

BOOK REVIEW

Sara Ahmed. *Complaint!*

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2021, 376**

Complaint! is the latest from prolific writer and feminist Sara Ahmed, known for her work on the cultural politics of emotion and queer phenomenology. The present book arose out of her experience of advocating against sexual harassment at Goldsmiths College in the University of London, where she once served as the director of the Centre for Feminist Research. In May 2016, she famously announced her resignation from her post at the Department of Media and Communications, citing Goldsmiths' failure to address the problem of sexual harassment committed by academic staff against students.

The book is based on at least 40 interviews and 18 written statements by students, academics, researchers, and administrators. Adopting the method of queer phenomenology, which provides a queer model of the concept of orientation and describes a positive politics of disorientation, Ahmed presents complaint as a "phenomenology of the institution." She writes,

... Complaint can be a way of apprehending what is around you: so much appears if you make or try to make a complaint that would not otherwise appear.... Then making a complaint changes your sense of self, it changes your sense of the world. (Ahmed 2021, 37-38)

The results of this phenomenology are comprehensive and perspicacious, as shown by the book's four main parts. The first, entitled "Institutional Mechanics," details what is revealed when one files a complaint, namely the workings of the system. It is an unwieldy system that often discourages the making of complaints, mainly through "nonperformatives" and managerial tactics designed to defeat complaints at the initial stage. Ahmed's original concept of the nonperformative pertains to an institutional speech act, such as a policy or a procedure, which does not bring into effect what it names (Ahmed 2021, 51). A policy, for example, can either be treated as if it does not exist or, when it is acknowledged, can actually be used as counter-evidence against a complaint:

... when complaints about harassment or bullying come out in the public domain, many organizations respond by pointing to their own policies as if having a policy against something is evidence it does not exist....

Commitments can be used as a *rebuttal system* as if they directly contradict the evidence of a complaint.... (Ahmed 2021, 82)

Ahmed also itemizes the strategies that management uses in order to forestall complaints, beginning with the encouragement to resolve disputes informally within one's own department. At this point, the complainer may be warned against the costs of complaining, which may have ramifications for his or her career. The figure of the complainer is gendered and associated with making an unnecessary fuss; she is met with skepticism and a kind of procedural and institutional fatalism. The act of nodding can also be a strategy of appeasement, as when the complainer is met with nods but his or her issue is not actually addressed or elevated to the concerned office. Blanking is when the complainer is simply ignored or not even acknowledged as having said anything, and it is used when other methods fail. Finally, there is strategic inefficiency, which pertains to "not just the failure of things to work properly but is also how things are working" (Ahmed 2021, 129). In other words, the sluggishness of the system is precisely how it is intended to work. Unfortunately, this tactic is effective against those who most need to complain, i.e., those who rarely have the time and resources to see a complaint through, as when he or she is on a temporary contract or a temporary visa.

The second part of the book, "The Immanence of Complaint," examines the backward temporality of complaints, a person's negative dwelling, which has led to the making of the complaint. It begins with an uneasy feeling, which becomes a progressive realization that something is not quite right. However, the complaint usually takes time because "it can take time to trust your own mind" (Ahmed 2021, 148). Women especially are prone to epistemic uncertainty because, as they are expected to maintain and value relationships, they are discouraged from complaining. The behavior that is the subject of complaint then becomes even more pernicious as it is normalized, which is how the grooming process is allowed to flourish.

Sometimes it is the *unremarkability* of the behavior, how people are not remarking upon something, not objecting or showing signs of objecting, that can make you wonder whether what is happening is not objectionable after all. (Ahmed 2021, 153)

When the complainer finally resolves to make a complaint, he or she experiences a heightened consciousness, when the violence that was heretofore not faced is finally brought out into the open. It is at this point that institutional harassment begins, which Ahmed (2021, 238) defines in terms of "how institutional resources are mobilized to stop those who are trying to make complaints such that those who are trying to complaints feel the institution as weight, as what comes down on them." The complainer tends to get little support because people near him or her also fear being targeted.

In this part, Ahmed also presents a political analysis of how people inhabit spaces, in particular institutional spaces. Those who are moved to complain are typically misfits, those whose movements are hindered by the very structures of the institution. They are bodies that thereby become testimonies about their own

misfitting. As a misfit, the complainer stands out and comes to be identified with/as the problem, even becoming a “complaint magnet,” the object of other people’s complaints. However, if one is privileged, *one can make a complaint without becoming a complainer*, as in the case of the figure/meme of “Karen” (Ahmed 2021, 204). Ultimately, the complainant, as a misfit performs “nonreproductive labor,” the work of intervening so that a problem will not be reproduced; it is tantamount to the refusal to “adjust to what is unjust” (Ahmed 2021, 220).

The third part of the book, “If These Doors Could Talk,” uses the metaphor of doors and thresholds to describe the dynamics of the complaint process, and the forces that hinder or help it. These forces involve power relations of race, class, and gender. (The centrality of door metaphor is borne out by the book cover, which features art by Rachel Whiteread entitled “Double-Doors.”) The idiomatic expressions Ahmed employs include the following:

- “Behind closed doors” – Information is kept secret from the public. Ahmed (2021, 244) cites the case of a female student whose harasser’s actions were minimized by the dean and who was able to retire without a blemish on his record.
- “Doors shutting people in or out” – When a complaint is ignored or stopped, “violence is shut in [while] those against whom that violence is directed are shut out” (Ahmed 2021, 247), as when the complainer is forced or encouraged to leave the institution. Non-disclosure agreements or NDAs are often resorted to, not just to protect the reputation of a professor against whom a complaint has been made but also to protect the reputation of the university (Ahmed 2021, 250).
- “Keeping the door open” – If doors are closed on complaints, they are kept open for harassers, whose conduct is thus enabled (Ahmed 2021, 255).
- “Holding the door” – Doors represent pathways in one’s career; the complainer is often warned against antagonizing his or her harasser, who is “an important man” (Ahmed 2021, 290). Because of the culture of collegiality and the university essentially being “a web of past intimacies,” people can hold the door for others who will feel beholden to them. This can make it harder for would-be complainers to actually make a case against their harassers and for bystanders to intervene when someone is being harassed. References and promotions can be doors, as well; “... *holding the door* is about whom you have to go through in order to get information, energy, and resources. The *door holders* are often called *gatekeepers*” (Ahmed 2021, 318).
- “Entry doors”- Certain ways of coming into the institution may count against a person, as when he or she is perceived as getting in not so much through merit as through a diversity policy. Thus, the arrival of people of color is often framed as debt (Ahmed 2021, 216). They recognize that the diversity door, though it is doing a lot of useful work, may also be shut at any point.

The fourth and final part of the book, “Conclusions,” emphasizes the importance of complaint collectives. The first chapter is written by postgrad students from

Goldsmiths who were involved in the formal complaint process, the failure of which had moved Ahmed to resign. Leila Whitley et al. narrate how the university, as a matter of policy, viewed faculty-student relationships as a private matter, which led them to conclude it “actively did not want to know about abuses of power.” This policy also forced complaints to be filed on an individual basis, which they resisted. They note how the university never publicly acknowledged what has happened, which allowed the harassers—though now no longer affiliated with Goldsmiths—to leave with their reputations intact. The last chapter of the book constitutes a manifesto about the role of complaint activists in working on new policies and procedures, and about complaint collectives as a form of institutional wisdom. Only by banding together can individuals divide the costs of complaint and begin to initiate change. “My hope is that this book can be a reminder: we are not alone. We sound louder when we are heard together; we are louder,” writes Ahmed (2021, 356).

Several things distinguish this timely book. One is Ahmed’s familiar strategy of calling attention to the etymologies of words in order to intervene in their sense-making, which she has also done in her trilogy of works, *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (2019), *Willful Subjects* (2014), and *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Also striking is the use of metaphors and photographs in the book—e.g., of mailboxes, filing cabinets, corridors, and yes, doors—in order to concretize abstract ideas. But most importantly, Ahmed provides a groundbreaking phenomenological analysis of how institutions work, and how feminist politics can be brought to bear on their transformation. She alludes to that perennial conundrum, voiced by Audre Lorde, about dismantling the master’s house using the master’s tools. Thinking the institution—its mechanisms, its violence, its self-perpetuation—entails robust conceptual work, which Ahmed delivers. In this way, her work is reminiscent of much feminist theorizing on collective and social responsibility, such as that of Iris Marion Young and Hannah Arendt. Ahmed’s message could not have come at a better time in this #MeToo era, during which feminism, while doing important work, has also been criticized as going overboard, for example, by the likes of Laura Kipnis in her controversial 2017 book, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*. In the face of such criticisms, Ahmed makes a case for a more just complaint process, backing up her arguments with the most grounded of phenomenological studies.

Noelle Leslie dela Cruz
De La Salle University, Philippines