Elisabeth Oxfeldt

“I Come from Crap Country and You Come from Luxury Country”: Ugly Encounters in Scandinavian Au-Pair Novels

In the new millennium, the use of au pairs in the Scandinavian countries has increased steadily.¹ Women hire au pairs because of a perceived time bind; without help, the woman in the Scandinavian household is likely to reduce her workload outside the home (Liversage, Bille, and Jakobsen 2013, 16). This may come as a surprise to those who have come to think of the Scandinavian countries as particularly happy and egalitarian. British journalist Helen Russell, for instance, decided to move to Denmark for a year to explore Danish happiness. Attending a language class, she finds herself surrounded by among others, half a dozen Filipino girls working as au pairs. Russell wonders: “‘Isn’t everyone supposed to be equal in Denmark? Aren’t Danes supposed to do their own cleaning and child rearing?’” (2015, 69). The answer according to a 2013-report on the Danish au-pair program is “No”. Public institutions take care of children during work hours, and, increasingly, au pairs take care of house cleaning in general, and children during stressful moments at home, such as mornings and right before dinner (Liversage, Bille, and Jakobsen 2013, 16).² As the report points out, this is far from unproblematic. While the term “au pair” suggests that the relationship between host family and au pair encompasses a cultural exchange between equals, in reality it is full of violations and grey areas.³ Subsequently, the au

¹ In Denmark, for instance, the Au-Pair Convention (established by the European Council in 1969) was ratified in 1972. In the 1990s it was broadened to include au pairs from third-world countries (Liversage, Bille, and Jakobsen 2013, 29). Over the last 10-15 years, Denmark has had the following increase in au pair residence permits: 1996 (318 au pairs), 2002 (1156 au pairs), 2011 (2409 au pairs) (Liversage, Bille, and Jakobsen, 27).

² This especially pertains to households in which both parents are highly educated, have jobs and above-average incomes, and two or more young children (Liversage, Bille, and Jakobsen 2013, 9, 14-15).

³ The relation is originally conceived and fronted as a horizontal, “au pair” relationship, but most often, a host family primarily engages an au pair in a vertical relationship. Even if a host family is primarily interested in cultural exchange, the relationship maintains a fundamental, vertical relationship since the au pair is reliant on the family for being able to stay in the country and not vice versa (Liversage, Bille and Jakobsen 2013, 173).

pair is a figure who continually receives much attention in politics and the media as she (usually a female) evokes questions of global inequity.

Literary texts also explore the relationship between host families and their au pairs. Contemporary novels from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, however, frame the au-pair issue not only as a general question of class inequality (as suggested by Russell above), but also as a gender issue. Domestic work, including the hiring and use of au pairs, is primarily the woman's responsibility (cf. Liversage, Bille, and Jakobsen 2013, 16); she is the one who has to find a replacement so that she may work fulltime and thus contribute to the gender-equal ideal of the Scandinavian welfare state. Yet, hiring a less privileged woman to carry out domestic tasks evokes guilt and unease rather than happiness. Hence, in the novels we find a guilt-triggering au-pair figure raising questions of femininity, feminism and global sisterhood. The novels may be apocalyptic, chick-lit funny, or dead-pan realistic, yet they are all steeped in irony, indicative of ambivalence, uncertainty, and what Sianne Ngai calls "ugly feelings" (Ngai 2005). As opposed to the more pragmatically perceived real-life circumstances described in the Danish au-pair report, we find that the fictional motivation for getting an au pair is the protagonist's uncomfortable mixture of altruism, welfare-state ennui, existential emptiness, as well as the sense that she needs more time to live up to the ideal of what a woman should be at work, at home, and in the bedroom. It is a mixture of feelings of emptiness and inadequacy that points to an overall lack of (affective) happiness in the so-called happy countries.⁴ And rather than solving the problem, the au-pair figure ends up illuminating it – leaving further reflection and possible action up to the reader.

⁴ As pointed out in the introductory article to this volume, Scandinavians often score low on affective happiness (considering how they felt yesterday) while they score high on evaluative happiness (being overall satisfied with life). This is what the first *World Happiness Report* from 2012 showed – in particular for the case of Denmark. Denmark was ranked no. 1 on the world-happiness scale, but no. 100 on GWP's survey of "Average Happiness (Yesterday) by Country" (Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs 2012, p. 46)

In the following I analyze Sara Kadefors' *Fågelbovägen 32* (2006; Paradise Lane⁵), Selma Lønning Aarø's *Jeg kommer snart* (2013; *I'm Coming* [2015]) and Kirsten Thorup's *Tilfældets gud* (2011; *The God of Chance* [2013]) in light of the happiness discourse of the *World Happiness Reports*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russel Hochschild's notion of *global woman*, and, finally, Ngai's conceptualization of "ugly feelings" in order to show how alleged Scandinavian virtues such as happiness, social equality, and gender equality are questioned as postfeminist issues in literary works that tend to produce an affective counter-discourse to the scientific happiness discourse of research institutions and reports that focus on evaluative happiness.⁶ Here, the term "postfeminism" refers to a continuation of feminism that has attained a new level of reflection by incorporating points made through postmodernism, poststructuralism and postcolonialism.⁷

Theoretical Perspectives

The *World Happiness Reports* focus on global inequality with the first report's two opening sentences reminding us: "We live in an age of stark contradictions. The world enjoys technologies of unimaginable sophistication; yet has at least one billion people without enough to eat each day" (Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs 2012, 3). And just to ensure that the reader sees the connection between privilege and lack thereof, the report states, that "the lifestyles of the rich

⁵ It seems Brandt New Agency has purchased the rights to translate the novel into English but that it is not on the market yet.

⁶ Cf. the introductory article to this volume.

⁷ As opposed to second-wave feminists who had a tendency to universalize the white Western woman, postfeminists tend to view gender from an intersectional perspective, taking into consideration race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and other markers of identity. Ann Brooks suggests that there are two types of contemporary postfeminisms. One is a *popular* postfeminism, the gist of which is that feminism has pushed women into wanting too much for their own good (Brooks refers to Lynne Alice on this point); the other is postfeminism "framed within the feminist academic community" inspired by postmodernists, poststructuralists and postcolonialists (Brooks 1997, 3-4). Both types are relevant for the study of contemporary au-pair novels.

imperil the survival of the poor” (4). Ehrenreich and Hochschild’s *Global Woman* (2002) considers this theme of inequity from a feminist perspective, investigating “the female underside of globalization” (3). The fact that the use of au pairs and other personal service workers is steadily increasing in Scandinavia is representative of First-World countries where women, as Ehrenreich and Hochschild point out, tend to attain gender equality by leaving the “dirty work” to women from less privileged parts of the world: “The lifestyles of the First World are made possible by a global transfer of the services associated with a wife’s traditional role—child care, homemaking, and sex—from poor countries to rich ones” (4). This means that the hard-working and ambitious women of the world are getting together, yet not as sisters and allies, but “as mistress and maid, employer and employee, across a great divide of privilege and opportunity” (11).

Once they are represented in literature, the encounters, as indicated above, become “ugly”, with the texts focusing not only on the suffering Other, but also on the Scandinavian woman marked by stress, irritation, jealousy, a nagging sense of inadequacy, self-irony, self-deprecation and what to some degree comes across as extreme narcissism. Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings* (2005) focuses on how the emotions evoked under these circumstances work aesthetically in representations; her book is a series of studies “in the aesthetics of negative emotions, examining their politically ambiguous work in a range of cultural artifacts” (1). By “negative emotions”, Ngai refers to ugly feelings experienced by people in “ambivalent situations of suspended agency” (1) – the kinds of feelings I just described as marking the Scandinavian protagonist. The ugly feelings produce a sense of emotional confusion and disorientation characteristic of our late capitalist times (5). They are also noncathartic, “offering no satisfactions of virtue [...] nor any therapeutic or purifying release” (69). They are captured in works that rather than depicting and evoking great

emotions like wrath – and rather than arousing the sympathy and empathy of the reader through a melodramatic or sentimental style – draw the reader into a universe characterized by irony, ambivalence and an apparent lack of morals. The novels, overall, express a sense of impotence in a neocapitalist era where individuals are uncertain of how they may change the world.

Ngai maintains a feminist perspective as she acknowledges that several of the ugly feelings she examines are feminized and tend to be attributed to women, not least the feeling of envy. Envy is particularly relevant in situations where women come together as haves and have-nots. Yet rather than dismissing it as an ugly female emotion, Ngai maintains that envy “lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities, even though it remains the *only* agonistic emotion defined as having a perceived inequality as its object” (128). The feeling of envy, as we shall see, often figures in au-pair novels. Yet, as Ngai indicates, it serves more to question what a woman should desire, than to affirm a preexisting feminine ideal.

Sara Kadefors’ Feminist Realism

The uneven power relation, the lack of sister solidarity, and the uncomfortable aspect of being a privileged member of one of the world’s wealthiest and “happiest” welfare-state nations is strongly expressed in Sara Kadefors’ *Fågelbovägen 32*. In her article “Att sätta medelklassens problem under debatt” (2011), Åsa Arping situates the novel within a century-long tradition of middle class (or bourgeois) literature, written primarily by women. As Arping argues: “Genom hela den här traditionen löper en övergripande fråga: hur ska vi kunna leva ett fullvärdigt liv som frigjorda, lyckliga (och lyckade) och ansvarstagande människor?” (73) [One main question runs through this entire tradition: How can we live satisfactory lives as liberated, happy (and

successful) and responsible human beings?]. The question of how to be happy, in other words, is not new. Yet, whereas women of the 1800s were eager to demonstrate their respectability as morally correct mothers and (house) wives, contemporary middle class women gain respectability on more individualistic grounds: “Det viktigaste här är inte att göra rätt för sig, vara ‘hel och ren’ och hålla snyggt hemma – de klassiska arbetaridealerna – utan snarare att vara politiskt och socialt ‘medveten’, att kunna stå för sina livsval och att ta ansvar för sin egen lycka och framgång” (77) [Here, the most important thing is not doing the right thing, being “whole and clean” and keeping a pretty home – the classic ideals of the worker – rather, one has to be politically and socially “conscious”, being able to stand up for one’s life choices and take responsibility for one’s own happiness and progress]. Hence, the question of happiness has become a question of self-realization in a social and political context where one is accountable to oneself and others for individual choices.

Fågelbovägen 32 is about high-achieving Karin. She works as a doctor at a hospital, is married with children, and volunteers at an underground clinic for immigrants without valid identification documents. Working with illegal immigrants is altruistic, politically correct, but might also satisfy an (embarrassing) need in a world that apparently has become too safe and predictable:

Kanske har förortskliniken blivit ett substitut för Afrika. Förr räckte det att åka ner och arbeta några månader för att få behovet tillfredsställt, *behovet* som man inte talar högt om, särskilt inte inför engagerade kollegor. Att tragiska människoöden blir till något så ytligt som spänning i hennes svenska vardag låter inte bra (8).

Perhaps the clinic in the suburbs had become a substitute for Africa. Before it was enough to go down there and work for some months to have one’s need satisfied, the *need* one

doesn't talk about out loud, especially not in front of engaged colleagues. The fact that tragic human fates turn into something as superficial as excitement in her Swedish everyday life does not sound good.

Karin, in other words, carries out socially important work, but questions her own motives. The initial adverb "kanske" [perhaps], suggesting affective disorientation, is significant for so-called ugly feeling. It is "a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about *what* one is feeling" (Ngai 2005, 14). Karin feels a sense of satisfaction, but her meta-feeling tells her that the satisfaction may derive from a self-serving urge for excitement and not just from an altruistic urge to help the needy.

One evening at the clinic, Karin encounters a sick Moldovan woman. It turns out that this woman, Katerina, works as an au pair and is grossly exploited by her Swedish host family. Karin wants to do good and brings her home in order to employ her as an au pair in her own house. The problems, however, accumulate as it turns out that Karin cannot legally employ Katerina as long as she is an illegal immigrant in Sweden. The situation gets worse when the young, beautiful au pair develops a closer relationship to Karin's husband and children than Karin herself has. And, finally, the state of tension and discomfort peaks when Karin realizes that Katerina has left her own children in Moldova in order to make money in Sweden. The novel clearly explores the situation described by Ehrenreich and Hochschild, in which the ambitious women of the world come together - "the career-oriented upper-middle-class woman of an affluent nation and the striving woman from a crumbling Third World or postcommunist economy" – yet, they come together as mistress and maid, as employer and employee, rather than as "sisters and allies" (11). As Katerina puts it: "Jag kommer från skitland och du kommer från lyxland. Det går inte att ändra på" (Kadefors, 354) [I come from crap country and you come from luxury country. There

is no way of changing that]. And Karin is full of feelings of guilt and disgust at her own excess and ”äckliga privilegier” (338) [disgusting privileges].

The novel ends with Karin’s mental breakdown. The two women’s issues that have finally been discussed, but not solved, are 1) whether the Nordic woman should choose to be a good mother or a good fellow human being – with the understanding that she cannot be both (cf. Arping 72), and 2) whether the affluent Nordic woman and the poor “Other” can ever meet as equals – as friends. The closing scene depicts Katerina and Karin on their way to Moldova. They have talked through everything and want to remain part of each other’s lives. Karin just hopes she will not feel so distressed by Katerina and her family’s poor living standard that she has to move into a hotel. Then again, Katerina might just accept that. The divide of privilege and opportunity remains, but on a personal and emotional level, the two women are in the process of narrowing the gap.

Selma Lønning Aarø’s Chick-Lit Framing of a Postfeminist Issue

Norwegian Selma Lønning Aarø published *Jeg kommer snart* in 2013. This novel also sets an ironic focus on the au-pair dilemma. In her hectic everyday life, Julie feels that she fails as a wife, mother and career woman (she is a freelance author). Hiring Ludmilla from Ukraine may be a way of attaining an ideal, harmonic family idyll. Again this leads to irritation, jealousy and envy when her husband and children end up preferring Ludmilla’s company and cooking to Julie’s.

The postfeminist chick-lit-devices and comic elements are given more prevalence in this work as Aarø lets Julie despair that she is not the perfect woman because she has never had an orgasm. The plot covers one week during which Julie locks herself into her room with the dildo Mr. Rabbit while the rest of her family stands on the other side of the door, wondering whether she is

going to come soon (120/146).⁸ The novel thus builds on traditional feminist topics regarding women, gender, sexuality, identity and ideals. And it takes a step into the global-woman issue by depicting the relationship between Julie and Ludmilla.

Everything about Ludmilla irritates Julie – her perfume, her grinning boyfriend, Michael, and her sighing (which, ironically, is explained as an Eastern European habit, rather than a sign of, say, weariness) (188/238). Ludmilla and Michael, in her view, represent low-class, bad-taste Eastern-Europeanism. Yet, as today's servant class, they are also sexualized. Julie views Michael as her potential Strindbergian Jean (189/240). One day she arrives home and hears noises from Ludmilla's room: "Ludmilla stønner, skriker. Michael skriker" (191) ["Ludmilla is moaning and crying out. Michael is crying out" (242)]. Julie is once more confronted with her failure to live up to the ideal of a perfect woman. She fires Ludmilla as soon as she can and finally realizes that she does not really care about her "sexual dysfunction disorder" (194/245). Why should she? Her husband is the one she imagines is unhappy about her lack of orgasms, thinking it reflects poorly on his masculinity. This, she reasons, will cause an imbalance in their relationship, which in the long run will lead to melancholy or divorce (205/259-60). Julie wants neither melancholy nor divorce: "Jeg vil bare være lykkelig. Er det for mye forlangt?" (205) ["I want to be happy. Is that too much to ask?" (260)]. Julie embraces what Sara Ahmed calls the figure of "the happy housewife" for whom "any deviation from gender roles defined in terms of women being trained to make men happy is a deviation from the happiness of all" (Ahmed 2010, 55). Julie primarily wants to make her husband happy: "Jeg tenker på Ludmilla og simulerer en perfekt orgasme. Faktisk har jeg savnet å fake. Jeg har savnet å kunne glede A [her husband], å gjøre ham lykkelig på denne måten" (206) ["I think about Ludmilla and fake the perfect orgasm. I've missed faking.

⁸ In these citations, the first number refers to the original-language version and the second number to the English translation.

I've missed being able to give A [her husband] something to make him happy in that way" (260)].

In the novel's final scene, Julie is awakened by her daughter's: "Kan du komme, mamma?"

(206) ["Can you come, Mommy?" (261)]. This time Julie, whose main focus is once again on the

nuclear family, decides that this is the inflection of the phrase that matters ("coming" in the sense

of being there for her family) and answers: "Det er klart jeg kan" (207) ["Of course I can" (261)].

The ideology of the happy housewife is chosen above that of the feminist killjoy at a point in

history when, as Ahmed points out, "the happy housewife retains its force as a place holder for

women's desires and could even be said to be making a return" (Ahmed 52).

As opposed to Karin, Julie never hired Ludmilla as a do-good gesture towards an Other, and has

no intentions of befriending her, a fact that makes her motivation for hiring an au pair the most

realistic of our three examples.⁹ The ideal of global sister solidarity does not exist in her world.

Still, it exists in the norm of the work and in its encounter with the reader who is left wondering

at Julie's self-centered behavior. When Julie fires Ludmilla, she feels a *schadenfreude* the reader

hardly identifies with. For all the reader knows, Ludmilla – who has lived up to her part of the au

pair contract – may now have to return home without having gained the opportunity to learn

Norwegian and gain further education.¹⁰ The topic of the inequality between the "happy"

⁹ Similarly, the au pairs, in most cases, are mainly economically – rather than culturally – motivated. In Denmark, most hired au pairs are from the Philippines (81% of those getting residence through the au-pair program in 2011). The second largest group of au pairs arrives from the former Soviet Union. Ukrainians, in fact, were the second largest au-pair group in Denmark in 2011 (4% of those attaining residence). Au pairs from former Soviet Union, however, are to a larger extent motivated by the possibility of attaining new experiences abroad than au pairs from the Philippines (Liversage, Bille, and Jakobsen 2013, 17). The Danish report underlines that au-pair circumstances are very similar in Norway (14; 43). Hence, Ludmilla does not come across as a far-fetched literary case.

¹⁰ The au-pair ideology is tied to an exchange, not only of work for money, but of work for a weekly allowance and an opportunity to participate with a family in a foreign, desirable culture. Education is often part of the package, with the au pair attending school, at least to learn the language spoken in the host country. As phrased on the Norwegian UDI's (The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration) website for au pairs: "Som au pair kan du øke språkkunnskapene dine og få bedre kjennskap til det norske samfunnet ved å bo hos en familie. Til gjengjeld bidrar du med lettere husarbeid og/eller barnepass for vertsfamilien" [As an au pair you can improve your language skills and understanding of Norwegian society by living with a family. In return, you contribute with light domestic chores and/or babysitting for the host family]. <http://www.udi.no/skal-soke/au-pair/> (read 03.03.2015).

Scandinavian woman and the hardworking global woman is treated more satirically in Aarø's novel, but the underlying shame, guilt, and unease remain the same.

Kirsten Thorup's Apocalyptic Melodrama

If we turn to Danish literature, we find the ultimate example of an au-pair novel in Kirsten Thorup's *Tilfældets gud*. Ana (short for Mariana) is in her 40s, is single, has chosen her career over having children, and works for an international finance company, Rower. Suffering from stress, she is sent on a vacation to Gambia. Here she meets 15-year-old Mariama who sells snacks to the tourists on the hotel beach. As in the case of Kadefors' novel, the names of the two women (Karin-Katerina; Mariana-Mariama¹¹) suggest that they may be kindred spirits. In fact, Ana goes as far as to consider Mariama her missing half:

Mariama var blevet en del af hendes selvforståelse [...]. I Mariama havde [hun] fundet sin sjæl, [...] den manglende brik hun havde ledt efter i sin individuelle udvikling henimod at blive "et helt menneske" [...]. Hun fik pludselig en klar fornemmelse af, at Mariama var alt det hun ikke var, hendes platoniske halvdel som hun i tidernes morgen var blevet skilt fra. (50)

Mariama had become part of her image of herself [...]. In Mariama she had found her soul, [...] the missing piece she had been searching for in her individual development towards becoming 'a whole person'. She suddenly had a clear intuition that Mariama was everything she was not, her platonic other half which she had been separated from at the dawn of time. (45)

¹¹ Thorup's choice of names also enforces the idea that Ana represents body and materialism, while *Mariama* represents soul and spirituality (from Latin *anima*, meaning soul). In addition, the choice allows for an intertextual allusion to Klaus Rifbjerg's *Anna (jeg) Anna* (1970), when Mariama exclaims: "Ana, my Ana" (149/135).

Regarded as a childish, soulful, poor Other, Mariama becomes a variant of the black person needed by the white person to make him or her complete. Ana's attitude is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's mocking imitation of the white man's voice: "From time to time when we are tired of all that concrete, we will turn to you as our children [...]. In a sense, you reconcile us with ourselves" (2008, 111). In Ana's mind, however, this is about doing good and she decides to sponsor Mariama's schooling in Gambia. When this proves impossible, Ana helps her protégée immigrate to London where she can work as an au pair at her friends' house while also attending college.¹² Ana, who meanwhile plans on relocating to her company's London office, strives to find a suitable balance for her involvement in Mariama's life. She is caught between ugly and confused drives of altruism and narcissism. On the one hand, she wants to "do good" as a sponsor in a businesslike manner; on the other hand, she thinks of Mariama as a child, a daughter, a sister, and a friend, wanting Mariama to fulfill her life by developing a close – but not too close – emotional relation to her. Towards the end of the novel, the genre develops from realism towards an apocalyptic end, evoking Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1885/1902) in the midst of London.¹³ Mariama has fled from her white benefactors and has decided to live as an illegal refugee in London among other Africans. Meanwhile, Ana falls victim to the afflictions of the affluent. As Jeffrey Sachs points out in the 2012 *World Happiness Report*, "affluence has created its own set of afflictions and addictions", including psychosocial disorders, and addictions to

¹² The novel is divided into three parts of which the first takes place in Gambia, the second in Copenhagen, and the third in London. Ana and Mariama are together in parts one and three. One reason for moving the plot from Copenhagen to London may be that it allows Thorup to develop a postcolonial theme incorporating a fair share of *Heart-of-Darkness* intertextuality.

¹³ The novel is constructed around a series of inversions, thus Ana's "heart-of-darkness" experiences in Gambia are matched by similar hallucinogenic "heart-of-darkness" experiences in London. For a further analysis of inversions in the novel, see Veisland 2013. Initially Ana thinks of Africa in terms of an eerie "heart of darkness" (25/22) and towards the end of the novel, Conrad's novel is evoked once more, both through the apocalyptic London-scene and through discussions of how to avoid the trap of "the white man's burden" (260/236).

shopping and gambling (Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs 2012, 4).¹⁴ Ana, who started out suffering symptoms of stress, ends up losing her sense of purpose at work, does not get rehired by Rower in London, suffers angst and paranoia, and turns increasingly to alcohol, medication, and gambling. In the novel's penultimate scenes she reaches a social bottom as she roams around looking for Mariama in the streets of London, which suddenly strike her as inundated by black people. In a psychedelic sequence, Ana ends up "et sted ude i fremtiden, hvor alle nationaliteter var smeltet sammen til én mangfoldig menneskehed" (292) ["at some point in the future where all nationalities had fused into one multifarious humanity" (266)]. At this point, she encounters Mariama in line at a soup kitchen and they see each other as equals. While Mariama experiences this as liberating, Ana turns violent and shoves Mariama to the ground, a gesture that reasserts her superiority in the most primitive way.

In a final tableau we find Ana dressed in a new silk gown, at the Ritz Casino on Picadilly Square. Here she has gambled and lost thousands of pounds, but seems confident in her luck. Arrogantly and desperately she wants to reassert an order of chance and inequality in which she comes out the winner, not just of money, but also of Mariama: "Hvis hun vandt den store gevinst i Ritz, ville hun også vinde Mariama tilbage" (313) ["If she won jackpot in the Ritz she would also win back Mariama" (285)]. With Homi Bhabha, we could say that Ana as a white colonizing figure wants to hold on to Mariama as her African Other, created in her own image "*as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (1994, 86). Hence, at the end of the novel's third and final part, we apprehend an echo of the end of the second part in which Ana looked forward to Mariama's arrival from Africa, thinking that "de skulle blive som søstre der lignede hinanden

¹⁴ It is disconcerting to note that: "In the typical advanced country roughly 15% would be assessed as ill enough to need treatment" (Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs 2012, 74). Of these, approximately 1% suffers psychotic conditions, while 7% suffer depression and 7% suffer anxiety disorders.

og dog var så vidt forskellige” (165) [“they would become like sisters who resembled each other and yet were utterly different” (149)], with both the notion of resemblance and difference being key to Ana’s (misunderstood) sense of being, happiness and fulfillment.

Tilfældets gud is generally considered a harsh critique of contemporary Western society.¹⁵ As Thorup lets her novel unfold not just in Scandinavia, but also in postcolonial Gambia and London, she is able to depict the Danish woman’s sense of guilt merging with a more general postcolonial white guilt, namely the guilt of the privileged white person vis-à-vis the discriminated black person. Ana’s motivation for helping Mariama is repeatedly described as a white-savior syndrome, aimed more at maintaining an image of her, the Westerner, as ”good” than at combatting racial structures of oppression. It is about ”demonstrating” her good intentions (37/33), about relieving her conscience (49/43), and about creating a success story (303/275). In other words, her urge to help is what Shelby Steele (1990) would call a negative version of white guilt rooted in a narcissistic need to establish an image of oneself as good and innocent. It is a type of motivation expressed through Ana’s subconscious as she has delirious reveries about preventing her ”hvide, uskyldsrene bevidsthed” (310) [“innocent pure white consciousness” (282)] from being invaded by devils. And as Steele reminds us: “Guilt that preoccupies people with their own innocence blinds them to those who make them feel guilty” (503). Steele’s positive type of white guilt is ”the guilt of genuine concern” which motivates white people to make structural changes that will create equal opportunities for all and enable black people to act as agents who know for themselves what they need in order to develop. This is a point with which Ana is confronted several times in the novel, for instance by her coach, Jakob, who reminds her that it

¹⁵ See for example Erik Skyum-Nielsen’s review: ”Man overfortolker næppe romanen, om man hævder, at Kirsten Thorup med sin globalt orienterede samtidsskildrende problemroman holder dommedag over det nutidige vestlige samfund” [It is hardly an over interpretation, if one claims that Kirsten Thorup performs a Last Judgment vis-à-vis today’s Western society through her globally oriented novel, depicting contemporary problems] (2011).

ought not be a matter of Ana's need to help, but of Mariama's need of help as "afrikanerne må finde deres egen vej ud af fattigdommen" (208) ["Africans have to find their own way out of poverty" (189)] and be given an opportunity to "vise, hvad de dur til" (209) ["show what they are capable of" (189)]. It is, nevertheless, a Steelian dichotomous point that Ana is able to destabilize by reminding Jakob of the specific child at hand who may not be able to wait for grander changes.

As in the cases of Kadefors and Aarø, the novel maintains an ironic distance between the implied author and the narrator who through a third-person narration evidently renders Ana's thoughts faithfully, using free indirect discourse. Thus, Ana is held up as an example *not* to follow, and her attitudes are held up for ridicule. Even before Ana goes to Africa – before she is forced out of her comfort zone among equals – her state of happiness is described in a dubious way, reflecting the notion that one may be an unhappy, "happy" Scandinavian. Ana feels entirely indebted to Rower for providing her life with social and existential meaning:

Der fandtes ikke andre virkeligheder end det liv hun og de levede i Rower Internationals futuristiske prestigebyggeri af glas og stål, og i deres smukke privatboliger udstyret med børn og au pair. Ana identificerede sig hundred procent med de lykkelige/ulykkelige familier, fordi samfundet tilhørte dem. (104)

There was no other reality than the life she and they [her colleagues] were living in Rower International's prestigious futuristic building of glass and steel, and in their attractive private houses equipped with children and au-pairs. Ana identified one hundred percent with those happy/unhappy families, because society belonged to them. (94)

Two word choices beg commenting in this context: First, the notion that houses are "equipped" with children and au pairs. The overall perspective is one of commodification and instrumentality.

Human beings are objectified and it seems that the use of au pairs adds to this point of view so that children suddenly also come across as less organic. We are left wondering, though, to what extent the sentence expresses an ironic distance between Ana's point of view and that of the novel. On the one hand, the carrier-oriented Rower employees are generally depicted as slaves to the system and their values are far from admirable. On the other hand, single, childless (or childfree) Ana with an anonymous sperm donor as a father and no contact with her mother (and non-biological father) is consistently defined by her loneliness, alienation and artificiality. As Janet Garton puts it: "Her material success has not compensated for the fact that she feels incomplete and unloved, a half-person who was created with donated sperm" (2013, 289). Hence, Ana's life is not like that of her colleagues and the fact that she identifies with them may only show that she does not understand the importance of having families and children. Second, the slashed adjective "happy/unhappy" is the only one of its kind in this novel. It seems the other families – resembling those of Kadefors' Karin and Aarø's Julie, with spouses, children and au pairs – are either happy or unhappy; it is up to the reader to choose. Perhaps some of them are happy, some unhappy; perhaps they are sometimes happy, sometimes unhappy; or perhaps they are happy/unhappy in the sense where people may be evaluatively happy while affectively unhappy. What is striking, ultimately, is that it does not seem to matter so much what kind of happy they are, as long as they are in it together.¹⁶

The Figure of the Au Pair

If we compare the three au-pair novels, we find that the au pairs evoke all the stereotypes associated with her role. In an article on the au-pair body, Rosie Cox argues that the au pair is

¹⁶ Cf. Ahmed's argument that people seek happiness through a common, social orientation towards "happy objects" and places (2010, 21), as discussed in this volume's introductory article. Here children and au pairs are depicted as "happy objects."

usually regarded as a sex object, a sister or a student, depending on the discursive context: A sex object in the popular media, an older sister in the au-pair agency advertising, and a student by the government. In Norway, for instance, au pairs are not considered work immigrants, but figure in statistics on student immigration (cf. Statistics Norway). Both Kadefors and Aarø play on the au pair's status as a sex object by describing her stereotypically as young, white, attractive and potentially promiscuous (Cox 2007, 281, 289).¹⁷ And while Aarø also mentions Ludmilla's student status, which is completely disregarded by her protagonist (Julie), Thorup has the greatest focus on Mariama's potential for getting an education, first in Gambia, then in England. Thus, they are considered as sex objects and students to varying degrees.

Yet in the literary discourse, the au pair is first and foremost a global sister. Not in the au-pair agency sense that she is the helpful older sister in the family, but in the sense that she is a guilt-triggering figure pertaining to a series of feminist issues. We may conclude, that the novels discuss a need for global sister solidarity, a solidarity which – as Ehrenreich and Hochschild point out – is lacking. Kadefors' Karin desires it, but it is made structurally impossible by the great divide of privilege and opportunity. Thorup's Ana similarly desires it in a more maternal way but it is made impossible by postcolonial racism, and Ana's need to define Mariama as her Other. Aarø's Julie, to the contrary, could not care less, yet she is inscribed in a work whose norm is not covered by her perspective.¹⁸

The Figure of the Nordic Woman

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that in contrast to the feminist fiction analyzed in this article, Norwegian TV documentaries tend to depict au pairs as Filipina mothers who have left their own children behind and subsequently become vulnerable to trafficking and sexual exploitation. They are more exoticized than the literary au pairs, yet as Elisabeth Stubberud argues, they similarly stand in as the underprivileged Other: "Through their visible presence in the films, Filipinas/au pairs are used as reminders of difference, global inequality, and exploitation" (136).

¹⁸ The implied author, in other words, maintains an ironic distance to her protagonist and the reader realizes that she is shameless, and ought to feel more shame and guilt than she does.

At the same time, viewed from Ngai's perspective, focusing on ugly feelings and envy in particular, we may conclude that the novels focus on the Nordic woman's predicament as a privileged person living in a supposedly gender-equal society, yet feeling weighed down by a sense of inadequacy. Hence, the novels interrogate a Nordic/Western feminine ideal and the impossibility of living up to it, with envy running both ways. In the case of Katerina, Ludmilla, and Mariama, it is clear that they want to take part in privilege. They want to earn money and/or an education in order to raise the living standard for themselves and their families. They are envious to the extent that they want to partake in what the Northerners have. Nevertheless, while the au pairs are depicted as material have-nots, they are perceived by the main characters as emotional haves.¹⁹ As Ehrenreich and Hochschild put it: "It is as if the wealthy parts of the world are running short on precious emotional and sexual resources and have had to turn to poorer regions for fresh supplies" (2002, 4-5). The au pairs have boyfriends, children, love, youth, beauty, as well as an idealized femininity based on their cooking, their sexuality, and their physical appearance.²⁰ Thus, they possess "a certain model of femininity that [the Scandinavian protagonist, in our case] recognize[s] as culturally desirable" (Ngai 163). It is on this count, that the Nordic woman becomes envious. However, referring to Melanie Klein's "Envy and Gratitude" (1957), Ngai explains that envy serves a critical function to question an ideal: "The ideal or good object envied and phantasmatically attacked is attacked precisely because it *is* idealized and good – as if the real source of antagonism is less the object than idealization itself" (162). The way Ngai sees it, we should understand this kind of envy as constructive rather than destructive.

¹⁹ Ehrenreich and Hochschild similarly discuss the import of emotions: "Today, while still relying on Third World countries for agricultural and industrial labor, the wealthy countries also seek to extract something harder to measure and quantify, something that can look very much like love" (2002, 4).

²⁰ This, admittedly, is more the case for Katerina and Ludmilla than for Mariama whose feminine qualities are not emphasized to the same extent. As mentioned above, she is more of a (potential) student figure than the other women, and she is more racialized than gendered.

If from a feminist standpoint what I struggle with most is my having been acculturated into admiring and desiring that femininity, envy would seem to enable me to critically negotiate [...] this desire [...]. Moreover, envy would facilitate a transition from desire to antagonism that might enable me to articulate what I have been trained to admire as something possibly threatening or harmful to me. (163)

While the protagonists of these novels are not particularly articulate on these points, the reader is invited to negotiate the feminine ideal and articulate how it is threatening and harmful to the protagonist as well as, presumably, to contemporary women outside the fictive universe of the novel. It seems to me that what is depicted as threatening and harmful, is the impossible combination of a feminine as well as a feminist ideal and the way these two ideals function within a system of global capitalism (or what Ngai refers to as “a transnational stage of capitalism” [5]). The (literary) au pair is regarded (and regards herself), on the one hand, as a commodity, and on the other, as a fellow human being, a global sister. As recent reports on au pairs in Scandinavia point out, this leads to highly ambivalent grey zones that make the au pairs particularly vulnerable. At the same time, from a Marxist point of view, this would not be a case particular to au pairs, but rather a general issue of commodity fetishism. The human provider of labor and services living inside the family, of course, becomes a particularly interesting figure, problematizing commodity fetishism.

The novels thus use the au pairs as guilt-triggering figures in literary discourses on contemporary Scandinavian privilege in a context of Western and global feminism. The extent to which the foreign au pair has helped the protagonist change her life and her values, becomes a measure of the extent to which she has succeeded in finding the right balance between femininity and feminism, on a global as well as a local level. Karin, for instance, is held up as somewhat

exemplary towards the end, Ana is held up as tragic and ludicrous, while Julie is held up satirically within a discourse of popular feminism in which accepting the status quo – with a smile – seems to be the only viable alternative; guilt is alleviated through laughter.

Conclusion

There are many ways of reading the novels of Kadefors, Aarø, and Thorup (as illustrated, for instance, by Annegret Heitmann's focus on Thorup's protagonist as a tourist in this volume). The main point of my reading, however, has been to look at the novels as examples of a postfeminist literary discourse questioning the happiness of the Nordic woman by confronting her with less privileged global sisters. In this context, Nordic women are caught in a bind with global women triggering their guilt feelings in all directions – from feeling guilt at not being feminine, to not being feminist enough. Underlying the juxtapositions is a structural inequality – Ehrenreich and Hochschild's great divide of privilege and opportunity – that makes it impossible for the women to become fully human. In no relationship are the women fundamentally on par with each other – true "au pairs" – there is always a sense that privilege is fundamentally unfair and unjustified.

The World Happiness Reports stress the value of altruism and insist that altruism and generosity contribute to individual happiness (Helliwell 2012, 72; 2015 96ff).²¹ Yet, in the au-pair novels, altruism is depicted as much more complicated and self-servingly "ugly" – whether this is the judgment of the characters themselves (as in the case of Kadefors' Karin) or that of the implied author (as in the case of Thorup's Ana). From their perspective, altruism and generosity do not seem to be the answer to the larger questions of structural difference. In an age of globalization, these are questions that seemingly continue to haunt the happy/unhappy Scandinavian.

²¹ While the 2012-report briefly touches upon the connection between altruism and the giver's increased happiness, the 2015-report devotes a greater section entitled "Empathy, Altruism, and Well-Being" to this topic in a chapter on "Neuroscience of Happiness".

Finally, the questions turn into a postfeminist issue as the reader is left wondering why the protagonist is a woman – with prime responsibility for the au pair – while the men seem less concerned with domestic chores (and guilt feelings).²² Perhaps, as Helen Russell wonders, equality is not as fully attained in the Scandinavian welfare state as its reputation would have it after all. It is, however, not just a matter of origins – crap country and luxury country – but also a matter of gender.

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²² As indicated by Liversage, Bille, and Jakobsen's report, it is generally the woman of the household who hires au pairs and will work less if necessary. Stubberud, in her analysis of au pair documentaries, similarly criticizes a heteronormative matrix positing gender equality, but leaving caregiving and household chores gendered (as the roles of the Scandinavian woman and her hired au pair).

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