

How Many Times the Same Story?

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Sara Ahmed. 2021. *Complaint!*. Durham: Duke University Press. 376 pages.

There is something deeply thankless about the task of having to review Sara Ahmed's latest book, *Complaint!*, in multiple meanings of that word. It requires me to criticize – possibly even harshly – a work with ambition and scope I find admirable, and whose political commitments and hopes I

aspire to share. More troubling even, this sentiment emerges alongside the creeping suspicion that most criticism I am about to present against *Complaint!* ultimately serves to confirm Ahmed's intuitions and conclusions.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Coming in at the heels of her two previous works, the excellent *The Use of Use* (2019) and the widely popular *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), *Complaint!* takes for its subject matter the

titular complaint – or, to be more precise, the fate of complaints made against sexist, racist, and ableist working conditions lodged by scholars within the (Western: chiefly UK, but also US) university system. The starting point here is Ahmed's own disillusionment with the university and her decision to – in the face of the ignorance following her complaints – leave her post at Goldsmiths College and become an independent scholar. As she writes, this prompted her to reach out to other people, both established scholars as well as students who shared similar experiences with having their complaints stymied, ignored, and filed away by the administration invested not in fostering diversity and equity, but rather in preserving work-place hierarchies and reputation at the cost of minority workers.

Much of *Complaint!* is, therefore, built upon collected stories extracted from a number of interviews; however, despite the superficial similarity of methods, it would be difficult to classify the work as one belonging to a field of institutional anthropology. Social sciences are hardly a point of reference for Ahmed, who instead shapes her material into something immediately familiar to the readers of her previous works: a phenomenology of a minority experience.

The task that Ahmed sets herself up against is to provide a rich and viscerally-felt account of how it feels to complain against injustice and go

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mostly unheard. Although she does not shy from analyzing institutional logics driving the processes of ignoring and setting aside complaints, her interest lies less in the institution itself and more in the life of those who suffer as the consequence of its inertia and tendency to reinforce existing hierarchies of social and cultural privilege.

In writing about it, she is also unmistakable Ahmed in style. Consider the following opening sentence of the book: “To be heard as complaining is not to be heard. To hear someone as complaining is an effective way of dismissing someone. You do not have to listen to the content of what she is saying if she is just complaining or always complaining” (p. 1). To the readers of her previous work, this is not just familiar – it is cosy. The entire text, then, moves alongside similar paths; we follow Ahmed’s phenomenology of complaint guided by her free-flowing prose, gentle wordplay, and attention to the intricacies of the everyday experience. As in *The Use of Use*, photographs of walls, doors, and filing cabinets illustrate the text, not to provide concrete examples or the visual archive of some specific time and place, but rather to serve as anchor points for some of Ahmed’s recurring metaphors: that of a wall to claw on, of a door closing, of a cabinet as a graveyard of complaints. In fact, some of those photographs return from her previous work, as at places Ahmed retreads significant portions of her argument from *The Use of Use*, returning to the out-of-use post-box turned into a bird’s nest that was so crucial for her in that book.

The sense of familiarity does not limit itself to matters of style. The arguments themselves likewise feel immediately known. Ahmed’s phenomenology of a complaint is, in fact, a detailed account of experiences she has already devoted much of her work to: of being an (institutional) feminist killjoy whose complaints disturb the peace and hierarchy; of being set against systems designed to suppress minority voices; of butting one’s head against the world’s sexism and racism over and over again, and feeling

like it is going nowhere. In this respect, *Complaint!* reads like a collection of case studies meant to illustrate *Living a Feminist Life*, or less abstract presentation of her points from *The Use of Use*. This is to say: the biggest issue of *Complaint!* is that while reading this book, I could not escape the nagging sense I have already read it before, and multiple times, too. It is, for the lack of a better word, overly repetitive.

And yet, this is also where the thanklessness of criticism comes back in full force. When I say that *Complaint!* is repetitive, that is, it revisits arguments made before, and reaches conclusions already well-established in the author’s prior work, what do I do? Following Ahmed, one could point out how the demand to present “fresh” or “new” material in the face of the persistence of sexism and racism is, in fact, a demand to look away from those sorry structures, to pay them no mind. Insistence on moving on in thinking, instead of going in circles, can, therefore, in itself be an insistence on ignoring the structures that will not budge easily. An important theme in *Complaint!* is how such complaints are often met with a soft sort of dissuasion: *don’t say those things, they won’t accomplish anything, everyone already knows that this or that professor is a pest, but nothing can be done about it*. An accusation of repetition, then, is also an accusation of being boring, unexciting, of obsessively dwelling in the same – and if the same is a deep critique of institutional and structural violence, this dwelling becomes a domain of the killjoy that refuses to shut up about the wrong, even as her voice is deemed nagging and frustrating.

This, incidentally, makes the very criticism I am raising here – that *Complaint!* is a book that does not really move Ahmed’s thought beyond the bounds of what she had set in *Living a Feminist Life* and *The Use of Use*, not to mention her earlier work – by itself a demonstration of her argument. Of course, *Complaint!* is repetitive because the work of complaining is one of endless repetition of the same point. Of course, *Complaint!* refuses to

move towards new theoretical grounds because complaining refuses to stop addressing the same old problem. Of course, *Complaint!* is mildly frustrating to read to someone who has already consumed Ahmed's previous work because complaining is not meant to be easy on the ear of the listener. And as a result, I am not sure what to write next.

"We can hear something because of its intensity," writes Ahmed, adding that "the exclamation point in the title of *Complaint!* is a way of showing what I am hearing, how a complaint is heard as intensity, an emphasis, a sharp point, a sore point, a raising of the voice, a shrieking, a shattering" (p. 47). Perhaps, then, the repetitiveness in this text is precisely this exclamation point, meant to drive up the intensity of the killjoy statement and point at the urgency of complaint that does not stop even when it is (over)heard – especially since, as Ahmed notes time after time, hearing a complaint without acting on it is one way to *file it away*, which is to file down at the very will to resist the injustice that the complaint marks. So, does that negate the criticism? Does it mean that repetition is merely a part of the method that ought not to be pointed out as a shortcoming of the work?

Unfortunately, the issue is not so easy to resolve. One could ask, for example, what it is that allows Ahmed the ability to air those same complaints – and points – over and over again, making her very work a kind of performance of feminist killjoy practices. Would a scholar without her reputation, without her fame and status, be allowed such dwelling in complaint? But then again, is it valid to criticize a writer for making good use of their own privileged status? The paradox is that thinking about *Complaint!*, whether to criticize or praise, invariably seems to point towards problems that are not directly related to the work of complaining itself. This is a challenge – and an interesting one at that. But what does it say about the book, about the work? Does it have to say anything?

This question is also a conclusion. *Complaint!* is a book about problems that lead to complaints, and how complaints themselves become problems, and brand people who complain as problematic. It is only fitting, then, that as a work, it is also a problem – one that does not yield itself to easy, effusive praise, one that seems to demand criticism, which then turns out to have been its strength all along, and that is what is so thankless about trying to review it. There is no definitive point I feel secure in making about *Complaint!*, not even whether this uncertainty speaks to the work's shortcoming or its power. Not even a glib "perhaps it's both" seems fitting here. This is also why I do not know how else to conclude this review without lapsing into an endless string of repetitions.

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Ahmed, Sara. 2019. *The Use of Use*. Durham: Duke University Press.