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Book Review of Sara Ahmed, *The promise of happiness*

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<http://dx.doi.org/10.7227/R.16.1.12>

PUBLISHER

Manchester University Press

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

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REPOSITORY RECORD

Lloyd, Moya S.. 2019. "Book Review of Sara Ahmed, *the Promise of Happiness*". figshare.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2134/19673>.

Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2009, pp. 299 (ISBN 978-0-8223-4725-5)

The Promise of Happiness is Sara Ahmed's most recent foray into discussions of affect. While her earlier book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), focused primarily on supposed "bad feelings" – fear, disgust, hate, shame, and anger – in this book Ahmed turns her critical attention to the allegedly "good feeling" of happiness (14). 'Happiness' has become – and remains – something of a vogueish area of study. The immediate prompt for the writing of *The Promise of Happiness*, according to Ahmed, was 'the happiness turn' in science and popular culture beginning in the mid-2000s, which led not only to the appearance of numerous books and courses on how to be happy but also to the commissioning by various governments, including the British, of happiness indices to sit alongside GDP as an indicator of performance; indeed, the first results of the British version of this test were published in July 2012. The net result of these developments has been the emergence of 'happiness studies' as a distinct academic field of study.

As Ahmed acknowledges, however, the 'science of happiness' has a much longer and diverse history than this. And so in *The Promise of Happiness*, she tracks happiness through fields as varied as philosophy, positive psychology, political economy, political theory, as well as literature, film, and television. Although there is a definite downside at times in dealing with such a wide array of sources, in that some of the readings on offer are limited in scope and detail, what this approach enables Ahmed to demonstrate is the ubiquity of calls for happiness over time and, more importantly, how those calls connect to particular ways of being in the world.

Happiness more than any other affective state, Ahmed contends, is widely taken to be 'the object of human desire... as being what gives purpose, meaning and order to human life' (1, my emphasis) or, as defined by the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant, as 'the wish of every finite rational being' (cited by Ahmed, 1), the assumption being that we all want to be happy. What interests Ahmed is what is being consented to when the individual

consents to happiness. What, in other words, is at stake in pursuing the promise of happiness? And, moreover, in what does that promise consist?

Challenging the distinction between good and bad feelings alluded to above Ahmed sets out to show that happiness is not necessarily, or even, a simple social good. Instead, she provocatively suggests, happiness is so entangled with particular norms of behaviour and specific life choices that to be happy effectively rests on making the 'right' choices, in being directed towards specific 'happiness objects', and in following certain happiness 'scripts'. On Ahmed's reading therefore, we are not, as we may believe, free to decide what makes us happy. Rather happiness is directive, in the dual sense that we are expected to be happy *and* to be made happy by particular things. *The Promise of Happiness* thus focuses on happiness as a mechanism of discipline or governance that fosters oppression and inequality. The important question in this context is not what happiness *is* but rather what it *does*.

To address this question, Ahmed focuses on unhappiness, which she suggests, in a classic deconstructive move, 'remains the unthought' in discussions of happiness. Her explicit goal is 'to give a history to unhappiness' (17). Drawing on what she terms the 'unhappy archives' that permeate feminist, queer and anti-racist histories, Ahmed proposes to rewrite the history of happiness from the perspective of those who have been, and continue to be, excluded from it; indeed, who are frequently seen as causing unhappiness: the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer and the melancholic migrant. It is the plight of these 'affect aliens' and the political possibilities opened up by them that Ahmed traces in chapters two to four. In Chapter Five, her work takes a different direction as Ahmed examines revolutionary forms of political involvement as a way to think about the (happy) future.

Chapter One, 'Happy Objects', establishes the groundwork for her later discussions. Picking up on ideas developed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed conceptualises affect as 'sticky'. It is 'what sticks' or connects values, ideas and objects (230 n.1). To be affected by happiness requires certain things – 'happiness objects' – to be in place that dispose us to be affected in one way (as happy) rather than another (as, say, angry or

afraid). Happiness, for Ahmed, is thus not merely an emotional or affective response. Instead, drawing from phenomenology it involves affect, intentionality *and* evaluation or judgment. Happiness is better thought of, therefore, as a learned mode of bodily orientation towards specific objects, objects that have already acquired positive value as social goods because they are allegedly productive of happiness. One such, according to Ahmed, is the family – or, more specifically, the ‘happy family’.

The trope of the happy family is first introduced in this chapter as an example to illustrate the profound ambivalence of the injunction to be happy. Happy families, as characterised by Ahmed, are not merely an assumed site of happiness (where and how it occurs); they are also, she suggests, a ‘powerful legislative device, a way of distributing time, energy and resources’ (45). To belong to a ‘happy family’ is to be oriented towards specific objects as the cause and expression of that happiness. These objects might be displays of family photographs that produce the family as a happy object or, as her brief discussion of Laurie Colwin’s novel *Family Happiness* illustrates, occupying a particular place at the ‘kinship object’ that is the family table (46). It is in the family, moreover, that the child learns the right happiness habits, where it is disciplined to live a particular kind of life. Being part of a happy family depends, in other words, on doing the right thing in the right way; it is thus conditional upon specific kinds of objects, choices and orientations. In Ahmed’s view the family can be a ‘happy object’, therefore, only ‘if we share this orientation’ (48). But, of course, not everyone does.

The foundation of the happy family is conventionally assumed to be a happy marriage. Indeed, within happiness studies (heterosexual) marriage is routinely regarded as one of the primary indicators of happiness. In Chapter Two, ‘Feminist Killjoys’, Ahmed turns her attention to the figure of the happy housewife in both the guise critiqued by earlier feminist writers, such as Betty Friedan, and in its more recent incarnation as a reaction against feminism. What interests Ahmed here is two-fold. Tracing through the discourse of the happy housewife from Rousseau to *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Hours*, she explores what the figure does; how, in particular, it operates to secure a particular racialised and classed

version of happiness available only to selected women. Just as importantly, she also probes how the rejection of the myth of the happy housewife fosters the connection between feminism and unhappiness, or in the case of feminists of colour of the association of feminism with anger. She shows, in what is to be a recurrent theme of the book, how particular individuals or groups (feminists, in this chapter, and queers and migrants in later ones) are constructed as problems because they refuse to seek happiness in the 'right things' (60). This results in their being vilified or castigated for their behaviour – causing trouble – rather than criticism being levelled at the society that attempts to strait-jacket them in ways of life that they reject.

The discussion in Chapter Three moves onto the relation between (un)happiness and queerness. In a discussion that ranges from the film *If These Walls Could Talk 2* to the novels *Rubyfruit Jungle* and *The Well of Loneliness*, Ahmed sets about disentangling what it means to be a 'happy queer' from what it might mean to be 'happily queer'. As with the argument about feminism, Ahmed suggests that unhappiness allows for (perhaps even is itself) a social critique of normative happiness. To be a happy queer requires the queer subject to minimize their signs of queerness and to approximate as far as possible those social forms that are already inscribed as 'happiness causes' (112): the family, marriage, straightness and so on. To be happily queer, by contrast, is to embrace unhappiness in order to expose what, to use a different lexicon, might be called the heteronormativity of the world. Or, in Ahmed's own words: 'to explore the unhappiness of what gets counted as normal' (117). Where killing joy is imperative for feminist politics, so the 'freedom to breathe' (120), which characterises queer politics, depends on exposing and renouncing 'happy homonormativity' (114).

In Chapter Four Ahmed turns her attention to questions of nationhood, citizenship, multiculturalism, and immigration, focusing on the figure of the 'melancholic migrant'. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the history of empire, centred on the relationship between imperialism and utilitarian philosophy, a conjunction that led in Ahmed's view to the construction of the history of empire as a history of happiness. Here she exposes the

coercive side of imperial and multicultural happiness: that is, how empire was justified as 'liberation from abjection' (127) secured through teaching 'the natives how to be happy' (128) and how happy multiculturalism requires fidelity to established national ideals, like playing football. What follows is a really fascinating discussion of the contemporary experience of British Asians, examined through the films *Bend it Like Beckham* and *East is East*, and the writings of Meera Syal (*Anita and Me*) and Yasmin Hai (*The Making of Mr Hai's Daughter: Becoming British*). Two aspects of this discussion are particularly noteworthy. The first, drawing from Freud, focuses on the 'risk of melancholia' (138). This is embodied in the narrative of the migrant (usually first generation) unable to let go of the hurt of racism and integrate fully into British society, and whose anger or pain is seen by others, including wider society, not just as threatening their own happiness but also that of their children and even of the nation. The second example explores what it means when second-generation immigrants try 'to put racism behind' them (143), and assimilate into British society: the disavowal of their culture, customs and perhaps even their language, as well as embracing the 'happiness duty' (158) not to speak of experiences of racism or of the violence of colonialism, all in order to gain proximity to whiteness.

A persistent question that surfaces throughout the book is whether, and if so how, it might be possible to overcome the differential allocation of un/happiness that it charts. In Chapter Five, 'Happy Futures', Ahmed considers the relation between alienation, revolutionary consciousness, and the possibility of (revolutionary) change in the future. Focusing on so-called 'happiness dystopias' (163), most notably the film *Children of Men*, she investigates how political radicalisation might be made possible by unhappiness and how the ability to be affected by unhappiness might facilitate political freedom, here understood as the 'freedom to be affected by what is unhappy, and to live a life that might affect others unhappily' (195), not in the sense of deliberately causing them unhappiness but through challenging the injustices and exclusions of the present. Unsurprisingly given her theorisation of happiness as a technology of governance, Ahmed refuses the idea of

happiness as *telos*. Instead she favours an orientation towards the future that she describes as one of 'hopeful anxiety' (183), tied to what she terms a 'politics of the hap' (223).

The idea for such a politics draws on the etymology of happiness. To be happy originally meant to have 'good "hap" or fortune' (22). Happiness was thus understood as contingent – the result of chance or good fortune – a view diametrically opposed to contemporary apprehensions of the term where happiness is usually conceived of as the effect of what we do. Picking up on the chanciness of the 'hap', Ahmed thus conceives of a politics of the hap as one that uses unhappiness as a prompt for political action and, in so doing, makes things happen. It is a creative not merely a reactive politics.

There is no doubt that *The Promise of Happiness* offers plenty of food for thought about the operations of happiness in contemporary society. To be sure, some of the arguments Ahmed deploys are already familiar from feminist and queer theory: about the (hetero)-normativity of marriage, the privileging of particular racialised and/or sexualised modes of being over others, and the gendered scripts that determine what constitutes recognisably feminine behaviour. Moreover, her discussion of freedom, characterised as 'the freedom to breathe' (120), with breath tied to possibility, together with her characterisation of queer politics as the 'struggle for a bearable life' (120) recalls very strongly Judith Butler's earlier discussions in *Undoing Gender* (2004) of freedom as possibility and her notion of the 'liveable life'. What is distinctive about Ahmed's work, though, is that it deploys happiness rather than norms or power as the lens through which to view these facets of sociality. Furthermore, it does so in a way that also distinguishes it from that of other affect theorists who often underplay the potential oppressiveness of allegedly 'good' affects or feelings.

Ahmed is surely right that tying happiness to certain forms of behaviour or social institution is normalising (though she tends not to use this word). Indeed, this is one of the most powerful insights of the book. The contention that unhappiness might, nevertheless, be a potential well-spring for challenging the values and orientations that one is expected to conform to is also largely persuasive; that unhappiness or anger might be a catalyst for change rather than affective states that inhibit action as they are so often typified.

Nevertheless, there are aspects of Ahmed's argument that trouble me. First, it is not clear if she is opposed to happiness *per se* or only to normative happiness. Her argument often appears to incline to the former because of the constant stress that she places on the immanent coerciveness of happiness. *If* this is her contention, and it is not entirely clear that it is, then it would seem to indicate that *any* experience of happiness will necessarily be oppressive. By implication, this further suggests that 'happiness' as such cannot be transformed in more productive directions and that affect aliens cannot pursue or develop alternative forms of happiness – because happiness itself is the problem. Although Ahmed demonstrates *very* effectively the deficiencies of 'normative' happiness, I am unconvinced it follows that happiness *itself* as an emotional state has to be construed as inherently inappropriate or in need of renunciation.

Next, one of the most provocative and compelling features of Ahmed's discussion is her consideration of those social forms (such as family, marriage, whiteness) that have already acquired the status of legitimate or recognised happiness-causes. In Chapter Three, Ahmed offers a reading of the final film in the three-part movie *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, which tells the tale of two women, Fran and Kal, who want a child together. The thrust of Ahmed's interpretation is that their desire to have a child to be recognized as a family requires that they must minimize their queerness. In turn, this generates a form of homo-normativity based on queer families approximating 'happy heterosexuality'. This appears to suggest that the *family* form is irredeemably heterosexual and, as such, cannot be converted or reshaped in any way. What would be required, if this is the case, is its complete rejection and the development of alternative, queer *kinship* forms.

What is not clear is whether, because of its imbrication in narratives of normative gender (the happy housewife and mother) and heterosexuality (happy families), the desire to have children is to be regarded itself as *always* a problem and whether queer reproductive happiness (assuming such a thing is possible) depends on its utter repudiation, because it purportedly advances social forms 'in which other queers will not be able to participate' (112). Or, whether it is possible to desire children in an 'unhappy' or a 'happily queer'

fashion, and, if so, whether such queer reproductive desire is able to avoid generating constraining affective norms of its own; where being 'happily queer' means desiring children in an appropriately queer way.

Ahmed does not, of course, only contest the privilege given to 'happiness', she also actively seeks to champion the political potential inhering in unhappiness and other purportedly negative emotions, most especially the anger of black women (see also Lorde 1984). I am deeply sympathetic to this approach. First, because it requires that we acknowledge what is at stake in the delegitimation of certain affective responses: in what is enabled by dismissing feminists as killjoys or black women as angry or queers as spreading unhappiness. Secondly, and equally importantly, because it works against a recent trend in affect theory that privileges the role of positive sentiments, such as generosity, in advancing political struggles (specifically democratic struggle). It does so by drawing attention to the capacity of negative affects to mobilise action and to drive political demands.

Nevertheless, there is a difficulty here if the happiness-unhappiness binary simply posits happiness as problematic, because aligned with oppression and normalisation, and unhappiness as positive, because tied to (the potential for) contestation and freedom. It merely reverses the dualism that Ahmed is justifiably critical of: where happiness is cast as a good feeling that allows for openness to the future, while unhappiness is presented as a bad feeling that consists in an inability to let go of the past. This risks overlooking both the fact that unhappiness itself might be normatively encoded – that there might be *right* and *wrong* ways historically of being unhappy – and that there will surely be occasions when collective unhappiness closes down futural possibilities rather than opens them up.

In the introduction Ahmed states that her aim is explore 'how happiness makes somethings and not others seem promising' (17). Despite the reservations noted above, the success of the book is to do precisely that. Its strength is that it challenges the reader to reconsider why it is that we believe that pursuing certain objects rather than others will lead us to happiness. For this reason, *The Promise of Happiness* offers an important intervention

into the general debate on affect, and forges new and original paths of inquiry in the study of happiness. It is a book that will be widely read for a considerable time to come.

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