

FICTION

Sara Ahmed’s “complaint biography” and Affective Reflections on Our Institutional Ethics

Sara Ahmed’s book as a creative and critical product came out of a performative act of hearing complaints for almost a decade. By asking us to mind the gap between what is asked for and what is done by the universities regarding the complaints, she offers us a methodology of how to attend to (feminist hearing) complaints and how to create a narrative out of them to share with readers, complainers and the predators (why not!).

KAZI ASHRAF UDDIN

The world is encountering an unprecedented scale of injustices all over. Each of us is replete with a never-ending number of complaints. Complaints never follow a straightforward linear model. The process of complaining and redressing grievances is a complex issue that functions within the powerplay of institutional mechanisms. Sara Ahmed, in her book *Complaint!*, has drawn an intimate account of complaints and their afterlives. Ahmed’s book is the product of her prolonged interviewing of her peers and students in academia regarding the lived experience of the gap between their complaints and the institutional ordeals they went through. Pitching the ethics and the well-being approach towards the complainers, Ahmed emphasized both the act of complaining and hearing the complaints as a feminist practice. She refers to becoming “feminist ears” as a way of hearing students’ complaints, sharing them and becoming a part of the collective, something she coins as “complaint activism.”

In her book, Sara Ahmed embeds her own anecdote of resigning from her post as professor at the Centre for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths, University of London, in protest against the failure to address sexual harassment at her institution (she calls resignation a “feminist issue”) as well as the testimonies of numerous others who complained seeking justice. “Complaint biography” is the catchphrase that Ahmed uses to point at the life of a complaint in relation to the life of a person or a group, i.e., how complaints start, what course they follow, how they affect the individuals, how they control our subsequent actions and feelings and finally how we carry the complaints with us. Complaints shape who we are and who we become; there is embeddedness in complaints. We are never the same once we complain or lodge an institutional complaint.

Ahmed argues that an affective



(read: intimate) hearing of complaints requires a safe space, a place where the reinvocation of the memories of actions that led to the complaining process does not traumatize the complainer. A retelling of the complaint narrative is comparable to a composition where the complainer has to go through the fragments of memories (often painful), see them through the lens of complaints, name what happened, and “spill” them within the limits of time and space. So, it comes at the cost of mental labour that affects our physique. Ahmed calls the testimony of complaints “spillage.”

Complaints have transformative potential, often at the cost of the complainers’ mental and physical health. The toils that the complainer has to undergo are often overwhelming yet with the potential to destabilize the power relations. Ahmed argues that power shapes what happens once we complain. To complain against the power is to know about the power, is to

deal with the monstrosity, and also to render oneself vulnerable. Once lodged, complaints reveal what Angela Davis calls the “intersectionality of struggle”. However, when the complaints are shared, lodged and disseminated as a mode of solidarity towards vulnerability, vulnerability turns into an energy, a justice project. Complaints by the so-called less-powerful against the “more-powerful” rupture the complacency of being powerful and untouchable.

A few days ago, a Bangladeshi national daily published an op-ed regarding a Bangladeshi public university’s unresolved sexual harassment cases. The title roughly translates as “Why so afraid to complain?” Well, this is not only the question of fear that restrains the complaining process but also about shame, stigma, and overall, the question of existence. While the events that led someone to complain had already caused enough damage, the formal protocol of complaining itself may

incur a more damaging psycho-somatic impact on the complainer, a context that critical theorists term “affect theory” or “affective reading.” Hence, our academic institutions must adopt an ethical and wellbeing-driven model to address complaints coming from any of its members, keeping in mind that students are rendered more vulnerable in this mechanism. The embodiment of the during and after-effects has a life in itself that the complainer carries with themselves. Perhaps, that’s why Ahmed calls her book “complaint biography,” which chronicles the life of complaints.

Institutions should adopt a clear delineation of what can be considered harassment or abuse and what is complaint worthy. Some universities in Bangladesh have already proved to be meticulous in disseminating their policies regarding sexual harassment and abuse, though this is just an exception. Most universities either do not have clear documentation or do not make the documents available and/or usable/decipherable. To make the policies regarding the redressing of sexual harassment and other forms of abuse messy and wordy is itself a strategy to create a scary labyrinth of procedures. We should not turn the institutional complaining process itself into another form of harassment.

I saw a colleague vomiting after one of her departmental colleagues made an unguarded comment about her. This is the same instance where Ahmed talks about institutional violence that may occur even in the meetings where seniority is often weaponized as “reprimands, threats and warnings.” Have we ever thought about how that colleague who digested all those bullying words was feeling while getting back home? In the Bangladeshi university context, seniority in age among peers comes with the taken-for-granted impression that junior colleagues (both in rank and age) can be reprimanded. This is how every day many undocumented injustices and abuses

are produced as snippets of institutional violence. A student being asked “why are you so fat?” by a faculty has a similar emotional damaging impact as a colleague being called “rubbish” by another colleague. Words matter and can leave a damaging trace on ourselves. If we don’t hear and don’t address them, they become an institutional epidemic. While universities as a location of injustice and abuse mark a deviation from the institutional ideals, the space of the universities has transformational potential.

Complaint! is not a provocation to endless institutional mayhem of accusations against each other; rather, this book can be read as a critique of the institutional culture of “dismissal” of complaints and a cultural reading of the politics of emotion. What we can take away from her book is the importance of emotion and an understanding of its multidimensional consequences.

Sara Ahmed’s book as a creative and critical product came out of a performative act of hearing complaints for almost a decade. By asking us to mind the gap between what is asked for and what is done by the universities regarding the complaints, she offers us a methodology of how to attend to (feminist hearing) complaints and how to create a narrative out of them to share with readers, complainers and the predators (why not!). Hearing and sharing can also be collective activism. Why Gayatri Spivak advocates for voicing or speaking within the feminist politics, Sara Ahmed pitches the importance of complaining and hearing as feminist solidarity. Both projects have academic implications in raising the series of micro injustices that turn our academia into an unwholesome space.

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SHOHORBANU

SOHANA MANZOOR

“Bhabi, do you remember Banu?” my paternal aunt Janu phupi asks Amma. We are in the middle of a grand celebration—I am getting married and today is my *gaye-holud*. My grandmother barks, “Don’t mention that ill-fated girl now. She tricked us all.”

Phupi’s face falls. She mumbles, “I recently learnt that her brothers kicked her out. She’s in Dhaka but nobody knows where she lives.”

Everybody, including me, pretend we did not hear her. But I cannot forget Shohorbanu ever. How can I?



She told her son, “Wait a few years—our Shohorbanu will be a lovely one.”

I looked at Banu carefully. She had thick, black hair and dark eyes. She was beautiful. “What happened then, Banu?” I asked impatiently. “Didn’t your husband love you when you grew up?” I wanted a fairy-tale ending. Maybe, her husband died later on, and that is why she was at our house as a maid-servant. But that would be later. Banu only smiled. She refused to give a complete story. She would stop at a climax and look away.

On one occasion, Banu revealed that her in-laws were into raising cattle. It seemed they were a well-to-do family. They had their own house,

way when she went to the verandah to spread clothes on the wire. I asked softly, “Are you angry with me, Banu?”

She laughed. “It’s my fate that went wrong. Why would I be angry with you?” Gradually, she became her usual self. But I kept on wondering if she still loved her husband. If she went back now, would she be able to live with her husband and have a baby? Maybe, she could chase away the other woman! In my childlike simplicity, I saw the other wife as the witch.

A year went by when Reba Khala came to stay with us for a few days. Reba Khala was Amma’s younger sister who lived in Dinajpur. When she saw Shohorbanu, she almost jumped. “Shohor, what are you doing here?” She turned to Amma and said, “You didn’t say Shohor was working at your place!”

Amma was surprised. “I told you that we have found a very good girl. How do you know Banu?”

Banu, at this time, had gone absolutely quiet. She was standing at the door of the kitchen with downcast eyes. Her big toe of one foot was busily digging at an imaginary crack of the floor.

Khala seemed very disturbed. She looked at Banu and without bothering to lower her voice she said,

“Shohor almost killed her sister-in-law.”

Both me and my mother jumped. I blurted out, “That cannot be. She was very young when her husband remarried. Then her father took her home.”

Reba Khala gave me a withering look and said, “Where did that story come from? Now out of here.”

I was chased out of the room—they wanted adult talk. But was that even true? Banu, our devoted Banu was a murderess? How could that be?

I did not hear much except that Banu would have to leave. Nobody wanted to tell me anything, but finally, I cornered Banu on the roof. She was collecting her clothes in the evening. Before I could open my mouth, she said, “I tried to kill them both. My husband and his woman—he was in relationship with his elder brother’s wife. I wounded them pretty bad, but they survived.”

I was in tears when I asked, “Are you sorry, Banu?”

She shrugged. “I’m sorry they didn’t die. Both she and I had to leave our in-laws house. No one wants a killer wife or daughter.” She straightened up and looked at me, “No one wants a killer maid either.”

She was right. I often wonder if my family thought that she would kill us?

I learnt later that her name ‘Shohorbanu’ or rather ‘shouhorbanu’ means ‘a woman loved by her husband,’ and not “shohor” as town or city. But instead of becoming her husband’s beloved, she turned into a woman of the city.

A bizarre thought enters my mind as I sit all decked up—would I try to kill my husband if he has an affair with another woman? Will my family disown me if I do that? I feel dizzy. I wonder where life will take me. See how much trouble you left behind, Shohor? Here I am, a young woman of twenty-four, sitting on the dais on the occasion of my *gaye-holud*, but instead of a future full of light and laughter, I am thinking of a disastrous marriage and murder already.

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When she came to work for us, she was in her early-twenties. My mother was not too keen on having a young woman in the house, but grandmother said she would be good. And she proved to be true to Dadi’s words—quiet, well-mannered and clean. She listened to Amma’s instructions attentively and followed them. Two weeks went by and Amma was very happy.

Now what to call her? Shohorbanu was too long a name and sounded strange. I had laughed and asked if her parents knew that she would go to work in the city and hence they named her ‘Shohor.’ We started to call her ‘Banu.’ Soon, Banu learned to cook well, and Amma found a bit of a respite. My twin brothers kept Amma and Dadi quite busy and they badly needed a good hand in the kitchen. Everything was fine and six months passed by pretty quickly. I was about fourteen then and liked her a lot. She was not like the other maids we have had in the past. She knew how to read and write and she flipped through easy Bengali books every afternoon. She told me about her village in the northern district of Dinajpur and how she was married off very early, when she was only about eleven years old. Her husband was twenty-two and he was not at all happy with such a young bride. It was her mother-in-law who had chosen her and she apparently liked her a lot. She used to call her, “Chhotto bou.”



seven cows and twenty goats. There were also chickens.

“Banu, what did your husband die of?” Banu was busy chopping garlic and onion. She trembled and looked askance at me. “W.. what?”

“I said, how did your husband die?” “I never said my husband died,” came the somewhat faltering reply.

“Why did you leave the village then?”

Suddenly, Banu went absolutely quiet. Then at length, she said. “He married again. And my father brought me back home.”

“What!!!” I looked at her crestfallen. That was a terrible ending to my fairytale that did not even begin properly.

For the next few days Banu was grim and silent. I saw her looking far

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