

Can Feminist Scholarship Stop Sexism?

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By Becca Rothfeld June 25, 2017

This year, my first in a Ph.D. program, I counted how many times I said "Sorry!" in a single day and found that the tally reached upwards of 30. Each "Sorry," pronounced with bubbly inflection, was an apology for more than whatever I was ostensibly apologizing for: speaking in seminar, again, even though that's what you're supposed to do in seminar, or disagreeing, again, even though the discipline of philosophy trades in opposition. These local apologies were part of a global apology for existing in the male-dominated discipline of analytic philosophy: for being the wayward creature I am, 5-foot-2 and female but brash and contrarian.

How often have I been punished for this? If I can be sufficiently helpless or self-deprecating or infantile, if I can affix enough implied exclamation marks to whatever harsh verdicts I deliver, perhaps I can offset the offense of pairing intellectual facility with femininity. Or so I have often reasoned. I can eviscerate your novel or your argument, but don't worry: I'm too ditzy to drive!(!!!!!!)

How exhausting it is to have to defend your right to excel, and to take on the additional burden of having to explain that you shoulder this burden at all. Sometimes I find myself enmeshed in a nested doll of apologies, apologizing for apologizing until apology supplants apologia and the seed of self that once grounded it and "Sorry!" is all that's left.

The female *cogito*, the basis of a brutal gender dualism, is this: I'm sorry, therefore I am. We're allowed to exist in the first place only because we're pre-emptively sorry for it.

It takes courage and originality to be female and dissatisfied.

My experience is not an unusual one. Most women in the academy or the literary world have at one point or another been cast as headstrong girls who talk too much and too loudly, whose demands are voraciously great: too much, crazy, hysterical, shrill. And the hardships that I have faced as a white, mostly straight woman can hardly compare with those faced by Sara Ahmed, a lesbian scholar of color who [resigned](#) from her post as a professor of race and cultural studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2016, in protest of the university's lax policies on sexual harassment. Her *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press), out this year, is a testament to her strength and intransigence in the face of the imperative for apology.

Part memoir, part phenomenology, part critical study, the book is an imaginative attempt to imbue the cold apparatus of theory with novel tenderness. Its unfamiliar form is an acknowledgment that the best philosophical meditations are always personal.

Living a Feminist Life begins with Ahmed's initiation into feminist practice. In her view, "sensations" are what awaken women to political consciousness. We start with disorientation: the wordless suspicion that something is canted or askew. When we fail to follow the default trajectory, our deviation from prescribed routes becomes a source of friction. Ahmed favors the imagery of paths and pressures, directions and divergences: "Once a flow is directed, it acquires a momentum. A crowd is often directed by the machinery of man-made geography." We come to feminism when traumas erupt into articulation, and we are relieved to discover that "having names for problems can make a difference." Feminism affords us terms with which to conceptualize and collectivize our formerly mute and private hurt.

But to describe a feminist injury is to cast oneself as a "killjoy." When we complain, however rightfully, "we are dismissed as emotional," which, Ahmed notes, "is enough to make you emotional." The cycle is vicious: We suffer from our inability to express our suffering, but to express our suffering is to incur more suffering. The figure of the feminist killjoy, trapped in toxic cycle of self-effacement, is particularly interesting to Ahmed, who wrote extensively about it in her 2010 book, *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke), and on her blog, [feministkilljoys](#).

When killjoys refuse to identify cheerfully with the roles forced upon us, to enjoy our weddings or our domestic assignments, to agree with men's arguments or praise their accomplishments, we are reprimanded for our obstinacy, as if the vagaries of identity were voluntary. The presumption of whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, and cis-sexuality functions as a mandate. To depart from these categories is to pose a rude interruption. Feminism "is full of stories like this: of women who are not made happy by what is supposed to make them happy."

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Ahmed applies these general insights to the vexed territory of the university, drawing on interviews she has conducted with diversity officers as well as on her own experience as a member of various diversity committees. She concludes that we perform diversity work when we attempt to effect institutional reform, but that we also perform diversity work interpersonally, in our everyday attempts to gain acceptance from our colleagues or superiors.

The institutions that hire diversity officers are often more concerned with cultivating friendly public images than with undergoing actual change, and Ahmed recounts how her critiques have frequently been dismissed as angry or oversensitive because she is a woman of color. When she points out that a panel is composed almost entirely of male speakers, or that a bibliography contains no female sources, men accuse her of selfishness, claiming that she is objecting solely because she has been left out. "White male genealogy is protected by the assumption that

anyone who challenges that genealogy suffers from self-obsession."

All this is wearing. Ahmed likens it to confronting a wall, inflexible and insensitive and indifferent. But she goes on to show how fragility can become a source of strength: how our exhaustion can be repurposed as fuel. "The energy required to keep going when you keep coming up against these structures is how we build things, sometimes, often, from the shattered pieces," she writes. *Living a Feminist Life* concludes with two resources for would-be feminists: a killjoy survival kit, featuring items as concrete as feminist books and as abstract as renewed appreciation for our bodies, and a killjoy manifesto, which exhorts us to sacrifice comfort in the name of justice. Happy families are all alike, but each killjoy is unhappy in her own way: It takes courage and originality to be female and dissatisfied.

Ahmed is often dissatisfied to the point of sadness. Her book's greatest strength is that it dares to make philosophy urgent and emotional. "This book is personal. The personal is theoretical," she writes in the introduction. Too often theory is divorced from the tremors that tempt us to it, from the lives it is supposed to improve or alter or at least explain. *Living a Feminist Life* is a chronicle of the accumulation of violations. Of her early experiences of sexism, Ahmed writes:

You seem to receive the same message again and again: the flasher at school who keeps returning; ... that time you come across a man masturbating under a tree in the city park who tells you to come and take a look and comes after you when you hurry away; the time when you are walking down a street with your sister and a man jumps out of the door exposing himself; the time you are waiting at a bus stop and a group of men in a car ask you to get in, and you run away and they start jeering and shouting; the time when you fall asleep on a long flight under a blanket and you wake up with a man's fingers all over you.

I quote this because it is long, repetitive, and relentless, and that is just what it is like. Read it and read it again.

I wept reading it, remembering the man who masturbated on me in a subway in Berlin; the man who followed me for an hour when I was running in a near-empty forest so I just kept running, miles further than I'd planned to, terrified, hoping to come to the end of the woods; the catcalls; the comments from editors that I wasn't professionally established enough to allow myself to find offensive; the undergraduate peer who told me that women don't do philosophy, as the historical record bears out; the logic TA who slept with me when I was his student and showed me his math homework, written in a notation I had not yet learned, because he "wanted to make me feel stupid."

Read it and read it again, and then envision all that you are not reading, a whole tapestry of daily injustice that goes unmemorialized. If you think these two paragraphs are gratuitous, "too much," imagine what it is like to live them without respite.

Women come to expect a battery of dismissals and debasements, and they adjust accordingly: To be feminized is to learn that you can either accept your diminution by becoming diminutive (sorry!!!) or put up an unceasing fight, one that often endangers your career or further degrades you. Usually "you can receive some benefits by adapting yourself to a system that is, at another level, compromising your capacity to inhabit the world on more equal terms," Ahmed writes. Recall the wall, and imagine how it feels to come up against it. Imagine apologizing daily to the wall, and trying to pretend you are happy.

Now is the time to confess that Ahmed and I are political allies but disciplinary enemies. She is a critical theorist by training, and I am an aspirational analytic philosopher. She confesses to finding "straight analytical philosophy" boring and remote from living; I find it careful and rigorous. And perhaps it is for that reason that I thought *Living a Feminist Life* sloppy and imprecise.

For instance, why does Ahmed so often use the word "bodies" ("only certain bodies are speaking at an event,"

"some bodies are in an instant judged as suspicious") when she seems to mean something like persons?

Maybe she relies on this terminology unthinkingly, just because it's trendy. ("Bodies" are "regulated" or "surveilled" in "disciplinary" "networks," etc.) Or does she mean to emphasize her materialism? Yet much of the book presupposes that categories founded on the basis of physical identity are constructions: that is, they are aphysical. If we accepted that femininity has an anatomical basis, we would have difficulty swallowing much of Ahmed's platform. So at the very least, "a body" is not obviously synonymous enough with a "person" to warrant the employment of the word without justification.

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Or consider this passage: "A norm is something that can be inhabited. I think of a norm as rather like a room or dwelling." How is a norm any more like these things than anything else, except trivially? Or again, a page later: "To be questioned, to be questionable, sometimes can feel like a residence." What does a residence feel like, anyway? I have never felt one. If an analogy is to aid understanding, it must tether the abstract to the concrete. No one can visualize an "inhabitation" or an "intersection," an "unpacking" or a "problematization."

Many such metaphors are stretched past their breaking points, and many of Ahmed's attempts at lyricism misfire. *Living a Feminist Life* is peppered with what I came to think of as the Ahmed sentence: a formulation that repeats a clause but tweaks it to confusing effect. Here are a few examples:

"The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question."

"A body in touch with a world can become a body that fears the touch of a world."

"Affect aliens sympathize with alien affects."

"The violence of an encounter becomes a violence she encounters."

"If a stranger disturbs the familiar, being a stranger can become familiar."

Argumentatively speaking, very little is said in *Living a Feminist Life*, and what is said is uncontroversial in the circles that are sure to compose almost all of Ahmed's readership. The book's hybrid nature, which makes it groundbreaking, is also its biggest limitation. What is its intended audience? It is too academic for the laypeople who might not already believe that patriarchal privilege structures social landscapes. But the academics or literati who can navigate its density already pay lip service to its ideas, even if they often fail to act accordingly.

This raises the central question of why men who have Kristeva readers on their bookshelves, or who have published articles in gender-studies reviews, fail to act accordingly: fail to suffer the company of women who won't dissolve into a stutter of sorries and self-abnegations. The problem, I think, is not intellectual but affective: Sexism in the university and in the world of arts and letters is more often a failure of empathy than a failure of understanding. Ahmed says as much: "Diversity work is emotional work," she writes. Callousness and cruelty are a kind of ethical stupidity, and their remedy is a sentimental, not a theoretical, education.

Ahmed seems to conflate philosophical complexity and moral importance. What other reason does she have to cloak her simple complaints in the outsized trappings of scholarly jargon? But the equation of difficulty with gravity is fallacious. Oppression is abhorrent not because it is difficult to understand but because it is unfair. Why should we need to justify, academically, a reflection on the pain of subjugation? Such a reflection is its own justification.

Besides, the men who publicly express admiration for Susan Sontag but make a private career of intimidating women won't listen to logic anyway. You can't argue with fragility. For centuries women have defied attempts to shrink their appetites. The men who accuse us of excess or deem us "too much" are rightly worried that they are not

enough. About this, at least, they are right. One day we will devour them whole, and we will not be sorry.

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