



**Sarah Ahmed. *Complaint!*. Duke UP, 2021. 384 pp. ISBN: 978-1478015093.**

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*Complaint!* emerged during the era of Black Lives Matter (BLM), #MeToo and the coronavirus pandemic, a moment in which transparency is required more than ever. Ahmed explores a timely topic, as systemic harassment has become an increasingly common occurrence. The question at heart of Sara Ahmed's research is what elements make up a complaint. Her work is concerned with how power is experienced and challenged in everyday life and institutional cultures. Ahmed draws on oral and written testimonies of individuals who have been harassed in Australian university campuses. She examines the structures underlying the operation of academic institutions and the mechanisms of institutional power. She takes up an intersectional approach to complaints, following the tradition of Black feminist and feminist of colour critiques of institutional power. She exposes how institutional change becomes possible and why it is necessary.

Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, "Institutional Mechanics", Ahmed undergoes an exploration of the institutional mechanics of making a complaint and how universities work. The complaints addressed in the book are complaints that pinpoint existing inequalities in university campuses, inequalities in hierarchy and instances of abuse of power. She voices the narratives of those who have faced sexism, racism, bullying and harassment on the grounds of their sexual and racial affiliation. Details of assault, bullying, harassment are very difficult stories to share. However, it is necessary that these stories come to the forefront in order for universities to get transformed. Ahmed reflects what it feels like to bring one's story to the present time. She gives room to individuals who have been dismissed to be heard. She pinpoints at the institutional mechanics that make the process of filing a complaint more intricate and in some cases hinder complaints from being heard. She claims that to "be heard as complaining is not to be heard. To hear someone as complaining is an effective way of dismissing someone" (1). This statement shows the dismissal that individuals face while complaining.

In chapter 2, "The Immanence of Complaint", Ahmed points at the efforts of individuals, not necessarily in academia, who try to mobilize "complain activism", a formal form of complaint against institutions. It is useful to think of complain activism as mobilizing a wider witnessing of complaints. Ahmed notes that many people start the complaint process informally. Most times, students start the complaint process by submitting to the faculty written letters of complaint. Warnings during and after the complaint about the risks and dangers involved are usually placed by the institution. There are many institutional mechanisms, dissuading people from pursuing a complaint, warn them not to openly express their feelings. Complaints can lead to an escalation of a structural problem that one is trying to redress. Ahmed points at the difficulties one faces in the process of making a formal complaint, as the institution requires the complainant to file a lot of paperwork as part of the complex procedure. Challenges that complainants face are lack of institutional support and even withdrawal of their funding in some cases. Therefore, many individuals become discouraged and withdraw their complaint. However, it is necessary to recognize the cost of not complaining. Not taking sides in a situation of harassment is a stance.

Most times, students revert to an existing policy in order to address an inequality because they need to base their complaints to existing principles. Ahmed takes a step further and ponders what happens when there are no policies regulating a particular situation, as performativity and policy are central tools in helping one point out the failures of a particular system. Having policies that address questions of power at hand is central however, it is not always the case. Policies could operate as the means challenging the reproduction of a culture in which a particular type of conduct has happened, as stories of harassment have to do with access to particular structures.

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In chapter 3, “If These Doors Could Talk?”, Ahmed talks about individuals’ phenomenological experiences of exclusion at universities. This chapter is heavily laden with architectural metaphors, especially ones in relation to doors and windows. Through these metaphors, Ahmed examines how we inhabit space and consequently how our freedom to complaint is premised and the same time denied. She further points to the differential orientations ascribed to the complainants’ bodies that displace them from spaces inscribed by privilege. Ahmed is interested in the “exhaustion” one experiences from being in a world that does not enable his existence. Overall, her work on complaint is about thinking through these politics of exhaustion and how spaces end up occupied in one’s efforts to challenge power.

In the last chapter, “Conclusions”, I find Ahmed’s observation that it is important to form a collective among individuals who have common interests to better preserve their rights extremely valuable. The personal becomes collective, as one realizes that there are other people struggling with the same issue as them and therefore they are not alone. Ahmed further dwells on the degree to which collectivity matters when one is making a complaint, as she claims that it is more probable to achieve resolution once a complaint is made collectively. Working collectively in order to address an institutional problem is more efficient.

*Complaint!* is an important contribution to feminist scholarship and to the field of queer and race studies. *Complaint!* is in conversation with Ahmed’s previous work *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) in which she argues that in most cases when one makes a complaint in higher education, his complaint is overlooked as marginal and he is flagged as troublesome. In continuation to this argument, in *Complaint!* Ahmed points at different charges of the individual on a racial and sexual count which on a first glance might seem to differ from one another, but ultimately are permeated by mutuality. There is a kind of universalism underlying cases of harassment even though at first they might seem unrelated. The weakness that I identify in Ahmed’s analysis is that she anonymizes the cases to which she refers in order to protect the personal data and ultimately the privacy of the people involved in the process. However, this strategy compromises the broader claim that she is trying to make because her study is tightly focused on a number of very particular cases. In some passages, it is difficult to keep track of which case she refers to and that undermines the reliability of her own argument at times. Overall, Ahmed shows how feminist complaints can be a form of diversity work. She identifies abuses of power and also the mechanics underlying the complaint process.

### Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Complaint!*. Durham: Duke UP, 2021.

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