

Living a Feminist Life

Weber, Sanne

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Living a Feminist Life. Sara Ahmed. Duke University Press, 2017. 299 pages. ISBN 978-0-8223-6319-4.

In an age of #metoo, in which sexism has become a hotly debated topic and more and more people – including men – have started to publicly identify themselves as feminist, it is important to reflect on what living a feminist life means in practice, beyond social media debates with easy likes and retweets. Sara Ahmed's 'Living a feminist life' provides insights in the constant questioning, sacrifices and potentially aggressive reactions this entails, but also the joy and relief it can bring. She describes this in a personal, literary style full of humour.

The book is divided in three parts. The first part gives a personal and honest account of Ahmed's own process of becoming a feminist. She describes scenes at the family dining table, where she first experienced what being a feminist killjoy – a returning concept in her work – was like. She describes the frustration felt when experiencing injustice for pointing out an injustice. This is a recurring experience for feminists and those who expose sexism and racism, which can cause exhaustion and requires wilfulness – one of Ahmed's other returning concepts. She describes how wilfulness often means not willing – not willing to laugh at sexist jokes, or follow the expected path to happiness, even when this makes others unhappy about the unhappiness they fear.

In the second part of the book, Ahmed analyses diversity work in universities, based on her research and own experiences. She distinguishes two forms of diversity work: on the one hand, the work done to transform institutions and on the other, the work done while not inhabiting the norms of those institutions (p. 86). She uses striking metaphors to capture those experiences, for example describing how the repeated encounters with an institution that refuses to move can feel like banging your head against a brick wall, eventually leaving you shattered. She describes how an institution or social structure for most people is like a comfortable chair, shaped by its repeated use by certain bodies. This is why Ahmed describes privilege, such as whiteness or able-bodied privilege, as an energy-saving device (p. 125). When modifications are needed for other bodies to fit the chair, those who naturally fit the chair often see this as an imposition by. Ahmed describes smiling as one strategy, often employed by diversity workers, to make others feel comfortable with their presence. The risk this entails is that diverse or brown bodies can become poster children, to show the problem of racism is no longer there. Diversity workers can thus become instruments for creating the appearance of change. Even critical academics often dismiss accusations of sexism or racism as identity politics, denying the existence of structures that support some bodies more than others. In order to counter these tendencies, we need to support those who expose injustices and make efforts not to reproduce them ourselves. One concrete and inspiring step Ahmed takes is refusing to cite white men, instead citing (black) feminists in recognition of their struggle and our indebtedness to them.

In the last part of the book, Ahmed describes the consequences of living a feminist life. Pointing out injustices can lead to personal, family or professional relationships being broken. Although this is generally seen as something negative and sad, Ahmed describes how it can also be liberating, a relief from pressure when bonds become damaging or violent. She describes how feminism is about bringing such invisible violence and structures of oppression to the attention, using feminist ear and feminist gut. This however also includes violence and injustice produced by feminism itself. Ahmed describes how white feminists are often reluctant to take the critiques of feminists of colour to heart, and often express feeling hurt by such critiques. She rightly points out that hurt feelings of those accused of sexism or racism, even if they describe themselves as feminists, are a defence system, a way of making something about oneself instead of hearing the critiques. For Ahmed, a feminism that leaves some women behind is not for women. She instead argues for lesbian feminism as a life choice, revolting against the requirement to be in relation to men (p. 224). This definition is therefore also relevant to women who do not identify as lesbians, because of its collective goal of women to reproduce a world that directs attention to men (p. 227).

Needless to say, this is an ongoing struggle. Ahmed illustrates this throughout the book with the myth of the wilful child, whose wilful arm keeps coming up and is constantly forced back. However, as Ahmed creatively suggests, many wilful arms make an army. The book is full of such inventive metaphors, which often build on historic feminist images. The other strength of the book is how it interweaves Ahmed's personal life with her academic experiences to critique how systems of gendered and racial exclusion work at all levels, including in seemingly critical and progressive circles. Critiquing academic culture, Ahmed argues that contrary to rigid academic notions of theory based on narrow citational chains, feminist theory comes out of the sense-making process of becoming a feminist (p. 20). For Ahmed, living a feminist life means constantly questioning the choices one makes, opening oneself up to different ways of living life. This means that feminist theory does not separate politics from living, and instead sees life as data collection. The book illustrates that this can be an exhausting process. Ahmed's own decision to resign from a well-regarded job as a form of feminist protest shows that she lives her life according to the feminist principles of a continuous struggle for a just cause. Fortunately, she also recognises that this is not possible for everyone all of the time. Her killjoy survival kit, which she shares with her readers, therefore includes strategies to make this manageable, such as time – to take time and take breaks – and dance. This way, she makes clear that in spite of stereotypes of humourless feminists, joy is part of feminist killjoy survival and an essential element of living a feminist life.

Sanne Weber
University of Birmingham