find her. 'Oh, sweetheart,' she said on the phone. 'She is still alive, but the doctors say you should come as soon as you can. I'm so, so sorry.' My knees didn't buckle. I didn't fall to the ground. I was at the sorority house. I could hear girls cooking in the kitchen, chatting about their fat-free diets and how not to 'bulk up' at the gym. 'Thanks for letting me know,' I told Peggy. She was whimpering and snorting. I didn't tell anyone at the sorority house what was happening. I didn't want to deal with the indignity of it all. It took me almost an entire day to get up there. I wrote a final paper for a class on Hogarth on the train. Part of me was hoping my mother would be dead by the time I arrived. (Moshfegh 139)

When her mother dies, she is unable to mourn correctly, revealing her inability to regulate and manage emotions. She reacts with a lack of emotion at the news, and this notable lack of empathy sheds light on the struggle of the protagonist to connect emotionally. Similarly, she describes her father's death in a distant, remote mood, as if she is talking about a stranger:

> I stayed home for a week after my father's funeral. I wanted to do what I thought I was supposed to do—to mourn. I'd seen it happening in movies—covered mirrors and stilled grandfather clocks, listless afternoons silent but for sniffling and the creaks of old floorboards as someone in an apron came out from the kitchen saying, 'You should eat something.' And I wanted a mother. I could admit that. I wanted her to hold me while I cried, bring me cups of warm milk and honey, give me comfy slippers, rent me videos and watch them with me, order deliveries of Chinese food and pizza. Of course, I didn't tell her that this was what I wanted. She was usually passed out in her bed with the door locked. (Moshfegh 136)

The protagonist is unable to mourn and respond to her father's death because of her traumatic early relationship with her parents. The characters with narcissistic personality disorder have generally experienced a lack of mirroring, often stemming from parental ignorance. When parents are emotionally unavailable or unable to concentrate on their child because of stress, anxiety or unresolved trauma, they cannot respond to the children in a way that is useful for their developing sense of self. This lack of response causes them to lose the opportunity for exchange and to understand the social environment as a place of emotional exchange. When the mother cannot do her mirror function, the person will not be able to accept herself as she is; instead, she will search for a look that admires her and integrates her.

Having grown up in an unemphatic and unresponsive, emotionally suppressive environment, the protagonist of the novel cannot give what she could not take from her parents during her childhood. The only view about her mother that is engraved on her memory is that her mother was distant and self-centred emotionally during her childhood. She recalls how her mother was more interested in her looks and status rather than showing love and care towards the feelings and needs of her daughter. The most vivid memory of such neglect is her withdrawal to her room for drinks and pills while leaving her daughter to manage everything alone during difficult times.

> I remember one afternoon, she came out of her room and walked past me where I lay on the floor sobbing. She went to the kitchen, wrote a check for the housekeeper, took a bottle of vodka from the freezer, told me to turn down the television, and went back to her room. (Moshfegh 137)

The protagonist's sentences point out a deep and overwhelming feeling of emptiness, highlighting inadequate love and care during childhood. The

inability to give enough care and attention to the child can be defined as a type of narcissistic parenting where the child continuously feels an obligation to meet the desire of parents for approval. Although the children need to feel supported and encouraged as individuals with unique needs and feelings based on their environment, they maintain the approved image. The main link between the narcissism of her parents and the behaviours of the protagonist stems from the focus of the parents on image and validation rather than authentic emotional closeness and care for her. This situation makes the main character feel overlooked and lacking in connection despite the displays of kindness and love. Her parents also lack a sense of identity, so they are only sensitive to how their daughter likes them. They cannot mirror their daughter's emerging personality; instead, they need to be mirrored by their daughter.

By all means, the capacity to understand and share the feelings of others is an essential indicator of healthy individuation. According to Heinz Kohut (*Analysis of the Self*), individuals learn empathic responses from their parents, the first self objects, through the empathic relationship they build as they need care and love in the early years. The children need the mother or caregiver to respond by watching, observing, and understanding. However, any disruption in this empathic response can lead to a fragmented identity. The image of the unresponsive and unemotional image of the mother is introjected as the ideal ego, and this ego ideal achieves meaning through the projection of the same unresponsiveness upon the parent. Therefore, lack of empathy is the most crucial indicator of an unhealthy sense of self, creating a fragmented and complicated understanding of self and others. Moshfeg's protagonist cannot understand, relate, and resonate with people's emotional experiences, which is crucial for the sense of being understood and valued. She is searching for self-cohesion and meaning through her drug-induced deep sleep. She is unresponsive to the death of her parents, as they were unresponsive to her needs when she was a child. A cohesive and coherent sense of self can be achieved through empathic interrelations and supportive and encouraging relations, but the protagonist feels fragmented and disrupted. Her lack of authentic and proper connections with her parent, her friend Reva, and her therapist emphasises the importance of the fact that her narcissistic personality is the result of her fragmented identity. Her reliance on drugs, beauty products and prolonged sleep is a kind of defence mechanism to soothe her inner turmoil and fragmentation.

The protagonist's self-obsession with her self-image also shows her fragmented self. Besides being a distant, intrusive and judgemental woman who dismisses other people's feelings, the protagonist invests so much energy into what she sees in the mirror and makes a superficial effort to maintain it. In a poignant reflection, she says that:

> This was when my online purchasing of lingerie and designer jeans began in earnest. It seemed that while I was sleeping, some superficial part of me was taking aim at a life of beauty and sex appeal. I made appointments to get waxed. I booked time at a spa that offered infrared treatments and colonics and facials. (Moshfegh 83)

These sentences show how, for the protagonist, appearances seemed to mean more than many other things. This obsession with how she seems ties back to Kohut's concept of fragmented identity (*Analysis of the Self*). The protagonist's ego depends on external validation and material possessions, as she cannot develop a sense of her true self. She is continually looking for an image that would give her back something of herself. As she cannot learn to find a way to exist as oneself and to relate to people as oneself, her beauty regimen and designer wardrobe are efforts to appreciate her reflection. Contrary emotional states exist within her; inferiority feelings and grandiose expressions coexist.

The novel's portrayal of New York City and its inhabitants also enhances the theme of self-obsession, inner turmoil and fragmented identity, highlighting the overwhelming dominance of a culture of narcissism. The city is depicted as an artificial setting that further reveals the void inside the characters. This culture encourages people to pursue self-perfection through fame, wealth, and status instead of cultivating meaningful relationships. The constant display of brands, consumerism, and superficial relationships underscores the widespread sense of isolation. The protagonist describes the superficiality of city life critically:

> I'd moved into my apartment on East Eighty-fourth Street in 1996, a year after I graduated from Columbia. By the summer of 2000, I still hadn't had a single conversation with any of my neighbours—almost four years of complete silence in the elevator, each awkward ride performance of hypnotised space out. My neighbors were mostly fortysomething married people without children. Everyone was well-groomed and professional. A lot of camel-hair coats and black leather briefcases. Burberry scarves and pearl earrings. There were a few loudmouthed single women my age I saw from time to time gabbing on their cell phones and walking their teacup poodles. They reminded me of Reva, but they had more money and less self-loathing, I would guess. This was Yorkville, the Upper East Side. People were uptight. When I shuffled through the lobby in my pajamas and slippers on my way to the bodega, I felt like I was committing a crime, but I didn't care. The only other slovenly people around were elderly Jews with rent-controlled apartments. (Moshfegh 28)

Here is a detailed description of a society fixated on outward image and material achievement. It prioritises appearances and social standing in portraying New York City before 2001's tragic events. The environment is filled with known brand names, a constant stream of celebrity news and superficial activities. The obsession with material possessions and seeking validation from external sources is paramount. The self-description of the protagonist also supports the same superficial environment saturated with self-obsession, seeking validation and consumerism:

> It did comfort me to see that I was still pretty, still blond and tall and thin. I still had good posture. One might have even confused me for a celebrity in slovenly incognito. Not that people cared. I hailed a cab at Union Square and gave the driver the cross streets of Rite Aid uptown. It was already getting dark out, but I kept my sunglasses on. I did not want to have to look anybody in the eye. I did not want to relate to anybody too keenly. (Moshfeg 88)

This passage describes an extreme self-adoration with an aloofness that denies the need for another person. She is wholly oriented towards outer rather than inner beauty. Christopher Lasch defines this commodity-based identity as "a new kind of self-consciousness that has little in common with introspection or vanity" (*The Culture of Narcissism* 29). Moshfegh's protagonist focuses so much on her image rather than her essential parts of self that she can see nothing but a mere reflection of herself everywhere, as Narcissus saw what he saw was a beautiful creature at the pool. The protagonist's goal of one year of hibernation is to search for meaning in life. She believes that as she achieves her goal, she will start living a meaningful life. Her discovery of meaning will depend upon her transformation through deep sleeping. Due to the fragmentation of her self, the protagonist's experience of her inner world is one of emptiness and boredom. It seems fitting to assert that the protagonist's entire attempt is unity and cohesion. Her situation is defined as a common existential one of character disorder in contemporary American society. Even though she shows, on a surface level, self-satisfaction, she is often depressed and complains that life holds little meaning and purpose. Her plan to sleep is one of her many attempts to find herself, such as having affairs with several men without emotional depth and her engagement with old movies and TV shows. However, one year-long hibernation provides a creative potential for the rebirth of the personality, a typical desire for a narcissistic character.

Ottesha Moshfeg's novel ends with a juxtaposition of the 9/11 tragedy advancement. The unnamed protagonist completes her one-year-long drug-induced sleep. Although her existence is characterised by a disconnection from

reality and a longing to detach herself from the community, she awakens from her drug-induced sleep feeling a rush of clarity and optimism that stands in contrast to her earlier emotional turmoil. For Otto Kernberg, narcissists do not have a sense of joy as they cling to a depressed reality. However, after hibernation, the protagonist can achieve that by finding a missing positive and joyful connection to herself. Therefore, the quality of being joyful and feeling a sense of joy can be seen as an essential essence of the healing in the novel. This fresh viewpoint convinces her that her one-year-long rest will become successful, providing hope for the future. She believes that she has gotten rid of traumas and that it is possible to start anew. She reconnects to the "child of joy", and this energy fills her ego with a sense of wholeness grounded within herself and through relating to others (Scwartz-Salant 351). However, the book ends on a note that forces the reader to question the meaning of existence as the protagonist views a video of the 9/11 attacks and recognises her friend Reva entering one of the towers before it falls. Although the protagonist awakens with a new sense of self and becomes enlivened and joyful in her relationship with life, the societal tragedy American society experiences reveals that healing should be a social as well as personal endeavour. This conclusion juxtaposes the protagonist's transformation with a social tragedy, making readers think about the possibility of transformation and how trauma affects our minds. Thus, Moshfeg invites her reader to meditate on the close relationship between personal and collective trauma. Although time and detachment seem to heal the protagonist's wounds, entire societies may experience disasters, and the long-term effects of trauma might cause collective problems.

Conclusion

Moshfegh's novel emphasized a shift away from the traditional view of the individual as living in a private psychological world, attempting in vain to understand and communicate with others. Instead, the postmodern individual is not separated from social and cultural influences but is integrally interrelated and correlated. As such, the individuals' psychology and society's social practices are connected. In other words, the psychological situation of the individuals in the late postmodern society is essentially the result of social and cultural practice. Moshfeg's novel emphasises this close relationship between the postmodern culture of narcissism and the psychology of the individual. Suppose a fragmented identity characterises the postmodern society. In that case, the loss of meaning, disappearance of the objective truth, melancholy and depression, and narcissism, characterised by self-obsession without self-esteem and denial of the need for another person, become the calamity of contemporary society.

Although narcissistic personality disorder is often believed to be challenging to treat as it is associated with the concept of identity, Moshfeg's novel provides an analytical insight, aided by the recognition that an aim of reaching a fresh view of life increases common understanding of the nature of identity structures behind narcissistic personality disorder. The present study, combining both psychological definitions of narcissism and Heinz Kohut's concept of self-psychology, broadens the close connection between psychology and society, using an absurd solution to the issue posed by narcissism and the problem of identity. In the novel, Moshfeg's protagonist provides a unique view of self, something to be searched for, and her journey can be seen as a quest for self-cohesion. Her choice to withdraw from the world by taking drugs to go into a year of rest is an endeavour to repair her fragmented self. Due to her fragmented self under the influence of poor empathy from her parents as the first self objects, the protagonist with narcissistic personality disorder is susceptible to losing strength and energy and is dominated by a lack of interest in her relationships.

The novel's ending reveals the transformation of a narcissist and tells the story of the vulnerability of American society that begins on September 11. It is a reflection on the United States, which has narcissistic and grandiose fantasies of the American dream. The trauma of 9/11 shows how the United States has a fragile self, as the unnamed protagonist does. The early experience of the narcissistic character is that it is physically attacked. As a result, the self withdrew, and a more masochistic attitude developed. After the event of September 11, the United States became a more violent and self-centred nation and attempted to reconstitute its imagined wholeness by denying its vulnerability. Although nations do not have psyches as individuals have, however, it is a time of searching for another meaning for American society. Moshfeg holds a mirror to American society and its place as a global actor and forces readers to consider the ways in which the lives of people are profoundly implicated in the lives of others. Moshfeg emphasizes that there should be an alternative way of looking at the world and the self; it should involve a decentering of self-centred I within personal and societal individuation.

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