

The Loreley of Happiness

The Promise of Happiness, Sara Ahmed, Duke University Press, 2010

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Abstract Sara Ahmed has written a highly original book on happiness by not focusing on the content, but on the context in which the word happiness is used. Her chapters are titled Feminist Killjoys, Unhappy Queers, Melancholic Mirgants and Happy Futures. Ahmed convincingly shows that the pursuit of happiness may have unintended side-effects in different social contexts, and she has collected a lot of stories and ideas that provide a backbone for the book. The ideological critique provided by Ahmed would have been a lot stronger if she would have used data from empirical studies to judge her own ideas.

Keywords Happiness · Feminism · Migrants · Homosexuality · Cultural studies

Main Text

When the author Vin Packer tried to publish a lesbian pulp novel in the early 1950's, she had a hard time convincing the publisher that her story was fit for print. He eventually agreed to publish on the condition that she would change the happy ending, because otherwise the story would make 'homosexuality attractive'. The novel became a best-seller in 1952. In 2004 Vin Packer expressed regret that she had provided the requested unhappy ending, but also pride, 'because more important was the fact there was a new book about us'.

This is one of the stories that Sara Ahmed, a professor of race and cultural studies at the University of London, has accumulated in her book *The Promise of Happiness*. The story signifies an aspect that is often ignored in main stream happiness studies. Happiness can be used coercively. Ahmed uses the cultural image of the happy housewife in the sixties and seventies as an example. A good girl was

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supposed to find happiness in making her husband, children and parents happy. Feminists exposed the bad feelings that were beneath the surface of some happy housewives. They were often disregarded as killjoys because of it. Ahmed suggests that breaking the rigid ideology that women belonged at home, may at times have harmed average happiness. ‘Opening up the world, or expanding one’s horizons, can thus mean becoming more conscious of just how much there is to be unhappy about.’

Ahmed also discusses the repercussions of the promise of happiness for homosexuals. Being openly homosexual involves a choice for a lifestyle that may promise more happiness for themselves than would have been possible by entering a heterosexual relationship. Their choice may however harm the happiness of their relatives, when homosexuality is a life style that the relatives do not approve of. The choice for homosexuality may therefore be painful. Ahmed: ‘To be empathic is to suffer; it is to be made unhappy by other people’s unhappiness’. Ahmed reveals the pressure that can be behind an seemingly innocent sentence such as “I just want you to be happy.” This speech act often translates to ‘It is hard for me to be happy if you are not’ and can even suggest that you can be responsible the happiness of the speaker. The word happy is used to hide social pressures beneath a surface of pure altruistic motives.

In a following chapter Ahmed focuses on melancholic migrants, and she describes how early utilitarianism was used to legitimize colonial policies. The west was not acting out of self-interest, but was active overseas to make natives happy. Or as Ahmed put it: ‘The utilitarian promotion of happiness involves technologies of mimicry: the imperative to make the colonial elite “like us” in matters of taste, opinions, morals and intellect.’

Ahmed succeeds in describing blind spots of a happiness research and she has a habit of producing attractive sentences. Large parts of the book offer a good read. When she discusses the pessimistic tendency to regard a glass as half full, she argues that the story is not that simple. What if the glass contains a bitter medicine? Then it is optimistic to conclude that the glass is already half empty.

Ahmed likes to play mind games, but I have to admit that the books also contained parts that were very hard for me to follow. This is partly due to the fact that Ahmed has a background in cultural studies that employs a methodology of collecting ideas that is quite alien for me. The sense that different sources of evidence should be weighed against each other by other means than the personal preferences of the author, seems to be lacking all together. An example is that Ahmed argues for the freedom to be unhappy and she favorably discusses Schopenhauer’s pessimism, that may prevent false beliefs about happiness, which result in pain and disillusionment. She ignores the empirical studies that indicate otherwise (e.g. Schalkx and Bergsma 2008).

A second concern is if Ahmed sometimes gets carried away by her habit of being critical about dominating points of view. In her chapter about unhappy queers, her sympathy is clearly for homosexuals that should seek individual freedom to live their lives the way they want to. But when she discusses the movie *Bend it Like Beckham* she is troubled by the choices of the leading character Jess. Jess is a daughter of an Indian migrant family and lives in England. She wants to break free from the rules of how an Indian girl should act; she wants to play soccer and bend the ball. She

ignores social pressures and seeks individual fulfilment on the field. This seems to be the same tension between family background and individual preferences, that is so difficult for homosexuals. But this time Ahmed does not want to choose the side of the individual, because she is bothered by the fact that Jess chooses a white boyfriend when the story unfolds. Ahmed concludes: ‘The world of freedom promised by football puts her in intimate contact with a white girl and a white man. Freedom takes form as proximity to whiteness.’ I will not argue that Ahmed is totally wrong here, but I think her judgement is too stern. Jess’ love and delight seemed quite sincere to me. I had the suspicion that Ahmed would have liked the movie better if Jess would have chosen a lesbian affair with a black girl, but I think that being unconventional can be overrated.

References

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