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Anger and Hypocrisy in Vigdis Hjorth's *Et norsk hus* – Is Alma Complicit?

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Alma, the protagonist in Vigdis Hjorth's 2014 novel *Et norsk hus*, is a textile artist and makes tapestries. After the successful completion of two commissions and a TV show featuring her work, she receives a phone call, inviting her to create a tapestry as part of an exhibition accompanying the bicentennial celebration of Norwegian independence. This is her most prestigious commission to date, she is offered a fee that far exceeds her expectations, and she is asked to engage with the development of democracy in Norway, but apart from that, she is granted absolute creative freedom. While conducting research for her topic, Alma travels to Fredrikstad, and, while browsing the history section in a second-hand bookstore, she comes across a pamphlet that she picks up on a whim. Written by Ninja B., the pamphlet describes '*morens* […] *uberettigede opphold på psykiatrsik sykehus*' ('her mother's unjustified incarceration in a psychiatric hospital') in Fredrikstad, where the author's mother eventually committed suicide in 1913.[1]

1. Hjorth 2014: 107; 2017: 100. As it is clear from the context when I am quoting from Hjorth's text, immediately followed by Charlotte Barslund's translation, I will only give the page numbers of the original text and its translation from now on.

This pamphlet arouses Alma's interest because of its tone, as it is written in anger and with outrage, and Alma finds herself admiring Ninja B.'s courage to voice her personal views with such passion. Reading the pamphlet causes Alma to reflect on her own anger, and we learn that '*Alma kunne være sint og opprørt i tanke og holdning, men hadde sjelden følt sinne dypt i sitt hjerte, dypt i sin kropp*' ('Alma could be angry and outraged in thought and attitude, but she had rarely felt rage deep in her heart, deep in her very core').[2]

While Alma is envious of Ninja B.'s ability to express anger with such liberty, she realises that she herself has had reasons to be angry in the past, but instead of acting upon it, she had '*båret det inne i seg, latt det bore inne i seg*' ('kept them in, letting them eat her up').[3] She reflects that her own inability to express herself through anger must have to do with the fact that she never had any female role models who were openly angry; she had never experienced '*rasende kvinner, opprørte kvinner*' ('angry women, women who rebelled'), nor could she '*huske å ha vært riktig rasende*' ('remember being properly angry').[4]

Moved by Ninja B.'s strong emotional response to the injustice that her mother experienced, Alma makes the connection to a theory that she had held for some time: '[*E*]*n teori om at jo dypere følelser var dess mer allmenne var de, også gjennom tidene*' ('[A] theory that the deeper the emotions, the more universal they were, and had been throughout the ages').[5] One hundred years later, Alma finds that she can relate passionately to Ninja B.'s anger, and she manages to find inspiration there: this is the kind of social injustice that Alma wants to portray in her tapestry about Norwegian democracy, and she concludes that

2. 109; 102.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. 109; 103.

'*det var en slik følelse som fikk folk til å handle*' ('it was that kind of emotion which spurred people into action').[6]

At the same time, the prospect of anger as an emotional power that has the potential to unite people scares Alma; it is '*skremmende, for hva om* […] *de fattige i verden, asylsøkerne de papirløse romfolket samlet seg sammen og fikk tak i raseriet sitt og* […] *rettet det mot – Alma*?' ('terrifying, because what if […] the world's poor, its asylum seekers and paperless Roma gathered and recognised their common rage and […] aimed [it] at Alma?').[7]

This passage is quoted at length here because, when Alma's voice permeates that of the narrator in free indirect discourse, she addresses two different aspects of anger that, as I will show, are crucial regarding the way in which she acts in, and reacts to, her surroundings. On the one hand, Alma gives the impression that expressing anger is a quality that can be inherited or learned; and because she can recount very few experiential encounters with anger in the past, she is unable to express, or even feel, anger in the present. Instead of learning to express anger from angry women as role models, Alma suggests that she learned to supress her anger because she was used to seeing '*Frustrerte og psykisk forkrøplede* [*kvinner*] *ja, men ikke opprørske*' ('Frustrated and mentally crippled [women] yes, but not rebellious [ones]').[8] This gendered perception of anger implicitly indicates that anger, as an emotion that is freely expressed, is predominantly reserved for men, whereas women, instead of voicing their anger, suppress it, internalise it, or replace it with other emotions. In other words, when women do not express their anger, they can become frustrated or even ill, which, as Alma suggests, is socially more acceptable than a furious woman.

6. 110; 103.
7. Ibid.
8. 109; 102.

On the other hand, Alma describes anger as an affective quality that has the power to move people and bring them together to fight for a common cause. This notion is substantiated by philosopher Alison Bailey, who identifies anger as 'an audible expression of resistance to the suffering of injustice'; and she states that anger 'has a bonding effect – it provides the affective fuel that brings us together and helps us to form cohesive social networks and organized movements'.[9] Instead of interpreting anger, as it is usually done, as a negative quality that can possibly lead to violence and oppression, Bailey views anger as a positive force that can be harnessed in the fight for recognition and political agency in the struggle against the oppression of women.

Alma acknowledges this potentially positive power of anger, but, at the same time, states that she is scared of this very power. When Alma names those who are most vulnerable in any society as possibly uniting – the poor, asylum seekers, and undocumented travellers – she recognises that they have reason to fight against the injustices done to them. However, why would Alma think their anger may be directed against her, unless she is complicit in the injustices that oppress them? Alma's fear suggests that she is aware of her privileges but also afraid of losing them.

In general terms, Devika Sharma describes the predicament of privilege as 'the awkward yet highly ordinary experience of one's privilege being a problem'.[10] This awareness of one's own privilege, as Sharma goes on to say, implies 'a concern about living off, and thus being complicit with, economically and politically exploitative systems and their histories', which possibly 'gives rise to all sorts of ugly thoughts and feelings, and a

9. Bailey 2018: 96, 113.
10. Sharma 2019: 711.

range of gestures and rhetorical strategies for handling them'.[11] Sharma argues further that this form of awareness of one's own privilege is reflected upon in what she calls 'hypocrisy literature' and explains as writing that entails depictions of 'a globally privileged subjectivity that is living with the knowledge that it benefits from and contributes to an unjust world "order"'.[12] The hypocritical elements in hypocrisy literature are not found in the 'fraudulent relationship between a self and its social context', but, according to Sharma, are rooted in the relationship of the privileged subjectivity to itself: 'A moral consciousness regards its own immorality with aversion, apathy, or both'.[13] When it comes to the self-reflections of a privileged protagonist, questions can be asked as to whether these reflections can be viewed as a critical discourse on privilege, or whether the novel itself can be seen as attempting 'a critique of that very system'.[14]

In her reflections on anger, Alma has already shown an awareness of global injustices, and through her fear, she unconsciously admits that she is aware of her own privilege within this global capital system. The question remains, however, whether her privileged position would concern her at all if it did not instigate fear, and if it does, whether it is indeed ugly thoughts and feelings that arise in Alma, and which strategies she uses to handle them. I am convinced that the answer to this question lies in anger; in the anger that Alma, at least until the very end of the novel, is unable to feel and to express, and in those emotions that Alma experiences instead of anger. Therefore, I shall identify those situations where we should expect an angry response, and explore the emotions, as well as the concomitant coping strategies, that replace it.

11. Ibid.: 712, 714.
12. Ibid.: 717.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.: 714.

Sharma states that 'the hypocrisy in hypocrisy literature is the experience of an affective, moral, or political inconsistency that upsets the hypocrite'.[15] The investigation of Alma's affective register will enable me to highlight possible affective, moral, or political inconsistencies in Alma's character, and even if these inconsistencies upset her, so what? Or, to put it less flippantly, Alma's possible awareness of complicity does not necessarily change it, nor her privilege; but can the novel itself contribute to a critical discourse that strives for more justice and equality?

The first few pages of the novel introduce Alma's situation in the narrative present by giving an overview of her history. We learn that Alma separated from her husband when she was thirty-two, that she bought a big house so that her children could stay over regularly in a shared custody arrangement, and that she has to rent out the small flat adjacent to her house because her income as an artist is irregular and dependent on commissions. At the same time, the narrator discloses that Alma values her personal freedom highly, because it allows her to work within a loose structure that she chooses herself. Alma's dependency on the rent as her only regular source of income already gestures towards the first limitation of her personal freedom.

The second limitation is that she feels restricted by personal relationships in general, and in particular by those with her tenants. She wants to avoid anything that would make '*forholdet til leieboeren mer komplisert enn strengt forretningsmessig*' ('her relationship with her tenant more complicated than a purely business arrangement') because, as she thinks, 'å *bli involvert eller kjent med leieboeren*' ('becoming involved with, or having to get to know, her tenant') would make her feel '*ufri*' ('less

15. Ibid.: 718.

free').[16] Usually, we would expect the relationship between landlady and tenant to be a professional one, but as Alma's tenants are also her closest neighbours, she prefers tenants who work long hours and just need a place to sleep – in other words those people who do not make demands on her personal life. However, while Alma states that a professional relationship is all she wants from her tenants, her financial dependence on the regular income from the rent makes her feel restless and anxious; in short, it makes her emotional. When the flat has stood empty for a while, she is prone to making hasty decisions; she chooses her tenants less carefully than she usually would and overlooks the required deposit, which has led to conflict in the past.

This overview seems to prepare the reader for what is to follow: the account of Alma's seven-year-long relationship with the young Polish couple – the woman visibly pregnant on arrival – who move in after the flat has stood empty for a few months, not procuring any income for her through rent payments. Because Alma is relieved that someone moves in at all, she does not insist on the payment of the deposit.

When Karolina Drozdowska discusses the depiction of Eastern Europeans in modern Norwegian literature, she observes that it constructs an image that is based on a handful of prejudices and stereotypes. This is also apparent when analysing *Et norsk hus*: on the one hand, there are 'the ones who "come and stay" (mainly labor force)' and on the other, there are 'the ones who "come and go" (mainly criminals)'.[17] In addition, Drozdowska states that 'Eastern Europeans coming to Norway are almost automatically perceived as cheap labor, taking up jobs such as construction work (stereotypically for males) and cleaning (stereotypically for females)', while

16. 9; 11.
17. Drozdowska 2021: 301.

another characteristic trait specifies that the Polish workers 'do not speak any Norwegian (and very limited English)'.[18] Indeed, when the small Polish family move into Alma's flat, '*førte* [*mannen*] *ordet på sitt gebrokne engelsk*' ('The man did the talking in his broken English'); he is handy around the house and leaves every morning for a presumably similarly manual job, and when he is sent back to Poland to serve a prison sentence, his wife takes up a cleaning job to support herself and her baby daughter.[19]

This information is given to the reader through Alma's consciousness, as the third person narrator's perspective is limited to Alma's, and it is influenced by her prejudices, and derogatory and racist remarks. Alma knows the husband's name, Alan, but not the wife's, because, as she says, she could not be bothered to learn '*det vanskelige navnet hennes*' ('her difficult name'), Slawomira, and therefore, she only calls her '*den polske*' ('the Pole') throughout the entire novel.[20] Slawomira '*var pen, men veldig polsk*' ('was pretty, but very Polish-looking'), and, watching her new neighbours closely from behind her curtains, Alma comments on '*den rare polske pynten i vinduene*' ('the weird Polish decorations in the windows').[21]

Although the rent arrives on time every month and everything seems to go smoothly, in the beginning at least, there are many little things that irritate Alma: they talk loudly, they use too much of the electricity that is included in the rent, they do not recycle, they smoke in the basement near the shared washing machine, and they park their car on the lawn on which Alma asked them not to park. When Alma's adult children come to visit with their own children, they also park

18. Ibid.: 301, 302.
19. 15; 16.
20. 122; 114.
21. 20; 21, 41.

on the lawn and have long hot showers, and Alma is irritated, but she tolerates it. With her neighbours, however, their supposed failings become tightly related to them being Polish, or to their otherness.

When Sara Ahmed discusses her concept of stranger fetishism, she states that 'the (mis)recognition of strangers serves to differentiate between the familiar and the strange, a differentiation that allows the figure of the stranger to appear'.[22] Alma differentiates between her family and those she perceives as other although they live next door to her, and, like this, she singles them out, condemns them for wrongdoing based on their supposed otherness and therefore fetishises them. Instead of feeling anger, Alma feels irritation; and instead of seeking an open conversation, or confrontation, to address the issues that irritate her, Alma makes assumptions, again built on the perceived otherness of the Polish couple and her prejudices, which consolidates the figure of the stranger in her proximity: '*Alma hadde ikke spurt, men gjettet på at de var i Norge for å legge seg opp penger for så å reise tilbake til Polen. For det virket ikke som om de forsøkte å nærme seg det norske*' ('Alma hadn't asked, but she guessed that the Poles must be in Norway to make money before going back home because it didn't seem as if they were trying to learn Norwegian'). On the same page, we learn that Alma thinks that, '*De holdt det norske ut* […] *mens de tjente penger. Kanskje baktalte og hånte de det norske sånn de så de med sin polskhet*' ('They were keeping all things Norwegian out […] while they earned their money. Perhaps they spoke ill of and mocked all things Norwegian as filtered through their own Polishness').[23]

Alma's thoughts display a register of doubt, with words and expressions such as '*gjettet*', '*virket*', '*tenkte*', '*kanskje*' ('guessed',

22. Ahmed 2000: 24.
23. 34; 34.

'seemed', 'thought', 'maybe') or '*sikkert', 'antagelig*' ('certainly', 'presumably') in other instances. Yet, she uses these phrases of uncertainty to reinforce her prejudiced image of the Polish people next door, who, in her view, exploit the Norwegian state without showing a genuine interest in its language and culture. In terms of anger, we see Alma's earlier mentioned reflections confirmed: she can be angry only in her thoughts, which results in a derogatory and exclusionary stream of consciousness, but she has no means to express it.

Alma's personal discourse of xenophobia is accompanied by emotions: irritation, as stated above, and '*ubehag*' ('a sense of unease'), which Alma feels when she cannot avoid meeting her neighbours face to face. She ponders the reasons for this discomfort, and asks herself: '*Fordi hun eide, de leide? Fordi maktbalansen var skjev* […] *Eller at de var så forskjellige, levde så forskjellig, hadde så forskjellige smak?*' ('Was it because she owned what they rented? Because the power balance was unequal […] Or that they were so different, lived so differently, had such different tastes?')[24]

When Alma names an imbalanced power relation as one of the reasons for her unease, she acknowledges how awkward it is when she experiences her own privilege as a problem. Instead of focusing on this economic difference from which Alma benefits, however, she aims her attention again on her neighbours' otherness, which suggests that it is easier for her to feel uncomfortable vis-à-vis her neighbours' difference rather than in relation to her own privilege. We can see clearly how ugly thoughts and feelings arise when Alma becomes aware of the predicament of privilege.

Sianne Ngai describes such ugly feelings as '"semantically" negative, in the sense that they are saturated with socially

24. 22; 22–23.

stigmatizing meanings and values […] and as "syntactically" negative, in the sense that they are organized by trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction, by phobic strivings "away from" rather than philic strivings "toward"'.[25] In the way that Alma utilises her irritation and discomfort, she stigmatises her Polish neighbours with her derogatory remarks, according to the prejudices she holds about them, and instrumentalises her feelings in a move away from them, setting boundaries that keep them at a distance.

How far Alma goes in her practice of stranger fetishism becomes even clearer when we consider that, as Ahmed states, 'The recognisability of strangers is determinate in the social demarcation of spaces of belonging: the stranger is "known again" as that which has already contaminated such spaces as a threat to both property and person'.[26] Indeed, when Alma describes her Polish neighbours as '*bekvemme og hjemme i det som var Almas land, okkuperte det, parasitter*' ('at ease and at home on what was Alma's land, occupying it, the parasites'), they pose, in her eyes, a threat to her own person and property.[27]

Land, in Norwegian, refers of course to the land that Alma owns, but, at the same time, it can also mean country. In this sense, Alma seems to imply that her Polish neighbours do not only contaminate her own space but the whole of the Norwegian state. When she thus identifies with her own land and country, Alma tacitly justifies her differentiation between 'us' and 'them', between 'mine' and 'yours', and displays a sense of entitlement that, in her view, would allow her to judge who does or does not belong, and to exclude that which supposedly contaminates this space.

While Alma's attitude towards her tenants is derogatory

25. Ngai 2007: 11.
26. Ahmed 2000: 22.
27. 160; 149.

and xenophobic, she carries herself with an entirely different demeanour when it comes to her work. She keeps her personal life separate from her work, as if her creativity is a world on its own that her tenants would not understand regardless, as she patronisingly suggests: '*At Alma hadde sin identitet knyttet til sine henders små bevegelser* […] *dette visste de polske ingenting om*' ('How Alma's identity was linked to the tiny movements of her hands […] the Poles knew nothing about that').[28] Alma has the ambition to produce political art and artworks that could instigate social change, or, as she puts it, '*muligens få folk til å handle annerledes enn før bildet*' ('possibly to create something that made people behave differently after they had seen the picture'). Simultaneously, she admits: 'Å, det var *stort tenkt, og for mye å håpe på, men i hvert fall en god intensjon*' ('Oh, these were grandiose thoughts and too much to hope for, but at least her intentions were good').[29]

With these 'good intentions' in mind, Alma reflects critically on society, politics, and the world through her work. These reflections always have a strong personal connection, and therefore, she also questions herself: '*Sånn var det. At når hun utforsket et emne kom hun til å utforske seg selv*' ('It was always thus. When she explored a topic, she ended up exploring herself').[30] While she conducts research for one of her commissions, we learn through Alma's reflections that she used to be a politically active citizen in the past, in debates '*alltid på de svakes side*' ('invariably siding with the underdog'); but that now in the present, she has reached a certain sense of futility, where she feels the vague impetus that she should do something, but that she does not quite know what, or how to go about it: '*Med forstanden visste hun at behovet for radikale endringer var like*

28. 25; 26.
29. 27; 28.
30. 95; 89.

stort nå som før, men hun klarte ikke oppvise noe engasjement, og var skuffet over seg selv og bekymret' ('Common sense told her that the need for radical change was just as great now as it ever was, but she was unable to summon up much enthusiasm, and was disappointed at herself for this and fretted about it').[31] Here, we can determine 'a critical consciousness treading water', or what Sharma describes as a political inconsistency that upsets the hypocrite: on the one hand, Alma would like to move people politically with her artwork, while she herself, on the other, lacks the motivation to be politically active although she deems it appropriate.[32] She seems aware of her hypocrisy and feels bad about herself, but this, however, does not change the fact that she remains inert.

Alma's hypocrisy becomes even clearer when she describes one of her tapestries and its concept. She embroiders the shapes of people with small flames on their chests:

> [S]må glør som kunne flamme opp hvis de ble pustet til og bli et stort bål hvis de bare åpnet seg for hverandre og kom i egentlig kontakt, men det klarte de ikke, og det var så trist for det ventet en stor felles fare.
>
> [T]iny embers that could flare up if you blew on them and turn into a bonfire, if only they would open themselves up to one another and make real contact, but they were unable to do so and that was their tragedy because they were facing great danger.[33]

Everyone's life is in danger '*hvis de altså ikke forsto at de var i samme bilde og måtte samarbeide*' ('unless they realised that

31. 30; 31, 32; 32.
32. Sharma 2019: 720.
33. 52; 50.

they were all in the same picture and had to work together').[34] With this tapestry, Alma seems to make a case for community, solidarity, and humanitarianism, and she relates the message to her audience that only through teamwork and mutual support can change be achieved. While this message suggests that Alma holds the belief that she can transcend her political inconsistency with such an artwork, for the reader, it becomes clear that this stands in stark contrast to Alma's own practices when it comes to, for example, her tenants. In the general and theoretical sense, humanitarianism, or even just empathy for the situations of fellow human beings, seems to work well for Alma, whereas her ideas lose their valence very quickly when it comes to the particular and the personal. In other words, so long as her own status quo remains unchallenged, Alma can create political artworks and tell herself that she has overcome her political inconsistency, but as soon as she is involved with her person and property, different parameters apply.

Her artwork and her private life – Alma's two domains – appear distinct from each other, and yet they are intertwined. Alma's partner, whose name we never learn, comments on his discontent with her independent and nonconforming lifestyle with: '*Det var ikke sånn det skulle være* […] *mellom kjærester*' ('This wasn't how it should be […] between lovers').[35] This direct critique inspires Alma to reflect on relationships between people in general, which she takes up in a tapestry which she works on while she also works on her paid-for commissions at the same time: '*Hvordan skal det være mellom menneskene*?' ('How is it supposed to be then, relationships between people?').[36]

This question appears to be central to the novel; it is repeated several times with minor variations and permeates every aspect

34. Ibid.
35. 75; 72.
36. Ibid.

of Alma's life. How should it be, the novel seems to ask, between Alma and her partner, between Alma and Slawomira? Is it morally acceptable that Alma lives with the independence and freedom that mean so much to her?[37] When Alma's partner challenges her again to lead a life with him that he considers more normal, she '*konsentrerte seg for å få argumentasjonen med for å bruke den i sånn skal det være mellom menneskene*' ('paid close attention as he stated his case in order to use his ideas for her tapestry about relationships between people'); and, as the narrator discloses, '*han misforsto det konsentrerte uttrykket hennes. Trodde det skyldtes et oppriktig ønske om å forstå for å forandre seg*' ('he misinterpreted her expression of concentration. He thought it sprung from a sincere wish to understand in order to change').[38]

Instead of wanting to change her personal life as a compromise for her partner's sake, Alma's interest is focused on her artwork: '*Lage et bilde så han forsto at sånn han mente menneskene skulle være sammen, kunne ikke Alma være sammen med andre*' ('Create a picture so that he would realise that Alma couldn't be with other people like he believed she should').[39] What we see here is the version of Alma who exploits her partner's sincerity for her artistic inspiration. While she does reflect on the novel's central question, she can only express herself in the abstract and indirectly – through her artwork – whereas when it comes to Alma's private life – the particular and finite – she remains silent and inert. It is left to the reader to ponder how it should be between people, between Alma and her partner, in a way that is practically feasible.

I have discussed earlier how Alma also remains inactive regarding those issues that irritate her involving her neighbours

37. Liv Marit Weberg discusses this aspect in more detail in her master's dissertation 2016: 36.
38. 80; 76.
39. Ibid.

– a situation where we might expect Alma to become angry. Instead, she replaces her anger with those feelings that Ngai calls 'unprestigious', such as irritation and discomfort, feelings that are 'explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic, offering no satisfaction of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release'.[40] Put differently, Alma nurtures these negative feelings with a stream of similarly negative and derogatory thoughts but does not find a way to channel these feelings into a solution that may alter the situation.

Towards the end of the novel, however, Alma's financial situation becomes even more strained, and she decides to raise the rent payments in accordance with her tenants' increased electricity consumption, and writes a letter, '*så forretningsmessig hun kunne*' ('as business-like as she could').[41] To Alma's surprise, Slawomira answers her with a letter in Norwegian, in which she disagrees with Alma, and reminds her of her own duties as a landlady: '*Og en ting til. 6* år *make snø dine eiendeler. Det hører til din plikt*!' ('And another thing. 6 years snow clearing your property. That is your duty!').[42] Slawomira's reminder is the first time in the novel that we hear her voice directly; up until this moment, it was only through Alma's consciousness and her biased judgment of them that we were granted a view into the lives of Alma's tenants.

This reminder of her duties makes Alma truly angry, apparently for the first time in her life: '*Nei, hun var ikke forberedt på et anklageskrift, en slik aggressiv tone, utropstegn og to streker under hva som var Almas plikt. Som den polske skulle belære Alma om*?' ('No, she wasn't prepared for accusations, for such an aggressive tone, exclamation marks and two lines under what

40. Ngai 2007: 6, italics in original.
41. 128; 119.
42. 142; 132.

was Alma's duty. How dare the Pole lecture Alma?').[43] Alma is furious over this perceived injustice, and her reaction implies that she is convinced that she has the law on her side.

In her outrage, Alma drinks large quantities of wine and writes a message to Slawomira, drunk and in the middle of the night, telling her to leave. After she has calmed down somewhat, she writes other letters, fills out forms, intends to amend the contract; she demands the missing deposit and sends out a warning which threatens Slawomira with being forcibly removed from the premises. Eventually, Slawomira answers, also in writing, and terminates the tenancy.

While Slawomira lists Alma's shortfalls as a landlady to correct her demands, she expresses simultaneously how sorry she is that their relationship has to end this way: '*Jeg er lei for det, fordi jeg bor ved siden av deg lenger enn 6* år' ('I am sad about this because I live next to you longer than 6 years'); and, further down, she writes: '*Dårlig snakkes i norsk, men jeg er den samme mannen som deg*' ('Barely speak Norwegian, but I am the same man as you').[44] Slawomira is threatened and attacked by Alma, and yet, she remains respectful, reminding Alma of their shared humanity and their equality despite the differences. This, however, only makes Alma angrier, and when Slawomira agrees only to move out once she has received the payment that she thinks she is due, Alma loses her composure and confronts Slawomira, shouting at her after having hammered on her door: '*Nå er det nok* […] *nå har det gått for langt, ropte hun, nå må dere faen meg flytte*!' ('That's enough […] this time you've gone too far, she yelled, you bloody well move out now!').[45]

Afterwards, the feeling of anger does not subside but changes ever so slightly to '*et roligere mer brennende sinne iblandet en*

43. Ibid.
44. 164; 151–152.
45. 168; 155.

sterk gjengjeldelsesforakt for den […] *dumme polske kvinnen*' ('a calmer, more smouldering rage mixed with a strong portion of contempt and revenge for the […] stupid Polish woman'), and, talking herself into an even stronger rage throughout the night, Alma lines up all the radios in her house on the wall she shares with her tenants and '*satte dem så på fullt volum* […] *forberedt på et veldig slag, lengtet nesten etter dets voldsomhet, utløsning*' ('turned the volume to maximum […] prepared for a great battle, almost longing for its violence, its release').[46] Alma's tenants are gone the next morning: so, matter-of-factly, she achieved what she wanted, whereas the emotional release she craves for fails to appear.

Alma views herself as a victim of injustice, and therefore, she considers her anger apt. However, what we see in this scene is not necessarily anger per se but its close cognates: contempt, violence, a sense of rightfulness, and the wish for revenge. In this case, it seems impossible to distinguish between anger and 'whatever behaviour contingently accompanies it', but it is this behaviour, together with Alma's views and her self-righteousness, that blinds her to the fact that it might actually be Slawomira who is treated unjustly, and that the latter might be right when she lists Alma's failures as a landlady in her letter, and the many small things that she did and which Alma took for granted, such as clearing snow and leaves, and collecting Alma's mail while she was travelling.[47]

Only in hindsight does Alma realise how misguided her anger at Slawomira was, and she recalls the words Slawomira used in her letter to her and paraphrases them in her head: '*Dårlig snakkes i norsk, men jeg er et menneske som deg* […] *Det hadde hun ikke lest, ikke sett, ikke forstått, og det var ikke*

46. 172; 159, 173–174; 160–161.
47. Srinivasan 2018: 13.

til å forstå. Hvor alene må hun ha vært i det norske' ('I barely speak Norwegian, but I'm a human being just like you […] Alma hadn't read it, hadn't seen it, hadn't understood it, and that was beyond belief. How alone the Pole must have been in Norway').[48] Now that it is too late, Alma realises that her anger blinded her to the concerns of her fellow human being, that it made her self-centred and indifferent to Slawomira's situation – she was alone in Norway, and had to support herself and her daughter with a cleaning job. What follows are Alma's self-reflections that read like an epiphany, and in which Alma's work and her personal life finally merge:

> *Trodde hun kunne forstå Ninja B.s sinne og Ninja B.s mor, men skjønte ikke en dritt. […] men det handlet jo ikke om andre enn henne, hun presset bare sin egen selvforståelse og sin tankeverden i all dens ufullkommenhet ned over de stakkars sakesløse menneskene hun brukte historiene til, fylte ublutt ut slik det passet henne, for å få det slik hun ville, for et overmot […] sparte seg ikke for noe, og sånn er det, slik er litteraturen og kunsten, det er dens domene og dens privilegium, usynkron med virkeligheten, det var ikke det, men at hun ikke hadde forstått, ikke forsøkt å forstå sin egen nabo, menneskene hun hadde delt hus med.*
>
> She had thought that she could understand Ninja B.'s rage and Ninja B.'s mother, but she understood sod all. […] it had never been about anyone but her; she had just imposed her own views and her own inadequate world of ideas on poor defenceless people whose stories she had exploited, shamelessly embellishing them to suit her purpose, to get the outcome she wanted, what hubris […] she had taken what she wanted because that's what literature and art do, that's

48. 181; 167.

> their domain and privilege, out of sync with reality, but that wasn't the real problem, the real problem was that she had failed to understand, that she hadn't even tried to understand her own tenant, the people she shared a house with).[49]

Sharma argues that the hypocrisy portrayed in literature is 'the judgment passed by a critical consciousness on its own moral inconsistency'.[50] This is precisely what Alma is doing here; she becomes aware of her own 'moral inconsistency', and she judges herself harshly for it. She also realises that her hypocrisy permeates every aspect of her life, including her work and her relationship, especially so considering the exploitative manner with which she approached both. Quite rightfully, she questions how appropriate her anger actually is when we learn that '*når hun selv for første gang ble sint, øste hun det uhemmet ut over en maktløs polsk kvinne og det lille barnet hennes, hva kunne hun bidra til et jubileum om demokrati?*' ('when she herself got properly angry for the first time, she had vented her rage on a defenceless Polish woman and her little child, what contribution could she possibly have to make to celebrate democracy?').[51] Indeed, it is the awareness of an affective, moral, and political inconsistency that upsets Alma, and she destroys the work she has done so far for the anniversary tapestry.

Once she has burned the cut-up pieces, she feels '*den takknemligheten som følger når man har fått og gjennomlevd en fortjent straff*' ('the gratitude that follows when you have suffered and lived through a well-deserved punishment').[52] Although Alma has the impression that she punished herself appropriately, the fact remains that she failed a fellow human

49. 183; 168.
50. Sharma 2019: 718.
51. 183; 169.
52. Ibid.

being and that this punishment is also an act that is related to her own concerns but does not engage with Slawomira in any way. Nevertheless, it is Slawomira who ultimately has the last word when she responds to a text message from Alma with: '*I avisen det står at du er kulturell person. Jeg har en annen mening*' ('In the newspaper, it says you are a cultural person. I have a different opinion').[53] This is not just an opinion, as this answer seems to imply, because Slawomira knows better than the newspaper as she has experienced Alma's inconsistencies first-hand, while she herself retained her integrity despite her difficult situation and Alma's unjustified rage.

Nevertheless, the reader never learns what becomes of Slawomira, and it remains open to interpretation whether Alma's epiphany actually changes anything, be that her exploitative attitude or her racist approach towards a perceived difference. The second part of the novel, consisting of the last three pages, suggests that Alma's prejudices have not, in fact, changed; she renovates the flat, signs a contract with '*et norsk firma*' ('a Norwegian company') because for her, this is '*det tryggeste av alt*' ('the best possible outcome'), and when '*to smilende polakker*' ('two smiling Poles') move in, Alma comments to herself: '*Livet er uforutsigelig og det gåtefulle like i nærheten, vegg i vegg*' ('Life is unpredictable and the mystery is just next door').[54]

When Sharma investigates hypocrisy literature, she is interested in 'the ways in which forms of self-reflexive discourse may or may not serve as critical discourse'.[55] Indeed, the whole novel constitutes a form of self-reflexive discourse, including the protagonist's realisation of her own hypocrisy; of her affective, moral, and political inconsistencies, and of her anger as being inappropriate and rooted in self-righteousness.

53. 188; 174.
54. 189; 175.
55. Sharma 2019: 720.

What Alma does not question, however, is the socio-economic difference between them.

At one point, she looks up Slawomira's tax return and finds out: '*hundre og femogtjue tusen kroner hadde hun tjent* året *før. Det kunne ikke stemme, hadde hun ikke fast jobb? Hun jobbet sikkert svart*' ('she had earned 125,000 kroner last year. So little couldn't be right, after all she worked full-time? She was probably doing cash-in-hand jobs on the side').[56] Instead of trying to understand what it must be like to live on the breadline in one of the most expensive countries in the world, Alma reverts to her prejudices, and the systemic economic imbalance between the two women remains unchallenged, and so does Alma's complicity with this imbalance. In her epiphany, Alma laments that she failed to understand her tenant, but this failure does not seem to include the economic power imbalance between them, from which Alma benefits. When Alma's systemic privilege – one of the most glaring differences between her and Slawomira – is taken for granted, how can the novel be seen as critical of the hypocrisy and complicity that it portrays? Or, to put it differently, when the novel can be seen as a self-reflexive discourse of recognition, does this recognition actually signify anything?

I shall draw on Ahmed's insights from a different context in an attempt to answer these questions. In 'Declarations of Whiteness', Ahmed discusses the extent to which it is possible for systemically privileged people to act or speak out against a system from which they benefit, in this case white middle-class people, and racism. One of Ahmed's arguments is that 'if we recognize something such as racism, then we also offer a definition of that which we recognize. In this sense, recognition produces rather than simply finds its object.'[57]

56. 180; 166.
57. Ahmed 2004: 17.

What Alma recognises through her reflections is, at least in part, her privileged position and her hypocrisy. According to Ahmed's statement, Alma's process of recognition would produce a realisation of this very privilege and hypocrisy rather than undo it. But when Alma undoes the tapestry that she worked on while she hypocritically exploited other people, does she simultaneously undo her hypocrisy? It would be difficult to argue that she does because all she undoes is feeling bad about herself, but she can at least begin to feel better after she has shown remorse and punished herself – she proves to herself that at her core, she means well.

Ahmed also addresses such ostentatious displays of shame, albeit in the context of racism; she argues that

> Declarations of shame can work to re-install the very ideals they seek to contest. […] they may even assume that the speech act itself can be taken as a sign of transcendence: if we say we are ashamed, if we say we were racist, then 'this shows' we are not racist now, we *show that we mean well*. The presumption that saying is doing – that being sorry means that we have overcome the very thing we are sorry about – hence works to support racism in the present.[58]

In line with this argument, Alma, by not only declaring her failings but also by acting upon them by destroying her artwork, might try to convince herself that she has transcended that which she recognised as a problem – her hypocrisy and lack of understanding. However, she only recognises and acts upon the problem in the abstract, or rather, her supposed transcendence is only a notion, while her status quo does not change, and her privileged position remains intact. She submits a piece of her

58. Ibid.: 27, italics in original.

embroidery work that was an unused by-product of a previous commission, so her reputation as an artist does not suffer, and, as the ending of the novel suggests, her xenophobic sensibilities remain unaltered. In short, Alma presumes that she has overcome her hypocrisy by feeling apologetic, while, in fact, she never apologises to Slawomira, and nothing changes as far as the reader is aware.

While Alma is unaware of the fact that her own hypocrisy and complicity do not change through one act of self-inflicted punishment, her delusions are apparent to the reader: she reveals herself to the reader with her declaration, and by stating how bad she feels about herself; and while she appears to convey to the reader that she is prepared to do something about it, we know how hypocritical this intention is.

The narrative perspective further contributes to undermining Alma's credibility: with Alma being the narrator's sole focaliser, the reader experiences an intense immersion into her consciousness and follows her self-reflections closely. These self-reflections are exaggerated to an extent that they verge on the obsessive, and thus, instead of inviting us to develop an understanding for Alma despite her failings, I would argue that it distances us from her. And when Slawomira's voice is heard towards the end of the novel, she is granted a moment of subjectivity which, of course, only further highlights Alma's failings. In this sense, Alma, as the protagonist, epitomises a form of hypocrisy culture in which she gives the impression that she is doing something about it, while, in fact, nothing changes. By throwing this hypocrisy culture into sharp relief, the novel itself, however, can be considered as supporting a discourse that is critical of precisely such a culture.

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