

Feminist academics: killjoys, unhappy, dissident? An approach to the notion of the feminist in the work of Sara Ahmed

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This snapshot analyses the experiences of feminist academics in the UK. As my current research understands academia as a gendered social reality, this snapshot looks at how this gendered social reality affects and shapes feminist academics' experiences. In this snapshot, I draw particular attention to the work done by Sara Ahmed (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d) who proposes that 'feminist' is understood as a difficult category, with the subject perceived to be stubborn and 'unhappy'. In addition, empirical evidence from my current research is discussed in order to further illustrate my argument.

Keywords: Feminist, Academia, (Un)Happiness, Affect Alien

Introduction

I am interested in analysing the experiences of feminist academics in the UK since they have been crucial actors in the development of critical ways of knowing (such as those based on people's experiences), more access to education for women, particularly higher education – one of the most relevant feminist demands during the last three decades - and insightful critiques of the gendered, classed and racialised division of society (see Antheas and Yuval Davis 1992; Skeggs 1997; and Reay 1998, amongst

others).

This snapshot is based on my current research in which academia is understood as a gendered social reality, and both my current research and this snapshot attempt to understand how this gendered social reality affects feminist academics' experiences. The focus is on their experiences, since 'experience' is not only one of the key concepts in feminist theory and research (Hughes 2002), but it has also been a crucial concept for feminist critiques of knowledge production, particularly against the

notions of objectivity and neutrality; the position of knower and what can be known (Harding 1987, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Maynard and Purvis 1994). In this snapshot I draw attention to the work done by Sara Ahmed (2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d) who proposes that 'feminist' is understood as a difficult category, with the subject perceived to be stubborn and 'unhappy'. In addition, empirical evidence from my current research is presented in order to illustrate the line of argument of this piece of work.

Conditions of new governance, managerialism, inspection and accountability (Lucas 2006; Deem et al 2007; Lambert et al 2007) together with structural transformation, changes in resource allocation and conditions of service for academics (Blaxter et al 1998; Black 2005), and the recently announced higher education cuts - which are political decisions influenced by global neoliberal trends (Olssen and Peters 2005) - characterise the current academic context in the UK. That is why to place this paper in this particular context of marketisation of higher education in the UK (Neary and Winn 2000; Furedi 2011) makes it interesting, challenging and pertinent.

Feminist academics: towards a definition

In Britain there was an abundance of writing about feminists, and particularly feminist academ-

ics, during the late 1980s and the 1990s; however there has been a decline in this debate from the late 1990s to the present day. Nonetheless, some interesting ideas have emerged recently. In one of the most contemporary and thought-provoking approaches to the notion of being a feminist, Ahmed proposes that:

A feminist story can be a beginning ... we can make sense of the complexity of feminism as an activist space if we can give an account of how feminism becomes an object of feeling, as something we invest in, as a way of relating to the world, a way of making sense of how we relate to the world (Ahmed 2010a, 1).

According to Ahmed, her story, and to some extent our own feminist stories, begins with a table, 'the happy table'. However, because it is difficult to preserve the order of happiness, tense and problematic conversations are inevitable, there are moments when one becomes 'the problem' - the object of shared disapproval, the cause of distortion - and therefore one becomes alienated. In that sense, being a feminist implies a process of alienation from happiness (Ahmed 2010a, 1-2).

By discussing the relationship between objects, affects and causality, Ahmed (2010a, 2010b) shows how to deconstruct the way in which these objects are bound up with affects. She places the figure

of 'the feminist killjoy' in the context of a feminist critique of happiness, particularly, of how happiness is understood as a justification of social norms as social goods. In this liberating act for which she claims the right to be orientated towards unhappiness, she finds a way of being feminist, which means to be sceptical of those things, objects and affects that are taken for granted in our societies:

The feminist is an affect alien, estranged by happiness... Feminists... are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness. *The feminist killjoy* spoils the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses or to meet up over happiness... feminists are thus attributed as the origin of bad feeling... (Ahmed 2010b, 581-2).

The feminist is usually seen as the one who is 'causing the argument' and disturbing the fragility of peace (Ahmed 2010d, 65). According to Ahmed, feminists - including those who define themselves as feminist academics - can be conceived as 'sitting at their own tables', creating their own emotional spaces to share experiences and struggles. Ahmed also argues that feminists are having their own conversations, being creative by doing the 'wrong' things, wanting what they are asked to give up (for example, desire, imagination and curiosity) and creating life

worlds around these desires. In doing so, they are developing a political consciousness against what has been taken for granted, they are 'out of place' trying to secure a place that is not already given; they become dissidents (Ahmed 2010a, 2010b, 2010c).

Feminist academics and their experiences

My experience of being a feminist has taught me much about rolling eyes
(Ahmed 2010d, 65).

Ahmed indicates that feminists are seen as sources of bad feelings, 'as the ones who ruin the atmosphere', 'as grumpy and humourless', 'as killjoy(s)' and troublemakers. In her view, being a feminist seems to be an obstinate subject (Ahmed 2010d, 65). Participants in my research have had similar experiences:

... In some Universities, [we as] feminists are regarded as marginal or as troublemakers or as second rate... [Louise].

I used to watch their eyes roll, used like as if to say 'here she goes again', you know... [Mary].

Elizabeth Bird describes the experience of being a feminist academic during the 1970s and the 1980s as one in which:

...the experience of being a wom-

an in 'a man's world'... is now remembered as one in which everyday life, both within and outside the academy, was carried out in the context of the sexual politics of the period when men were considered to be regarded as 'the enemy' (Bird 2004, 52).

Following Bird, being a feminist academic within the patriarchal context of the academy was a huge struggle and a label that provoked hostility, disrespect and derision from male colleagues (Bird 2002, 2004). In the context of my current research, participants have expressed their experiences as follows:

Feminism allows men the opportunity to smirk for what you engage with... [Ruth].

Louise Morley and Val Walsh point out that feminist academics 'are in the need' of articulating creatively feelings and ideas in contexts of disembodiment, and to produce knowledge with authority and excellence within these particular organisational and social conditions of academia that disempower them materially and psychologically (Morley and Walsh 1995, 1-2). Today, feminist academics articulate their struggles as follows:

Because it is seen as old-fashioned stuff you have to work very hard, show people the very best... [Rose].

In addition, feminist academics have explained that there is a risk of being marginalised and stigmatised as opportunities to publish and access research funding become more difficult:

I think it's hard to get our work published... it's hard to get research funding... if you're known to be a feminist, anything you say is automatic, they can automatically be dismissed. Oh well she's got a bias [Pauline].

Feminist academics and their characteristics

In the study I am conducting, participants have referred to the main characteristics of being a feminist academic. Even though their definitions may vary, they have certain aspects in common, such as the content and form of their teaching practices, research topics, content and type of publications and their critical approaches to gendered academia and society:

I would say they do always bring a critical gender analysis to whatever their specialism is... they would be able to articulate for you and everybody else why it was important to discuss, overtly bring gender, the gender features of whatever the topic was... There's a gender dimension that we need to look at. So I think that for me constitutes the core of being a feminist academic... [Ruby].

They are also categorised as talented and critical female thinkers with a sense of humour and irony for facing the intricacies of gendered academia:

[Feminist academics are] Generally women... who laugh at what stupid men are doing... So yeah humorous and funny and clever, lots of very clever women... [Pauline].

These academics are women able to criticise the current state of higher education but still have the ability to laugh, as stated by The FAAB Collective1:

A humourless audit will no doubt assess us and declares us merely feminist jesters. There's no RAE outputs but we'll be all be fine if we can raise a grin in these performative times (The FAAB Collective 2007, 5).

In the same line of argument, Ahmed understands the 'feminist killjoy' as a subject of joyful criticism and solidarity:

In order to get along, you have to participate in certain forms of solidarity: you have to laugh at the right points (Ahmed 2010d, 65).

In addition, the sharing of values, thoughts and spaces provide feminist academics with a sense of community and belonging:

You can meet like-minded people... You can create ways of getting together, speaking togeth-

er... And it's great because... it's the forum for women who have feminist views to meet up and discuss work and to carry on thinking about how this shapes our work... [Jo].

They are creating spaces for collaboration; they are sitting at their own tables of support, creativity and reflective work:

...We had a great time. Yeah, because we all had something in common which is that we were all doing feminist research from a feminist perspective and we were all openly feminist. And everyone was saying how nice it is to spend an entire day with seventy feminists... [Pauline].

Final Words

I think also as a feminist, people know that you're challenging the gender hierarchy and not everyone wants you to do that [Pauline].

First of all, it can be said that being a feminist academic is a specific way of being part of this world that highlights the critical way in which one relates to the world, the country, the society and community one is living in. Secondly, the figure of the feminist as killjoy is understood as someone who relates to the world differently, who always brings a specific critical analysis to those things that are taken for granted (for exam-

ple, what education is for) and who is both ironic and sceptical. This is particularly challenging within the current academic context in the UK. Thirdly, this snapshot has revealed feminist academics' experiences of being feminists, which has included experiences of joy, collaboration, support, recognition, solidarity, interesting research topics and innovative teaching practices as well as misrecognition, marginalisation, prejudices and dismissal. Fourthly, by criticising the idea of happiness, Ahmed has put into question fundamental aspects of the gendered and racialised division of society and, to a large extent, of gendered academia. In addition, Ahmed is not only providing a feminist critique of happiness but is also contributing to articulate a feminist critique of the current neoliberal trend within higher education in the UK. Finally, being a feminist whilst 'doing academia' invites one to think deeply about the complexities of the academic world. Being a feminist killjoy may be challenging and may imply the risk of being stigmatised and marginalised, nonetheless, it is a meaningful way of resisting dominant discourses in the academy and creating alternative worlds without becoming dogmatic.

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