



The Promise of Happiness

By Sara Ahmed



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The Promise of Happiness is a provocative cultural critique of the imperative to be happy. It asks what follows when we make our desires and even our own happiness conditional on the happiness of others: “I just want you to be happy”; “I’m happy if you’re happy.” Combining philosophy and feminist cultural studies, Sara Ahmed reveals the affective and moral work performed by the “happiness duty,” the expectation that we will be made happy by taking part in that which is deemed good, and that by being happy ourselves, we will make others happy. Ahmed maintains that happiness is a promise that directs us toward certain life choices and away from others. Happiness is promised to those willing to live their lives in the right way.

Ahmed draws on the intellectual history of happiness, from classical accounts of ethics as the good life, through seventeenth-century writings on affect and the passions, eighteenth-century debates on virtue and education, and nineteenth-century utilitarianism. She engages with feminist, antiracist, and queer critics who have shown how happiness is used to justify social oppression, and how challenging oppression causes unhappiness. Reading novels and films including *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Well of Loneliness*, *Bend It Like Beckham*, and *Children of Men*, Ahmed considers the plight of the figures who challenge and are challenged by the attribution of happiness to particular objects or social ideals: the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer, the angry black woman, and the melancholic migrant. Through her readings she raises critical questions about the moral order imposed by the injunction to be happy.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Ahmed’s analyses are spot-on and provocative. . . . Ahmed’s analysis of this and other topics is unpredictable and engaging.” - Heather Seggel, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*

“Ahmed’s language is a joy, and her work on each case study is filled with insight and rigor as she doggedly traces the social networks of dominance concealed and congealed around happiness. . . . *The Promise of Happiness* is an important intervention in affect studies that crucially approaches one of the major assumptions guiding social life: the assumption that we need to be happy.” - Sean Grattan, *Social Text*

“. . . [F]ascinating and important, both in showing us how to read some key texts differently and in showing how to think more carefully about happiness and its politics. . . . [T]here is a perverse happiness to be taken from reading such an interesting book about the insufficiency of happiness.” - Richard Ashcroft, *Textual Practice*

“*The Promise of Happiness* bridges philosophy and cultural studies, phenomenology and feminist thought—providing a fresh and incisive approach to some of the most urgent contemporary feminist issues. Ahmed navigates this bridge with a voice both clear and warm to convey ideas that are as complex as they are intimate and accessible. Her treatment of affect as a phenomenological project provides feminist theorists a way out of mind-body divides without reverting to essentialisms, enabling Ahmed to attend to intersectional and global power relations with acuity and originality.” - Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Signs*

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The Promise of Happiness is richly valuable not only for its discussion of utilitarianism but also for its broader deconstruction of the workings of happiness in a range of works of philosophy, literature, and social science. Whereas other feminist theorists also occasionally cast a critical eye toward happiness, or raise consciousness of female unhappiness, Ahmed has produced a volume that is unparalleled in its sustained and extensive expose´ of the entanglements between discourses of happiness and oppression.” - Andrea Veltman, *Hypatia*

“Ahmed enhances feminism’s critical toolbox by guiding us to regard affect as a cipher for society as we track how it produces and is produced by politics. . . . Ahmed draws on feminism to potentially enhance the quality of life for her readers, who are offered mindful practices of relinquishing attachment to various ideals in a text that is neither Pollyannaish nor depressing.” - Naomi Greyser, *Feminist Studies*

“At a time when happiness studies are all the rage and feminism is accused of destroying women’s happiness, Sara Ahmed offers a bold critique of the consensus that happiness is an unconditional good. Her new book asks searching questions about the nature of the good life, making its case in a wonderfully pellucid prose. What a paradox that a defense of the kill-joy should be such a pleasure to read! This timely,

original, and intellectually expansive book is sure to trigger a great deal of debate.”—**Rita Felski**, University of Virginia

“What could be more naturalized and less subject to ideological critique than happiness? How are we to get critical perspective on it? Through her readings of texts and films, Sara Ahmed shows how this might work. By revealing the complexity and ambivalence of happiness, she intervenes in several fields—including queer and feminist theory, affect studies, and critical race theory—in a genuinely new and exciting way.”—**Heather K. Love**, author of *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*

“. . . [F]ascinating and important, both in showing us how to read some key texts differently and in showing how to think more carefully about happiness and its politics. . . . [T]here is a perverse happiness to be taken from reading such an interesting book about the insufficiency of happiness.”

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(Sean Grattan *Social Text*)

From the Back Cover

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About the Author

Sara Ahmed is Professor of Race and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She is the author of *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, also published by Duke University Press; *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*; and *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism*.

Users Review

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Jennifer Wetzel:

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