

Living a feminist life
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Stefana Biervliet
MSc in Cultural Anthropology, Leiden University

To live a feminist life is to make everything into something questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question (Ahmed 2017, 2),

In *Living a feminist life* Sara Ahmed explores the two questions of the quote above by focussing on living a feminist life and its relation to generating feminist theory. Ahmed describes a feminist way of life as that of someone who asks questions about the nature of reality and challenges universally adopted ways of thinking, among which the gender division between men and women. She argues that dealing with these questions in everyday life is generating feminist theory. Although theory in academia is often used as an abstract way of making sense of the world, Ahmed wants to deal with theoretical work that “gets to the skin” (Ibid.,10). She aims for bringing back theory to life by concentrating on how theory is generated out of everyday life practices and experiences. She uses examples and anecdotes of her own life experiences while living as a feminist, and that of other feminists she interviewed or spoke with. While using a self-imposed citation policy of not citing “any white men”, by which she means the institution

representing the universal, she combines these experiences with literature of other feminists as a base to generate feminist theory (Ibid., 15).

Ahmed has divided her work into three main parts. Roughly, each part deals with the experiences and theorization of a dimension in living a life as a feminist. The first part regards the process of becoming a feminist. Here, Ahmed reflects on her experiences that lead her to a feminist path. One of the aspects of her experiences she theoretically develops is that feminism can be considered as sensational and linked to a bodily feeling. One can become a feminist by experiencing a repetition of sensing things not feeling right, for example, because of being sexually assaulted repetitively. In the second part, she addresses living as a feminist in the context of her profession as a diversity worker at a university. She theorizes here the notion of diversity work. By this she means the work a diversity-practitioner does to transform an institution, but also the work a diversity worker must do when they do not “inhabit the norms of an institution” (Ibid., 125). In this part she uses data gathered from her own experiences as a diversity practitioner at a university as well as experiences of others in the same profession. In outlying and theorizing the hardships diversity-practitioners experience, Ahmed shows how various forms of power and resistance are at play in diversity work, she describes these as ‘brick walls’. In the last part Ahmed dives into the consequences when one describes oneself as a feminist or when living a feminist life. She addresses here how you can use feminism to handle the consequences of being worn out and left fragile in living a feminist life, as you are often considered as a kill-joy or are confronted with brick walls. To hearten the feminist readers,

she ends her book with providing a set of tools a feminist should hold on to when one seems to lose it. Ahmed also makes an activist call for feminists to join the kill-joy mission statement. In this statement she formulates ten principles to expose the universal patriarchal order feminists want to disturb.

Sara Ahmed writes in her introduction that her work is dedicated to feminist students. The latter is noticeable in her style of writing as she often uses the notion of ‘we’ (feminists) throughout her book. Before starting to read this book I felt a bit uneasy as I did not consider myself as a feminist or at least did not label myself as such. However, Ahmed made me realize I might be living a feminist life more than I thought. For example, at a certain point Ahmed claims that you do so when you sense or relate to experiences close to the skin, “moments where things that had previously been obscured begin to make sense” (Ibid., 26). Ahmed describes these moments leading her to become a feminist as ‘clicks’. It is these clicks I experienced multiple times throughout reading her work. Being a woman of colour myself, I could recall certain moments and experiences similar to that of Ahmed’s. Furthermore, I realised that her starting point with turning back to everyday life experiences as motors of generating theory and challenging the universal is the main reason I started studying anthropology in the first place. Although the book is focussed on feminist students, it might well be that feminists in disguise can be woken. At first hand this work seems mainly biographical as it is focussed mostly on personal experiences of Ahmed herself. Nevertheless, she makes connections with structures and theory in a well-thought and thorough manner. I do think, but this is a personal side-note,

that her style of writing consists of an overdose of chiasmi, or paralleling words and phrases in one sentence. Even though these were part of her intellectual journey it sometimes made me lose her line of reasoning. All in all, the combination of theory and lived experiences makes this work a great theoretical contribution to literature for and about feminists, and especially feminist anthropologists.