



# DiGeSt

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## What are you reading?

**Wallaert, S. (2023). *Kwaad Spreken: Wie Geloofd de Boze Vrouw?*. Borgerhout: Letterwerk.**

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**Wallaert, S. (2023). *Kwaad Spreken: Wie Geloof de Boze Vrouw?*. Borgerhout: Letterwerk.**

Sigrid Wallaert's *Kwaad spreken: Wie geloof de boze vrouw?* (translation: *Knowing Anger: Who Believes the Angry Woman?*) is part of the *Questa*-series essays, a series launched by the Belgian publisher Letterwerk, which foregrounds critical feminist writing. All essays in this series focus on specific topics (such as ethics, love, age, music...) or specific philosophies (like feminist ethics, feminist philosophy, the philosophy of Proust, etc.). *Knowing Anger* is an important contribution to contemporary feminist debate because it sheds light on the (omni)presence of feminist anger and its epistemic value. As Wallaert puts it, anger is more than the wrapping paper in which you pack your message. It is an essential part of what you have to say (Wallaert, 2023, p. 29). She speaks of an 'anger turn', as she sees a new prominence of (the use of) feminist anger in the (non-fiction) publishing industry, the media, the academic world and politics, parallel to Sara Ahmed's 'happiness turn.'<sup>1</sup> Wallaert investigates where this anger comes from and how it is used as an enabling force in feminist activism by using Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (2007).

The cause of feminist anger is related to Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice.<sup>2</sup> Epistemic injustices take two forms that are related to social power and identity power: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice takes place when one does not recognize a speaker as a 'knower', excluding her from the community of 'reasonable thinkers,' which affects her humanity (Fricker as paraphrased in Wallaert, 2023, p. 25). It could damage the epistemic confidence of the speaker and leads to what philosopher Kristie Dotson calls 'testimonial quieting' and 'testimonial smothering':<sup>3</sup> the speaker is either actively silenced or chooses to stay quiet. (Wallaert, 2023, p. 27) Hermeneutical injustice – being disadvantaged because of a deficiency in collective interpretative tools (Fricker in Wallaert, 2023, p. 11) – causes damage, too, both on the practical level (losing your job, losing money, not getting access to services or tools you rightfully have access to) as on the personal level (the speaker's confidence is damaged, which directly affects personal growth) (p. 39).

Wallaert (2023) delineates a clear connection between these forms of epistemic injustice and feminist anger: being silenced, not being heard, not being able to communicate and report lived injustices. All these factors contribute to feminist anger, which in its turn contributes to defiance of existing power relations and injustices. Women being angry as a collective has a subversive potential: the angry woman - who would otherwise be robbed of her power, because woman's anger is seen as hysteric and irrational, while man's anger is tied to authority and power – is now part of a collective of angry women all over the world demanding to be heard. They reclaim power that was taken from them because they were angry; anger is able to shake or tear down frameworks as a powerful megaphone and a durable engine (Wallaert, 2023, p. 51-52).

In her essay, Wallaert (2023) also discusses Fricker's testimonial justice and hermeneutical justice as strategies to overcome injustice. Testimonial justice means correcting your prejudices and being conscious of your social identity and that of the speaker about whom you make a credibility assessment (Fricker as paraphrased in Wallaert, p. 44). Hermeneutical justice means to be attentive to the potential that a speaker is struggling, not due to foolishness or hysteria, but because they are grappling with a gap in the commonly understood conceptual framework. Heeding this can prevent future testimonial injustice (*Ibid.*, p. 53).

<sup>1</sup> Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Dotson, K. (2011). Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing. *Hypatia*, 26(2), 238-257.

Wallaert's theory of the anger turn is incredibly important for my master's thesis, a study of the fictional books *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis and *Boy Parts* (2020) by Eliza Clark. In my thesis, I focus on how the violence committed by the main characters (violent and unreliable narrators Patrick Bateman (*American Psycho*) and Irina Sturges (*Boy Parts*)) is tied to their gender and is a means to express societal critique. My thesis partly focuses on the presence of the anger turn in the fiction publishing industry by focusing on *Boy Parts* and on the presence of the anger turn in the media by focusing on the reception of *Boy Parts* and *American Psycho* (both the book and the movie).

*Boy Parts* is one of the many recent woman-authored books with a woman main character that expresses societal feminist criticism through committing violence; other examples are *How to Kill Your Family* by Bella Mackie, *How to Kill Men and Get Away With It* by Katy Brent, *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder, and *A Certain Hunger* by Chelsea G. Summers. There is a clear anger turn in fictional literature, and considering the books' popularity, there is also a large audience that wants to read these violent narrations. I am part of that audience, as some aspects resonate with me, being an angry feminist myself. In comparing *Boy Parts*, often called the female counterpart of *American Psycho*, with *American Psycho*, I explore how the difference in the violence committed by the main characters, and the societal critique that flows out of it, is closely linked to the characters' gender. *American Psycho* is a postmodernist book which critiques the empty and meaningless yuppie-society, while *Boy Parts* is the consequence of the fourth feminist wave connected to the #MeToo movement and the contagious anger bursting from it; Irina's violence is tied to testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, inspiring her anger.

*American Psycho* on the other hand is not immediately tied to testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, as the violence is a postmodernist tool rather than rooted in a direct motive. However, the contemporary reception of the book and the movie sprang from the *belief* of being the victim of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. The book, and to a greater extent the movie, is being claimed by men with a clear political preference for the (at times far-/populist) right through memes, YouTube videos and TikToks, in which the murderous Patrick Bateman is being simultaneously interpreted as a victim of society and as a hero. He is seen as an 'alpha male' who violently rises against 'the system of "woke" that oppresses cis, straight, white men'. Other examples of violent male misfits which are idolized or related to are Jordan Belfort from *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Arthur Flex (Joker) from *Joker*, and Tyler Durden from *Fight Club*. Romanticizing the violent main character is also noticeable, albeit to a lesser extent, when looking at the reception of *Boy Parts*, making it interesting to compare these toxic forms of romanticization. As previously stated, in the case of *American Psycho*, the idolization is tied to this wrong idea of victimization and to toxic masculinity, while in *Boy Parts*, the romanticization of the violent Irina is a result of the wrong use of feminist anger leading to forms of 'toxic femininity', a quite recent phenomenon on social media in which girls and women romanticize toxic and/or harmful attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, these toxic masculine and feminine attitudes are part of what both novels criticize.

Wallaert's anger turn focuses explicitly on explaining (the epistemic value) of feminist anger through Fricker's theory of testimonial and hermeneutical (in)justice, which is a useful source for my master's thesis. However, her explanation of the feminist anger turn and of Fricker's theory allows to be adapted to research both sides of the anger spectrum - the political (far-/populist) right, in which toxic masculinities nest, and the angry feminist side, in which forms of toxic femininity dwell - through looking at another pillar in which Wallaert's anger turn is visible: media. (Social) media show masculine anger stemming from the belief of victimization through testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, and show a

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<sup>4</sup> Le, M. (2022, August 9). "toxic" femininity: what's up with girlbloggers, female manipulators, and femcels? [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6aDNutZoB0>

feminine anger brewing in corners of the fourth feminist wave. These gendered forms of anger can lead to forms of toxic masculine and toxic feminine behaviour that carry a distinct harmful influential power on social media with different results based on the gendered dimension. Understanding these toxicities is crucial in a time where social media seem to control and steer our lives, and bring harm - especially to young people.

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**Alexia Debbaut** is a student of the interuniversity master Gender & Diversiteit. She has a bachelor's degree in Linguistics and Literature (English-Dutch) and a master's degree in Western Literature. Her master's thesis aims to explore how gender, violence and societal criticism correlate in the fictional works *Boy Parts* by Eliza Clark and *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis.