

BOOKNOTE

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Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, Duke University Press, 2021, 376pp, £98 hardcover, £25.99 paperback.

I read Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* at a time where I had become exhausted and deflated with the sheer weight of what it means to be a first-generation Black woman researcher in academia. I came to *Complaint!* at a time when I didn't have anything left in me to say. This, as Sara Ahmed explains, 'can be a sign of how much you have to complain about' (p153). The pure exhaustion of complaint had rendered me silent. There was so much to be said that if I started to complain, I didn't know whether I could stop. Ahmed's *Complaint!* reminded me however, that I didn't even need to say anything to be registered as complaining, all I needed to do was turn up. Turning up was enough. Turning up became exhausting. Being the only Black woman in a white space, registers as complaint. Writing a literature review and discovering that next to nothing has been written in your area and then simply stating that discovery registers as complaint. I discovered that even confusion can register as a complaint when it comes to unwarranted advances made by external male academics. I wondered about the entanglement of complaint, the entanglement of complaint with my joy for academic exploration, with the considered support available to me at my home institution, and with the stimulating discussions which I delight in and get to take part in. This book came at this time.

Complaint! is Ahmed's second major study accomplished using social science methods. Ahmed, through *Complaint!*, sought to 'hear about complaints from those who have made them' (p8). Ahmed became an ear for complaints to be heard, engaging in dialogue with students, academics, researchers and administrators, while drawing on her own personal complainant experience. The approach that Ahmed takes to the concept of complaint is not limited to formal complaints alone; rather, it gives careful space to the non-neat journey that complaint takes.

Please be forewarned, this book is heavy. If you are expecting a disconnected book on complaint, this is not that book. Going through all the stories of complaint in this book is taxing work, at times it can be too much. Ahmed's book warrants a response. It made me think through and with the lived realities brought forward. I went through my own complaint biography, and in doing so I brought that trauma into the present. The non-disconnectedness and heaviness of the book enables Ahmed to make a significant contribution in expanding our ability to hear complaint. To hear complaint beyond the limitations and parameters set out in formal complaint

procedures, expanding and paying attention to the full journey of complaints, to the entanglement of complaint. Ahmed asks us to think, to think about our own journeys of complaint, those we have shared, those which we have stored in our bodies, and the sort of complaints that come from just being who you are, a feminist, a Black woman, coming from a working-class family. This book is not a light read. Coming up against the violence of academia is not a light experience.

In this book Ahmed makes a fundamental connection between complaint and how spaces are occupied. In doing so Ahmed brings to the forefront the history and inheritance of complaint. I for example, would not be writing this review of Sara Ahmed's book, if others before me did not complain. There is a history of complaint. There is an indebtedness I have for those who have gone before me, who refused so I could enter now. I embody this history whether I like it or not and I bring this history with me. Ahmed crucially reminds us through *Complaint!* that complaint has a legacy. That complaint has a history. A history of fighting for survival. In bringing attention to occupation, Ahmed brings attention to structures and the efficient inefficient formal complaints process. The book does not adhere to the conventional narrative of singular, isolated occurrences, instead it shifts the focus to structural, collective issues. *Complaint!* says it how it is. In doing so, space has been given for that which was behind closed doors to come forward. Ahmed says that which others may be too weary to say, due to the sheer cost of being seen as complaining. This in part is due to the fact that Ahmed has her own journey of complaint, which enabled and shaped this book. Ahmed resigned 'in protest about the failure of the institution to hear complaints' (p8). Ahmed understands the cost. You can feel this lived understanding when you read this book.

Complaint does not come out of nowhere, Ahmed explains, but complaint is a response to a violent and already occupied space, it is a state of refusal. Complaint is about the hostility of the environment. Ahmed describes the work of complaint as a pushing, as effort, as a coming up against this environment. This pushing up requires work, requires your energies. What Ahmed brings forward, throughout the book, is the heaviness, the weight and the exhaustion that comes along with what it means to have to complain. With all the exhaustion, weariness and heaviness of complaint, at times I wondered what is the use of complaint? Is complaint about accommodating more people into or dismantling the occupied hostile environment? Ahmed indeed raises this question and draws our attention to and questions the formal complaints procedure as utilising the master's tools. I would have liked to have heard more concerning the use, and this difference, and what it means to move towards one over the other. Indeed, this is not a simple question nor an untangled question, especially for those of us whose very presence can register as a complaint, but it is one which warrants further consideration given the weight of complaint. Given the weight of complaint on the body. In holding well the way in which complaint is embodied and

stored within our bodies, Ahmed reveals and reminds us that complaint can be refusal, complaint can be what it means to fight, to fight to live.

Feminists will notice Ahmed's unapologetic stance not only on the gap between what is proclaimed by and then done by the institution, but that which is proclaimed and then done by fellow feminists and other critical scholars. Ahmed's use of lived experiences gives light to lived instances where that gap is held wide. The gap can be seen throughout the book and shows how whiteness and sexism is protected and reproduced. Those speaking about its very deconstruction are the same who are upholding it. 'But I like her ... he has been good to me, though ... oh, it's just the way they are', is a way of siding with the one the complaint concerns, over the one who has experienced the violence. You can uphold it by appealing to those who have expressed the complaint to not take it, the abuse, so seriously. Ahmed, through being an ear to listen and receive, has made a weighty contribution to simultaneously breaking down and unearthing not only the journey of complaint, but also the actions of how the hostile environment that produces the need to complain is reproduced and normalised.

Ahmed is successful in bringing forward that which has been kept behind closed doors, contained and isolated. This book in this way is like a doorstep. Stopping doors from being closed too early. From being closed at all. This book is letting the door remain open on all the complaints that have formally or informally been deemed closed. A doorstep can be annoying for those who want to close the door, who keep trying to close the door. Ahmed, in being unapologetic, faithful and attentive to that which is felt, makes it hard to bypass, hard to close the door on the collective lived reality of complaint which she brings forward.

There is strength in this book. There is strength in the lived realities which Ahmed de-isolates. What I found in complaint was refuge, a coming together, a collective. The book is a resource for critical students, academics, researchers and university administrators, a way of helping those of us, who keep coming up against it, to not feel alone, to not feel like we are going crazy and to not have to walk down the same corridors, in a way that would render us more vulnerable. The book provides those of us who are doing critical work in academia with the means to help articulate the fullness of complaint. There were many times while reading this book that I wanted to – and did – clap, click, shout yes, raise my hands, because at last someone was finally listening. The words in *Complaint!* resonated so deeply with me that they compelled a physical response in my body. I just couldn't sit still; the book moved my body and my body was moved.

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