

The Promise of Happiness

By [Sara Ahmed](#)
[Duke University Press](#)

In the introduction to her new book [The Promise of Happiness](#), Sara Ahmed asks readers a provocative question: “Do we consent to happiness? And what are we consenting to, if or when we consent to happiness?” Ahmed takes on the elusive topic of happiness not to define it, but to look at how it works. Amazingly, this book does not get trapped in abstraction. Sara Ahmed approaches her critique of happiness with explicitly feminist, anti-racist, and queer analysis, always attentive to the historical moment in which she’s writing. She moves through what she calls an “archive of happiness,” comprised of novels, philosophical treatises, films, utopian proposals, and dystopian visions that all deal in some way with happiness.

In the first chapter, the author reads older European philosophical and psychological accounts of happiness, many of them concerned with the family as a site of happiness. This history of ideas sets the groundwork for the ways in which happiness is constructed in contemporary times. Ahmed introduces the figure of the “affect alien” as a person who challenges the happy family ideal. This figure takes shape in the next three chapters in the form of “feminist killjoys,” “unhappy queers,” and “melancholy migrants.”

These chapters demonstrate how happiness gets used as a form of social control. In looking at how feminists challenge the notion that people are naturally happiest in rigid gender roles, Ahmed writes, “The struggle over happiness forms the political horizon in which feminist claims are made.” Her reading of the classic novel [The Well of Loneliness](#) considers how an unhappy ending for a queer main character opens up a possibility for social critique that a “happy” one might not. In her reading of the film [Bend It Like Beckham](#), Ahmed asks why certain kinds of rebellion (say, against one’s immigrant parents) get celebrated in mainstream film while other kinds (say, against British imperialism) don’t. She also recasts the age-old parental plea of “I just want you to be happy,” as a way in which a child is obligated to be happy in order to make the parent happy (a kind of debt).

In concluding chapters, Ahmed cleverly turns her gaze to the future by looking at the varied promises of happiness presented in speculative fiction. Dystopian visions, such as Ursula LeGuin’s short story “The People Who Walked Away from Omelas,” can show how insidiously the happiness of the majority might be used to justify cruelty toward the marginalized. Ahmed acknowledges that positioning happiness as a goal has disturbing implications. She suggests a new approach to living: “...if we no longer presume happiness is our telos, unhappiness would register as more than what gets in the way. When we are no longer sure of what gets in the way, then ‘the way’ itself becomes a question.” In her conclusion, Ahmed uses the word *hap* (itself so much more buoyant in sound than the heavy *happiness*) as a way to work through new ideas at the level of language.

Ahmed writes in her introduction, “To kill joy... is to open a life, to make room for possibility, for chance. My aim in this book is to make room.” I think Sara Ahmed succeeds in her project. Fresh in its premises and elegant in its follow-through, with plenty of incisive questions to move it along, [*The Promise of Happiness*](#) offers new lenses on an emotion rarely challenged. I suggest you make room for it on your shelf.