

Kohl: a Journal for Body and Gender Research
Vol. 3, No. 1 (Summer 2017)

Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*
Duke University Press, 2017

Golchehr Hamidi-Manesh

Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* gives the old feminist mantra of "the personal is political" a new boost of relatability. In her very unique poetic language, she engages with everyday experiences, objects, encounters, feelings, and embodiments. Her aim for this task, as she puts it, is not only to bring feminism "home," but also to explore how "feminist theory is something we do at home" (p.7). Throughout the book, Ahmed explores how "feminist ideas" are not abstract but generated through our involvement in the world. They originate in the midst of struggles that we face in "making sense of realities that are difficult to grasp," "a struggle to be, to make sense of being" (p.10).

The simplicity of these hard-to-grasp realities is what actually makes grasping them harder. Simple in the sense of being the most routine aspect or overtly present task in one's daily life. Simple like gathering with those you love around a table to have dinner. Simple like the facial expressions you encounter.

It is the image of family dinner tables that initiates Ahmed's theorising over feminist killjoy figure in her earlier brilliant work *feminist killjoy (and other wilful subjects)*: "We begin with a table. Around this table, the family gathers, having polite conversations, where only certain things can be brought up. Someone says something you consider problematic" (Ahmed 2010).¹ By pointing the problem out, you become the problem, and this is exactly why "the problem you expose is not revealed. The exposure becomes the problem" (p.141).

Feminism: what you need to afford being the problem. Or in Ahmed's words: "Feminism: what we need to handle the consequences of being feminist" (p.162).

Ahmed refers to the "rolling eyes" or "raised eyebrows" as what makes you understand that you are seen as the problem. The fake smiles, before very subliminally changing the subject of the conversation, are very resonating everyday experiences as well. Their smile is supposed to re-confirm "snap as a feminist sickness" (p.193). They smile to remind you that you are making your life "harder than it needs to be" (p.233). They smile to express kindness in dismissing you. The smile has a good intention, just like the "histories of racism and sexism are littered with good intentions;" they feel bad for you, "as if by feeling bad, [they] mean well" (p.151).

Ahmed also engages with smiles in her book in two instances. One is when we adopt smiling as a strategy, since "smiling becomes necessary to soften an appearance when you are perceived as too hard" (p.130). Smiling is then part of the constant "emotional labour" of "countering stereotypes," which usually persists for those of us who are seen as "racially others." On the other hand, Ahmed also suggests not smiling as a "feminist strike" (p.248), building on Firestone's (1970)² concept of "smile embargo" – an invitation to stop smiling as a collective action until we have something to smile about. Individually, we might not want to smile, as a feminist strike to sexist and racist jokes and commentaries, out of politeness. This is a point that Ahmed turns into the fourth principle of her feminist manifesto: "I am not willing to laugh at jokes designed to cause offense" (p.261).

¹ Ahmed, Sara. 2010. "Feminist Killjoys (and Other Willful Subjects)." *Scholar and Feminist Online*. http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/ahmed_01.htm [last accessed 10-07-2017]

² Firestone, Shulamith (1970). *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist revolution*. New York: Bantam.

However, at what point can the act of not-smiling become a privilege that not all killjoys can afford? Not smiling can have serious material and emotional consequences – consequences that are gendered. Not only can forcing a woman to smile be a reinforcement of gender roles, but it also acts as a tool of policing and rendering women's bodies accommodating and legible. In fact, not smiling can even have fatal consequences as “there can be nothing more dangerous to a body than the social agreement that that body is dangerous” (p.143).

The above engagement with daily experiences and expression reminds us that “to live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question” (p.2). For Ahmed, this “everything” is not an exaggeration; throughout the book, she engages with spaces and environments (she even engages with road bumps!), objects (tables, chairs, garments), feelings (humour, snap, vulnerability, love) and even body parts (arms, ears, and eyes). By using metaphors such as bricks and walls and brick walls, someone living a feminist life or a diversity worker can become a “space invader” or a “misfit” (p.125) – someone whose presence and body is not sustained by the shape and function of the environment they enter. Living a feminist life means, then, that you are often seen as an “affect alien” who “is made happy by the wrong things;” as someone whose happiness is seen “as a substitute for the real thing;” as someone perceived as “wilful” (p.65-68); “as having too much subjectivity” (p.156); as being “unthankful” (p.70).

Nonetheless, as Ahmed also points out herself, it is unfortunate that the brick wall is only a metaphor. If there was an actual wall, “we would all be able to see it, to touch it” (p.138).³ The heaviness of metaphors in Ahmed's analysing can be perceived as disadvantageous. As she points out, “when you become a feminist, you find out very quickly: what you aim to bring to an end some do not recognise as existing” (p.6) or are even “invested in not seeing” (p.138). Therefore, perhaps living a feminist life might mean for us to come up with material vocabulary and a language consistent enough not to be able to be dismissed. A language that can represent how material, metaphorical walls are, as they also stop your movement, force you to change direction; the wall that “stops movement, moves” (p.137) is even harder. “If walls are how some bodies are stopped, walls are what you do not encounter when you are not stopped” (p.148). In other words, what is metaphorical for some is material for others. For that reason, we perhaps need to come up with a language that can kill the joy of not seeing, although there will always be some of what Ahmed calls “sweaty concepts” (p.12) left, concepts that are generated by trying to describe something that your “feminist gut” (p.27) finds amiss, but that resists being fully comprehended in the present.

Although Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* is full of pain and rage that emanate from “fragile things” and “relationships,” “snapped bonds,” exhaustion, it does not despair. She does not despair; she helps us not despair. She starts the book and “carries us through” with “hope,” as “hope is not in the expense of struggle;” rather, it animates it (p.2). After giving the reader a “transformative redefinition of survival” as

³ Ahmed is talking about this in the context of institutional walls that diversity workers face, based on her research with those in the U.K. However this is not applicable to other contexts where actual apartheid walls do exist, and people choose to still not see them, or see them favorably.

what keeps one's hope alive (p.235), the book concludes with hope, once again, through the concept of a "killjoy survival kit." However, for Ahmed, this hope is not in relation to happiness, not even a hope to attain happiness. The rejection of the idea of making happiness one's life aim is in my opinion the most powerful and empowering of Ahmed's arguments. This is only possible when we realise that "happiness is used to justify social norms as social goods" (p.254). Ahmed unfolds the path of happiness as "a loop: we are directed by what is in front of us; what is in front of us depends on how we are directed" (p.48). Because what is in front of us is a hetero-patriarchal order, instead of partaking in it, we need to expose its violence – a task that Ahmed believes is the role feminist manifestos, and she offers hers as the second conclusion to her book. I do not mean to dismiss that living a feminist life is "not living smoothly; we bump into the world that does not live in accordance with the principles we try to live" (p.256). However, it might be when we decide to reject making happiness our cause that we witness "the unhappiness that happiness can cause" (p.257). Perhaps this can mean that we might actually find a happiness that is not dictated by heteropatriarchal norms somewhere deep into choosing unhappiness.

"Feminism: how we inherit from the refusal of others to live their lives in a happy way" (p.63).

It is to inheriting feminism, or feminism as "an affective inheritance" (p.20) that I want to turn to as my last point. To shatter the omnipresence of sexism and racism around us, we, more than often, are shattered ourselves. To carry on, we then need to assemble our fragments. Nonetheless, both shattering and surviving being shattered are only possible because of all those other feminists of colour before us that have been shattered to shatter. Ahmed writes, "after all, we know some of us are only here on these grounds because arms in history have refused to keep laboring, to keep building or holding up the walls that secure the master's residence" (p.160). We reach out to these arms and these arms reach out to us, and we form "a feminist army of arms" (p.159) that willfully snap and collectively kill joy. An army of arms that spans across a wide temporal and spatial ground and is more than flesh. Although the flesh of our fellow killjoys is an essential part of it, books also stand as fundamental arms in our feminist army or arms. Therefore, just like Ahmed's, my killjoy survival kit will definitely contain "other killjoys" (p.244) and "books," feminist books that, in Ahmed's words, make of reading them a process similar to "making friends, realizing that others have been here before" (p.31). It is in this sense that I would like to believe that in reading *Living a Feminist Life*, readers will find a companion, a vital guide to their killjoy survival kit.