University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

UTC Scholar

Student Research, Creative Works, and Publications

12-2023

Portraits of happiness (The performance of happiness: a cultural critique)

Meaghan Hibbs
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, zzv967@mocs.utc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.utc.edu/honors-theses

Portraits of Happiness

The Performance of Happiness: A Cultural Critique

Meaghan Hibbs

Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Humanities

Examination Date: May 2, 2023

Talia Welsh, Ph.D.   William Kuby, Ph.D.

Professor of Philosophy and WGSS   Associate Professor of History

Thesis Director   Department Examiner

Heather Palmer, Ph.D.

Professor of Rhetoric and Professional Writing

Department Examiner

Dedication

For my loving family and all the teachers and mentors who have made this milestone possible

and who have taught me so much about, well, everything. Thank you.

Abstract

While happiness may be something seemingly everyone, or most, people wish for, what happiness consists of, how to obtain it, and how to determine if/when one is truly happy remains elusive. One may view happiness as a simple wish, but then arises the question: what exactly does one wish for in wishing for happiness? Or, moreover, what may a society wish for or wish to ensure through the imperative to be happy? My thesis will primarily involve an interpretation of philosopher Sara Ahmed's book *The Promise of Happiness*, in which she offers a critique of "happiness," or, moreover, the cultural imperative to be happy. Through consideration of Ahmed's descriptions of "affect" and "happy objects," my work will explore how the imperative to be happy or to perform happiness can cover over histories of struggle and oppression and fail to include those who may not be made easily happy by conventional forms of happiness, on the basis of, for example, their gender or race/ethnicity. Lastly, my work, through applying Ahmed's concepts of "affect" and "affect aliens" to Albert Camus' *The Stranger* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* will examine the mother figure and the family as a happy object – and as a representation of cultural convention – in order to further explore how cultural convention is often protected by the performance of happiness or by being labeled a "happiness cause," to the detriment of those who live outside of what's deemed "normal" or "acceptable."

Table of Contents

Introduction

"What exactly does one mean when one says one is happy? While many might say that happiness is their life goal, it nevertheless remains elusive. What happiness consists of, how to obtain happiness, and how to determine if one is really happy all remain murky subjects. The elusiveness of happiness is nicely represented in the following quote by 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant: "Unfortunately, the notion of happiness is so indeterminate that although every human being wishes to attain it, yet he can never say definitely and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills."[1] Perhaps Kant's stance on happiness suggests that happiness cannot be reduced to one thing, nor can its acquisition be guaranteed through one method or way of life. While that notion may be abstract and, therefore, potentially threatening to some universal perspectives on what happiness is and how to obtain it, it may also provide comfort to those not as reliant on defining or measuring happiness. Perhaps happiness takes as many forms as there are different types of people who desire it, which speaks volumes considering that seemingly everyone desires happiness.

While not everyone might say happiness is their primary or only goal in life, it is hard to imagine someone who does not value happiness at all. In this way, happiness unites us. "There is probably no other goal in life that commands such a high degree of consensus."[2] If we return to Immanuel Kant's quote about the obscurity of knowing how to obtain happiness, one might equate happiness with a kind of wish. A wish, however, does not necessarily construct a will or, moreover, a way – a pathway to what we may wish for. Wishing for happiness, within itself, as

---

[1] Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1785/2005): 78. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs,* 35, no. 3 (2010): 572.
[2] Frey, Bruno S., and Alois Stutzer. *Happiness and Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Human Well-Being* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), vii. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs* 35, no. 3 (2010): 572.

Sara Ahmed suggests, does not mean that we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness.[3] Hence, a seemingly simple but obscure question is posed: "What exactly might one be wishing for in wishing for happiness?" To address this question, the constituents of happiness – what happiness involves, encompasses, or is dependent on are in need of further exploration.

While happiness has long been a popular subject of human inquiry, it has only relatively recently found its place in academia. Only in recent years have independent and high-achieving think tanks,[4] such as *The Happiness Research Institute,* based in Copenhagen, emerged, whose mission, as outlined on their website, is to "inform decision-makers of the causes and effects of human happiness and make subjective well-being part of the public policy debate, and improve the overall quality of life for citizens across the world"[5]. With this initiative in mind, my paper will explore the following questions: "What is, and perhaps more so, has been, the public discourse surrounding happiness in America? What can histories of happiness, or moreover, unhappiness, tell us about inequality?"

Outline

The first section of my thesis will introduce the primary source that my thesis will interpret: Sara Ahmed's text *The Promise of Happiness*. In introducing Ahmed's text, I will compare it to other "self-help" related books and identify the ways in which Ahmed's work is unique in its consideration of happiness. The next section of my thesis, titled "Measuring Happiness," will provide a genealogy of happiness, an overview of how happiness has been approached historically, and how it has arisen as a relatively contemporary phenomenon. The

---

[3] Ahmed, Sara. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs* 35, no. 3 (2010): 572.
[4] A "Think Tank" can be defined as a "group of experts brought together, usually by a government, to develop ideas on a particular subject and to make suggestions for action" (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2023).
[5] "The Happiness Research Institute," 2022.

second main section of my paper, the body of my thesis, will interpret the three archetypes that center Ahmed's work: the "feminist killjoy," "unhappy queer," and "melancholic migrant." As I examine these three archetypes, I will elaborate on the following ideas (although not exclusively) and provide an array of examples as to how the following concepts may operate in real life: how inequalities are masked by being labeled "happiness causes," how certain bodies are encountered as negative by virtue of being willing to unveil "the negative" (negative affect), how one's being may act as a form of disappearance, and the value of anger in sparking change. I will compare these primary concepts (and others) to one another in the section of my paper titled "Alien Affects." Finally, my conclusion will provide further interpretation of Ahmed's work by examining two primary literary examples – Albert Camus'*The Stranger* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* while also considering how Plath and Camus' work might support and challenge Ahmed's conclusions on happiness, namely the notion that happiness should not be viewed merely as an individual project, but as a widespread objective, and collective responsibility.

Section 1: The Pursuit of Happiness

There are an increasing number of "self-help" related books which have been published in recent years, alongside a growing presence of 'health & happiness" related content on social media, with topics related but not limited to weight loss, mental health, and relationship advice – to name a few. Whether it be an award-winning book or a humble blog post, there is an abundance of information at one's disposal regarding self-improvement and, supposedly, achieving happiness. It is worthwhile to consider how "happiness" or "well-being" has become commercialized, how it has become an industry, one which often promotes compelling clauses:

"*buy* this, or *do* this, or *be* this, and you will be happy." One commonality between many self-help books, which can contribute to their sometimes problematic claims, is that they often neglect to fully examine why happiness might be lacking or seemingly inaccessible to an individual or society at large. Many solutions or pieces of advice presented in "happiness" books are geared around "letting go," "moving on," or "looking on the bright side." All things that, in principle, anyone in any station or situation in life could seemingly do. In such a way, if you are unhappy, it is your fault for not behaving better. In this section, I introduce the primary source of my thesis – Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and provide a broader context into how it compares to similar source material on happiness and well-being.

Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* may be considered by some to be a "self-help" book, but her work provides something that is, despite some progress in recent years, severely lacking in widespread conversations on happiness. Ahmed provides a detailed but highly accessible look into the "history of happiness" and, equally so, "the happiness of history" for "feminist killjoys," "unhappy queers," and "melancholic migrants." Ahmed offers a thoughtful and unapologetic cultural critique of our relationship with happiness and how the cultural imperative to be happy can complicate or obstruct pathways for "new horizons." Ahmed brings into question not merely what happiness is or means, which she explores primarily through examining a range of classical and contemporary scholars/philosophers, but moreover, what it *does*, or does not do, and for *whom*? Embedded throughout Ahmed's book are rich prompts to difficult conversations, which must be had on a broad scale to aid new perspectives of happiness and well-being. To echo Julia Downes, Ahmed's book "carves out a home within feminist cultural studies of emotion and affect that push forward an engagement with bad feelings, shame, and violence."[6] I would add that

---

[6] Downes, Julia. "Review: Sara Ahmed. The Promise of Happiness." *Graduate School of Social Science* 9, issue 2 (2012): 231-2.

Ahmed does not merely promote negative feelings or construct a pessimistic view of life or well-being but rather emphasizes the potential utility of negative emotions and how they can be used to expand and improve the versions of happiness and "happy lives" that people so often accept on the grounds of, for one, not wanting to appear unhappy, or out of fear that alternative versions of happiness are not possible.

Popular self-help books exhort us to "let go." These exhortations neglect the deep-rooted reasons why someone might be unhappy. To "let go" or to "move on," I would argue, can easily mean to "cover up." Fundamentally, many unique challenges in life cannot be simply "let go." One cannot merely let go of "discrimination," for example. Instructing one to "let go" of a systemic issue seems to individualize larger social issues – that is, position the individual as a cause of the said problem or as needing to be the solution of a problem that is much larger than they are. One's pain and hardships can get in the way of their "happiness," and it is important to consider how the hardships one faces can be strongly shaped by virtue of who they are – a woman, a black woman, or a member of the LGBTQ+ community, for example. I, like Ahmed, would argue that our access to the causes of pain is far from random.[7] To become conscious of systemic issues, not in neglect of happiness, but in the *pursuit* of happiness, is to refuse to "let go" or to "cover over" histories of struggle. To echo Ahmed: "Becoming conscious – refusing to take cover – is a form of political struggle."[8] I would add that it is through this political struggle that one – and we collectively – can expand and redistribute the possibility of happiness. In the next section, I will examine the history of happiness, so to speak, in order to more thoughtfully examine how one might come to define happiness or identify an object (be it a person, place, or thing) as "happy."

---

[7] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press (2010): 215.
[8] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 84.

Measuring Happiness

Some of the earliest inquiries into happiness date back over 2,300 years to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* – one of the Greek philosopher's most influential works, which describes classical ideas of happiness as *eudaimonia*, as living a good, meaningful, or virtuous life.[9] Classically, happiness has been considered as an end rather than a means.[10] In this way, we tend to consider happiness as good-in-itself, as something that has intrinsic, not instrumental, value. In other words, we don't use happiness to get, for example, "money" or "success." However, the same cannot be said about the inverse: we often strive for "success" with the belief that it will bring us happiness. In other words, we aim to possess – signifying a certain instrumentality – certain objects in the hopes that they will "make us happy."

What makes an object a *happy* object? Perhaps one might classify a happy object, like Ahmed, as an object that indicates that it will provide happiness. Furthermore, one may simply identify "happy objects" as, like Ahmed, those which affect them in the best way.[11] In exploring what makes a "happy object," one might also question: "What makes an object *good*?" Our lives are comprised of and governed by all sorts of objects – physical items and social structures that project and protect cultural norms and values. To reiterate, an object, in this case, can be a physical thing, a condition or dynamic, a place, or a person. How one – and ultimately a collective of people – might come to identify something as good or bad largely comes down to a concept heavily explored by Ahmed: *affect*. "Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects."[12] People are often inclined to judge things as

---

[9] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 12.
[10] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 26.
[11] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 22.
[12] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 230 (notes to chapter one).

good or bad according to how it affects them, whether, for example, it gives them pleasure or pain.[13] Hence, one's relationship and how one might engage with various objects – people, places, or things – is largely shaped by how they are affected by them. One can consider the role of affect in our happiness and how our happiness might rely, in part, on being affected by objects in a primarily positive way. In contrast, if one experiences a lack of happiness in life, perhaps one could deduce that they are likely affected by objects in a predominantly negative way. In either case, exploring the notion of affect incentivizes further consideration of how happiness is not merely a personal choice or responsibility; rather, one's happiness is largely dependent on their engagement with objects and with the world. To be made happy suggests that our happiness is sourced from somewhere "outside" ourselves: "To be 'made happy' by this or that is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation."[14] In this way, one may associate certain objects with happiness due to how they personally have been moved or affected by them.

　　If one says they are made unhappy, we might assume they have been affected by an object or a circumstance negatively, in a way that resulted in pain or suffering. Conversely, if one says that they are happy, we might assume they have been affected by an object or objects positively, in a way that resulted in pleasure or joy. Whether one says they are made unhappy by sad news or made happy by a new car, for example, one can consider how the origin of one's mood traces to the objects or experiences outside of them. My main point in making these comparisons is to emphasize that to be happy – or unhappy – is to be affected by something in some way and by something that is largely external, or as Ahmed describes, "something other than the subject."[15] I suggest that the most important contribution of considering the role of affect

---

[13] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 22.
[14] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 21.
[15] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 21.

in one's happiness, and by extension, well-being, is that it helps broaden and "externalize" the factors which contribute to one's happiness. In other terms, to acknowledge the role of *affect* in happiness is to distribute the responsibility of happiness more broadly and to challenge the notion that happiness is merely a personal project or responsibility.

If one approaches happiness as a kind of personal "project" or "self-help" endeavor, one might consider how happiness is often attributed – reduced – to one's choices, which are, in turn, used to make sometimes unfair judgments about one's character or identity. With this in mind, it is worthwhile to contemplate what differences we may perceive between "character" and identity. When one judges the choices that another makes or does not make, perhaps they should first consider the notion of freedom and the "ways of being" or "pathways to happiness" that one may inherit or fail to inherit on behalf of, for example, their gender, race, sexuality, birthplace, or religion. A hyper-individualist approach to achieving happiness may be "empowering" to certain individuals, perhaps those whose happiness is not (as) obstructed just by merely *being* in the world, as is likely the case for the "melancholic migrants," "unhappy queers," and the "feminist killjoys," that Ahmed describes in her book. In the next section, I will provide a summary of each of these archetypes in order to further explore how happiness is an inherently political matter, one which ties into notions of freedom and responsibility.

Section II: Archetypes of Happiness

Feminist Killjoys

Ahmed first introduces "feminist killjoys" through an analysis of "the happy housewife" in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique,* positing gendered labor as one of the primary points of feminist critique. Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* encompasses an identity struggle pertaining to

(although not exclusively) American women in the 1950s and 60s: "Women were in many cases forced to choose divine 'feminity' over a painful growth to full identity."[16] Declaring women's growth to full identity as painful does seemingly prompt the following question: "Painful for whom?" It is worthwhile to consider in the context of women's rights, both in the 1950s and 60s up to today, how might a women's growth to full identity, or alternatively, a women's fulfilling her utmost potential, be understood as painful?

To describe one's growth to full identity as "painful" seems to emphasize the ways in which women's growth was obstructed by society at large. Around the time Friedan's book was published, in the 1950s and 60s, for women to have grown to their full identity would have meant the breaking of a rigid gendered mold that was not ready to have been broken. Given the social barriers in place for women (e.g., the pressure of taking care of the family and lack of availability of employment), their efforts to live multi-dimensional lives, in particular, those that extend beyond the role of "mother" and "wife," caused a painful struggle for a sense of self. However, as I will explore in the next section, the restriction of gendered labor, which is more likely to be recognized in contemporary times, was not always seen in such a negative light. I will now consider how gendered labor has been excused on behalf of being deemed a "happiness cause." Furthermore, I would encourage, like Ahmed, one to consider how describing something as happy or as a "happiness cause" may make it harder to challenge or, on the grounds of a social structure or norm like gendered labor, dismantle.

Masking Inequalities in the Name of Happiness Causes

---

[16] Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Sage Journals* 4, no. 3 (2014): 2.

Ahmed addresses how happiness has been used as an instrument that allows for the reorientation of individual desire toward a "common good."[17] Like describing something as happy, notating something as being for the "common good" seems to make it harder to challenge. On the topic of gendered labor, one might understand the "common good" as the separation of the public and private spheres and, furthermore, the feminization of the private sphere and the masculinization of the public sphere. As Roxanne Friedenfels points out, until the 1970s, it was nearly impossible for middle-class women to bridge both spheres at the same time; "the choice has historically been framed as an either/or."[18] To challenge, for example, the notion of gendered labor and the separate spheres – that is, to advocate for the increased career potential of women while also not forcing them to give up their desire or ability to have children or a family – is to challenge *a* longstanding *convention.* It is worthwhile to note, as Ahmed does, the etymology of the word "convention"; "to 'convene' is to gather, to assemble, or to meet up." If a convention is "a point around which we gather," to follow a convention, then, one might say, may mean to gather "in the right way."[19] Hence, conventions may be held in place or affirmed because they are believed to be good or in support of the "common good." There are conventions that are objectively seen as being in everyone's best interest, like, wearing a seatbelt or encouraging children not to engage with strangers. There are, however, other conventions like the separation of the spheres that may involve, for example, a limitation in one's, namely women's, ability to pursue an education and other professional aspirations because of, for example, their gender. When one views a convention, it is important to examine what is being "met over" or "agreed upon" by virtue of that convention existing rather than presuming a convention is "good" or in support of

---

[17] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 59.
[18] Rottenberg, Catherine. "Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How Superwomen Became Balanced." *Feminist Studies*, 40, no. 1 (2014): 149.
[19] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 64.

the "common good" merely because it is a convention. It may be common for people to associate

convention with meeting in the "right" way. However, one should not necessarily take

convention to mean meeting in the right way, that is, a way that is always for the betterment of

all bodies. If convention means to meet in the right way, perhaps then one can consider feminism

as a commitment to meet in a different way, to refuse to meet up over what is conventional – to

diverge from those who gather in the "right" – unthreatening – way. Perhaps feminism can also

be understood as an initiative to challenge the notion of the "common good" or "the happiness of

all," a sentiment that is often used to cover over the unhappiness of many and protect the

happiness of few. For women to prioritize their own personal pursuit of happiness over "the

common good," for example, would mean challenging pre-existing social molds, devaluing – on

the basis of gendered labor – the "divinely feminine role of the housewife."[20] There is arguably

no role historically that women have been more celebrated in than that of "motherhood" and

"wifehood." This affirmation has further incentivized women's placement within the confines of

the home and family life not only because it is where women have felt most valued but also, by

virtue of limited experiences outside the home, where they may have felt most purposeful or

fulfilled. One can consider the following quote by Ahmed in order to better understand how

social patterns become social norms and, therefore, by virtue of being widely accepted and

normalized, persist over time, forming a convention: "To be affirmed is to be given positive

encouragement, which might be what confirms a certain order of things or creates order out of

making things."[21] With this in mind, one can better understand how women's "role" – restriction

to the family – has been ensured by a kind of process of elimination (e.g., little to no

opportunities outside the home) while meanwhile being sometimes posed as a kind of altruistic

---

[20] Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Sage Journals* 4, no. 3 (2014): 2.
[21] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 48.

and "respectable" choice on behalf of serving the "common good." These insights pose new questions regarding how the happiness of individuals may conflict with a common or conventional happiness. I will now explore how advocating for one's individual happiness, or the happiness of a minority population, can often be perceived as killing the joy and happiness of others, or even "everyone."

Feminism, Unhappiness Causes, & "Killing Joy"

To label oneself as a feminist, Ahmed emphasizes, is in itself risky and perhaps by nature involves *trouble*, that is – "ways of reading situations of conflict and struggle."[22] To read situations of conflict and struggle is to be willing to refuse to meet up over what may be accepted as conventional or for "the common good." Hence, one might define trouble in this context as a willingness to question or even defy. To read situations of conflict and struggle, for women or anyone engaging in social activism – often involves being perceived *as* the conflict or as the killer of others' happiness, as *trouble*. Hence the "feminist killjoy," Ahmed says, is a spoilsport because she refuses "to convene, assemble, or meet up over happiness," and I would add, the feminist refuses to be made happy for the sake of appearing happy over conventional happiness objects.[23] With this in mind, one might wonder: "To what extent the *appearance* of happiness may distract from or obstruct real pathways to happiness?"

To revisit a previous idea, one often noted by Ahmed: appearing happy does not make one happy. Perhaps the vast majority of people can relate to having felt, at least once, a way that differed from how they were expected to feel by others (or themselves) or that differed from how they felt they should feel. Perhaps when such differentials arise – between what one feels and

---

[22] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 60.
[23] Ahmed, Sara. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs* 35, no. 3 (2010): 581.

what one thinks they are expected to feel and therefore show – one can further consider how pervasive the imperative to appear happy may be. One might consider how some people who outwardly project the most happiness or joy – comedians seem to provide good examples – are sometimes the most troubled.

We know that the presentation of happiness and the state of happiness can be disjointed. One might consider how in many professional settings, especially in service jobs, one is often expected to project a certain enthusiasm or joy at all times, regardless of the mood or demeanor of the customer or how they, the employee, may actually feel. It is worthwhile to consider the extent to which one's instinct as a consumer – that is, whether or not one decides to make a purchase – may be informed by how they are affected by a manufactured "feeling" engendered by the performing salesperson or person who is providing them with the object they desire. A server, for example, may be tipped better for appearing more bubbly or amicable – for presenting a happy demeanor. Perhaps what's so compelling about appearing happy, even over being happy, is that the appearance of happiness provides one with a way to avoid one's own recognition of unhappiness by not only acting happy but by having their, one might say, performance of happiness affirmed and recognized by others. Hence, happiness, or appearing happy, Ahmed argues, "involves a way of avoiding what one cannot bear."[24] With this quote in mind, perhaps one can conclude that appearing happy may provide people who are unhappy with the ability to mask or downplay the causes of their unhappiness. If one is able to mask their unhappiness, they are less likely to be questioned or examined – that is, to have their unhappiness revealed to others and, as a kind of reminder, to themselves. One may also consider how questions such as "How are you?" or "Are you okay?" are often directed at individuals who appear to be more unhappy than happy. Furthermore, we might consider questions such as "What's wrong" or "What's the

---

[24] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 64.

matter?" which immediately signifies that there is a problem – a failed display of happiness perhaps. The majority of people have been asked questions like these both when they have felt down, as well as when they were likely fine or facing no particular difficulty. In any case, these questions help point out the ways in which even our daily conversations on happiness or well-being (as prompted by the simple but perhaps profound question "How are you?) are often started or, at minimum, informed, by matters of appearance, that is, what one appears to be feeling. Furthermore, I would conclude that unhappiness seems to garner more attention as needing to be corrected, as it is often treated as an outlier or deviation from "proper" happiness. Perhaps it is easier to assume the happiness of others than it is to respond to and therefore take part in the unhappiness of others. To take part in the unhappiness of others would mean, it seems, to risk taking responsibility for the unhappiness of others.

Appearing happy is not only a mechanism to avoid feeling unhappy feelings but can be a mode of survival. If we return to the example of the server, one might consider how appearing happy can ensure greater financial security and, therefore, survival. To benefit on behalf of another individual by appearing in a certain way that contradicts one's true condition or well-being may be considered a form of servitude. Ahmed, not in *The Promise of Happiness*, but in her article "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness," references the work of philosopher Marilyn Frye as she describes the innate negativity that is often associated with feminists and, more broadly, how certain bodies or figures are encountered as being negative. As Frye argues in her article "Oppression," it is often a requirement upon oppressed people to smile and be cheerful. She goes on to say that if one complies with such a demand to appear content or happy, they signal their docility and acquiescence in their situation. They acquiesce in being

made invisible. They participate in their own erasure.[25] In this way, "oppression involves the requirement that you show signs of being happy with the situation in which you find yourself."[26] Hence, one can better understand how the appearance of happiness is further complicated for those who are oppressed, and how one may fail to be recognized as oppressed (or at all) by appearing happy, and how other individuals who are not oppressed may garner more attention by appearing unhappy. It is not difficult to understand, then, why those who identify and are perceived as feminists are often seen as "killing" the joy of others or as causes of unhappiness itself, for they are willing to disrupt others' means of avoiding the "unbearable," the unbearable being the possibility, or one could argue, the requirement of acknowledging the unhappiness of other's persons who are not situated to be easily happy in conventional situations. For instance, some men may be less inclined to consider or take ownership of the struggles of women by making the presumption, for example, that another women's struggles have nothing to do with them and the systems which they might support. When women reveal inequalities, they come to understand the cause of their own unhappiness and can feel it more deeply. As Ahmed points out, "there is a sadness in becoming conscious not only of gender as a restriction of possibility but also of how this restriction is not necessary."[27]

While some feminists may prefer or insist that feminism be defined exclusively on the basis of seeking justice for women, it can, as Roxanne Friedenfels points out in her article "Pleasure And Beyond: A Feminist Look at Happiness," also be viewed in broader terms as being generally about the happiness of women. Of course, the happiness of women and movements toward justice for women are not mutually exclusive. For instance, women's rights

---

[25] Frye, Marilyn. "Oppression." Ch. 2, *Oppression and Resistance*. *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* by Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo, p. 42.

[26] Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Trumansburg, NY: Crossing (1983): 2. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness," p. 582.

[27] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 75.

(e.g., reproductive rights and professional autonomy) can certainly correlate to their well-being and "happiness." If one considers the primary objective of feminism as the happiness of women, perhaps feminism can be viewed as a social tool to help women (although I don't mean to suggest that feminism is exclusively beneficial for women, as equality arguably poses benefits for all members of any society) achieve what Friedenfels describes as the "three happy lives." In short, Friedenfels emphasizes the importance of living a pleasurable, engaged, and meaningful life in order for women, in particular, to achieve happiness. Friedenfels emphasizes (albeit to a lesser extent than with engaged and meaningful lives) the importance of women's pleasure, noting the many ways in which women have historically and remain in many parts of the world deprived of physical and, more notably, intellectual stimulation. Whether it be on the grounds of sex, food, or education, "oppressed women were and are denied pleasure."[28] According to Friedenfels, studies do indicate that employment (and namely, income, even that which is very minimal or modest) increases women's happiness, emphasizing the role of education and professional autonomy in shaping women's happiness. Friedenfels also provides a clear image of what paid work, in its often limited capacity, has looked like for women noting that many women are still often employed in jobs with relatively low autonomy noting the three most common jobs for women in the U.S., at least as of 2007, being a nurse, secretary, and cashier.[29] The next component Friedenfels emphasizes as contributing to a happy life is the "engaged life," which she notes "comes from doing activities that require skill and concentration."[30] This concept can easily be related back to the importance of education and professional autonomy in contributing to women's happiness as sources of intellectual application and fulfillment. It isn't merely

---

[28] Friedenfels, Roxanne. "PLEASURE AND BEYOND: A Feminist Look at Happiness." *Off Our Backs* 37, no. 4 (2007): 19.
[29] Friedenfels, Roxanne. "PLEASURE AND BEYOND: A Feminist Look at Happiness," p. 19-20.
[30] Friedenfels, Roxanne. "PLEASURE AND BEYOND: A Feminist Look at Happiness," p. 20.

work-related tasks, however, paid or not, that may contribute to greater happiness, but rather

one's engagement with activities such as participating in sports and listening or more so making

music, activities which may help one enter "flow" state[31], a concept which was introduced by

philosopher Mihály Csíkszentmihályi as the "experience of an individual engaged with the

world, where the world is not encountered as alien, as an obstacle, or resistance."[32] The

importance of having outlets that allow one to enter flow seems to be very important to their

happiness and poignantly aligns with a concept described early on in Ahmed's book regarding

the phenomenology of happiness and the relationship between happiness and feeling as though

one has ownership of their life, and moreover "a sense of participation in the contents of their

life."[33] Last, but certainly not least, Friedenfels touches on the constituents of a meaningful life,

noting that if we have a meaningful life, "we have purpose and work toward goals that are

important to us."[34] Perhaps what all three "lives" – the pleasurable life, the engaged life, and the

meaningful life – encompass is attention to one's subjective well-being. To live a happy life, for

example, isn't merely about having things to do, as Friedenfels argues; it is to a much greater

extent about the degree to which an individual can live a life in which their skills and desires are

pursued, a possibility which is largely granted by the opportunities made possible only by social

equality. If one aims to approach feminism, like Friedenfels, as being primarily concerned with

women's happiness and considers Ahmed's critique of happiness as "a way of stopping an

answer from becoming a question," perhaps we can more thoughtfully view feminism not as

being unhappy or a source of unhappiness, but as a commitment to pointing the unhappy out, to

questioning what may appear or seem "happy," but which may affect certain bodies negatively.

[31] Friedenfels, Roxanne. "PLEASURE AND BEYOND: A Feminist Look at Happiness," p. 21.
[32] Csíkszentmihályi, Mihály. *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*. London: Rider (1992): 3. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 11.
[33] Csíkszentmihályi, Mihály. *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*, p. 3. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 11.
[34] Friedenfels, Roxanne. "PLEASURE AND BEYOND: A Feminist Look at Happiness," p. 20.

In the next section, I will consider Ahmed's archetype of the "unhappy queer" as it relates to sexuality as well as, in broader terms, anyone who lives in ways that are perceived as deviating from what's "normal" and "expected." Through my interpretation of Ahmed's archetype of the "unhappy queer," I will also continue to examine how certain bodies are encountered as negative and a source of unhappiness – like the "feminist killjoys" discussed in the previous section – just by virtue of being willing to call unhappiness out by its name.

Unhappy Queers

When one hears the word queer, one might think first of sexuality. Moreover, when one considers what it means to be happily queer, perhaps one envisions a person who identifies outside of the heterosexual world and who does so with pride. Perhaps, it is worthwhile, as I believe Ahmed would suggest as well, for one to consider queerness in broader terms, in those not restricted to sexuality. If we return briefly to the idea of a convention and to what it might mean for one to challenge convention – to refuse to assemble or meet up, or one might say agree, over happiness, we might be inclined to correlate queerness with a lack of regard for convention or "normalcy." "To be happily queer is to explore the unhappiness of what gets counted as normal."[35] If one returns to the notion of convention, perhaps one can view queerness, like feminism, as a commitment or willingness to dismiss convention or to refuse to meet up over "the common good" or that which is expected of you.

Moving on from her description of feminist killjoys, in which Ahmed outlines how happiness scripts are gendered scripts, she goes on to describe "unhappy queers" as a crucial aspect of queer genealogy, pointing to a seeming correlation between queerness and unhappiness, one, however, which is perhaps commonly over-simplified or misunderstood. As argued by

---

[35] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 117.

---

author Heather Love, "we need a genealogy of queer affect that does not overlook the negative, shameful, and difficult feelings that have been so central to queer existence in the last century."[36] It is crucial to consider the ways in which being queer – being or acting in a way that deviates from a "norm" – has been a historically unhappy experience. It is also important, however, to make the distinction that such unhappiness is not a result of being queer. Rather the fact that queers are often encountered as "unhappy" because of their queerness makes them misfits in a heteronormative world and thus alienates them. It is the problem of the world at the root, not the problem of being queer.

For some, being in this world may seem like a form of disappearance, and as Ahmed points out, there is a certain anger that can derive from this recognition. To recognize this fact, for one, may be to recognize one's alienation from tolerance and perhaps a kind of unconditional acceptance, which Ahmed describes offers its own promise of happiness, helping to ensure that one can do what one wants in the world that they are in.[37] Ahmed goes on to also describe how anger can, for individuals who often face intolerance, fill the "gap" between the promise [of happiness] and what happens, noting that sometimes "anger can be creative, sometimes not."[38] Perhaps with this perspective in mind, one can further consider the utility of anger and how it might build and build until something snaps, a snap which – Ahmed describes – one should view as "a moment with a history."[39] "Anger can be or ignite a spark toward happiness."[40] One might view a snap not as a pathway that has been entirely cleared but rather as a door that has made itself more visible, a door that has been cracked open: "A snap is not a starting point but can be

[36] Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: The Politics of Loss in Queer History*. Cambridge, Mass.:Harvard University Press (2007): 127. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 89.
[37] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 157.
[38] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 157.
[39] Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press (2017): 190.
[40] Friedenfels, Roxanne. "PLEASURE AND BEYOND: A Feminist Look at Happiness," p. 19.

the start of something."[41] As Ahmed suggests, sometimes this anger can be expressed creatively, and sometimes not, a view which I will further explore through my artistic examples later in the thesis.

Ahmed brings light to a common tendency among people to label or perceive individuals as unhappy because of their queerness, regardless of whether or not they are, in fact, happy. Even if one is unhappy, there are, one might come to find, a plethora of reasons why one might feel or be so, for reasons that extend far beyond matters of one's sexuality. As Ahmed and Heather Love point out, it is important to examine the unhappiness that is historically embedded in queer existence (e.g., through blatant discrimination). In addition, one should secondarily view that same unhappiness not as something that derives from or is promised by one's queerness within itself but perhaps rather by the perception that the queer individual isn't "performing" happiness according to the happiness script or isn't capable of participating in certain happiness scripts. Unhappiness is assumed because of this lack of conventionality rather than because of an investigation into the experiences of the queer individual.

Thus, in principle, any identity marker which may classify one as being or living outside "convention" or what's considered "normal" can be read by others as unhappiness. In conclusion, unhappy queers are not unhappy because they are queer, per se, but rather as Ahmed highlights, are so often perceived as "lacking what causes happiness, and as causing unhappiness in their lack."[42] Moreover, "the unhappy queer is unhappy with the world that reads queers as unhappy."[43] On the one hand, I suggest that there is a danger in reading queers as unhappy in that it seems to excuse external unhappiness causes. To neglect to consider how one's happiness is affected by others and other objects is to neglect the power of *affect* and to remove the

---

[41] Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*, p. 194.
[42] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness,* p. 98.
[43] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 105.

responsibility of communities to advocate and take responsibility for the well-being and happiness of all individuals. On the other hand, I argue, alongside Ahmed, that it is also dangerous to falsely promote the "happy queer" because, in doing so, one risks moving the "unhappy queer" out of view altogether, which may create a false image of queer acceptance of the status quo. For instance, one might view "queer happiness" as naturally having to do with a kind of self-love or acceptance (one can be empathetic to the fact that we all desire acceptance in some form). To what extent, though, can acceptance be a condition, that is, come with its own sometimes impossible expectations: "The recognition of queers can be narrated as the hope or promise of becoming acceptable, where in being acceptable, you must become acceptable to a world that has already decided what is acceptable."[44] One might compare such an expectation with being promised acceptance on the grounds of being something that you are not and cannot be. To accept someone only on the grounds of "acceptability," or one might say "respectability," is to say (although perhaps not aloud): "You are not acceptable, and the only way for you to be acceptable is to accept a life that is unacceptable for you." With this in mind, one might recognize that queer acceptance can often be rooted in the expectation that one is going to somehow partake in a conventional "happiness script," if not actually, at least in appearance: "It is not that queers feel sad or wretched right from the beginning. Queer unhappiness does not provide us with a beginning."[45] Perhaps what Ahmed wishes to emphasize with the previous statement is that to be constantly perceived and encountered as negative and as being the cause of your own unhappy condition seems to deprive one of the ability to fully claim – to exist and be perceived authentically as deserving and able to acquire – happiness. On the other hand, if one

---

[44] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 106.
[45] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 98.

focuses on Ahmed's emphasis on the "hap"[46] – the sense of possibility embedded within – happiness, perhaps one could view "not being provided with a beginning" as not being provided with a kind of script or way of life that is set to provide one with happiness. This perspective could be seen as a kind of divergence from common paths to happiness, resulting in a greater integration of the "hap" – a sense of possibility – within the happiness one is able to achieve.

Let's return briefly to Ahmed's description of happiness and the notion of what it means to "be made happy": "To be 'made happy' by this or that is to recognize that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation."[47] As I touched briefly on before, this description of "becoming" or "being made" happy seems to emphasize to a greater extent the role of the external world in our happiness and [subjective] well-being. With this in mind, it would seem appropriate or intuitive to apply the same approach to what it means "to be made unhappy." However, the tendency for people to create or perceive causal relationships between aspects of one's identity, such as their queerness and their unhappiness, signals in part a failure to take into account that one's being is constantly affected by the external world. For one to posit another's unhappiness as the result or symptom of their queerness is convenient in that it, for one, allows them (the "nonqueer" individual) to confirm the promise of their own heterosexual (or "X..") happiness script(s) – which seem to carry with them secondary promises of procreation and reproducing the family as a social form.

With procreation in mind, one might consider how the family functions both literally and figuratively as an inheritance – an inheritance of certain forms of happiness over others. Ahmed describes this inheritance as a means of acquiring an orientation toward some things and not

---

[46] "Hap" (deriving from Old Middle English) translates roughly to "chance" or "luck/fortune" as in "perhaps," or "happenstance."
[47] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 21.

others [as good].[48] For one to view the family as "good," as a "happy object," one may perceive the family as "where and how happiness takes place."[49] Lastly, before moving on to discuss melancholic migrants, we might view – like Ahmed – the family, in addition to a kind of inheritance and "myth of happiness" ("where and how happiness takes place") as a kind of "legislative device," one which distributes time, energy, and resources, helping to ensure the inheritance of the family as a "happy object," or as Ahmed suggests in an alternative definition of happy objects, something which "affects us in the best way."[50] If one considers what Ahmed describes as the "myth of happiness," in particular, "where and how happiness takes place," one might further consider how the word "myth" might lead one to question the promise of happiness an object might make, that is what someone may be inclined to believe by doing a certain action or obtaining a certain object. Moreover, one can observe how the expectation of happiness from a specific object (e.g., obtaining a certain degree or job) may be inherited within the family unit and broader cultural spheres. One can further observe how this dynamic of shared "happy objects" – that is, a widespread perception of certain things as providing happiness or "good" outcomes – may be employed in nationalistic and commercial ways. In the next section, I will further explore how we might apply the "myth of happiness" to the lives of migrants and explore the following question: "What might one [migrant] unknowingly inherit or take on in the aspiration of achieving a better or happy life in a non-native land?"

Melancholic Migrants

In addition to examining the "happy" and "unhappy" queer – or one could say, any person who might refuse to promote what Ahmed calls "happy normativity" – one can also examine happy

---

[48] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 43-44.
[49] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 43-44.
[50] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 22.

versus unhappy multiculturalism, which Ahmed explores in her section on the "melancholic migrant." Ahmed addresses colonialism and poses poignant questions surrounding the remembrance, or lack of remembrance, of unhappy histories: How might a certain empire or history be remembered and analyzed as a history of happiness? Alongside the previous question posed by Ahmed, I would pose the following: "How can remembering a history as "happy" serve to justify a history of pain or, more broadly, an unjust history?" As noted above, if queers are seen as "happy," this now removes their systemic oppression from consideration—after all, they are happy, so we do not have to worry. One should first respond to questions of history and migration by emphasizing how declaring something as happy or as a "happiness cause" can serve to protect it from questioning or dismantling.

As I touched on briefly in an earlier section of the paper, in response to these two questions, one might first consider how happiness is used as an instrument to direct people toward convention(s), or as some people might view convention, "the common good." Ahmed draws attention to James Mill's *History of British India* to further examine what "the common good" signifies in colonial rule and how colonial rule has sought to "justify" the subjugation and misery – erasure – of native culture(s). According to Ahmed, Mill argues that "happiness provides a way of measuring civility."[51] In addition, Mill describes "the end of education" as "rendering the individual, as much as possible, an instrument of happiness."[52] Education, in this case, is brought up primarily in relation to the native people's subordination to colonial powers; thus, to be happy is to become colonized. Mill speaks to the role of "education" in what Ahmed describes as the "colonial project," which acts as a form of "moral training or habituation."[53]

---

[51] Mill, James. *History of British India*. London: Routledge (1818/1997). Essays reprinted from the Supplement to the Encyclopaedia of Britannica. London: J. Innes, 1828. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 125.
[52] Mill, James. *History of British India*, p. 12. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 128.
[53] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 129.

According to Ahmed, Mill compares the natives to children with regard to their impressionist vulnerability: "It is because the child is most impressionable that an impression must be made upon the child."[54] Children are impressionable not only because they are young and, one might say, "naive," but because they also live in an insubordinate position relative to others. One's impressionability is not only shaped by one's age and knowledge but by a certain power dynamic – a hierarchy. For example, what if we were to consider the same phrase by James Mill but exchange children with women: "It is because women are most impressionable that an impression must be made upon the woman." While this phrase is arguably less convincing, it nevertheless provokes additional inquiry on how impressions are dependent on hierarchies and how hierarchies, in turn, help ensure the longevity of impressions (how cultural norms and biases persist through generations), impressions of insubordination, for example, a concept that is certainly relevant to women's experiences and history.

In addition to exploring colonial histories, Ahmed touches on something which has seemingly only grown in controversy in even recent years: matters of nationhood and citizenship. As an Australian-born English woman with a Pakistani father and English mother background, Ahmed's insights on migration and the challenges embedded in multinationalism seem personal. One might consider, for example, an immigrant moving to the United States in search of the notorious "American dream." One could view the American Dream itself as a kind of happiness script: "Move here, and this will happen." "Do this, and this door will open…." Embedded in these prompts, however, is also a rule, or perhaps many rules, about behavior and desire: "*Be this way, like these things, want these things,* and you'll get this…." The American Dream seems to embody the "individual dream" in that it seems to provide a pathway for the fulfillment of the desires and wishes of seemingly any individual who is willing to "work hard enough." As I

---

[54] Mill, James. *History of British India*, p. 35. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 129.

emphasized, like Ahmed, earlier in the paper: "Wishing for happiness does not mean that we know what we wish for in wishing for happiness."[55] To build off this thought, I would add that wishing for happiness does not mean that we know what exactly we wish to receive or that we know what we're going to receive: "To be bound to happiness is to be bound by what has already been established as good."[56] Perhaps this sentiment is expressed in a phrase that we've likely all heard many times before: "Be careful what you wish for." One may relate this concept to the American Dream and consider how the American Dream seems to promise the fulfillment of one's own happiness script while meanwhile upholding the happiness scripts – dreams – of what in reality is a select few, those which can often be traced back to the kind of colonial predecessor initially examined by Ahmed.

In simpler terms, one might understand the American Dream as involving the following stages. First, one might move to the United States with an expansive view of the future – a future that may seem to promise happiness or instill in one a sense of hope of what could be: "We are happy as long as we haven't lost the hope of becoming happy."[57] After settling into the "land of the free," however, one might begin to feel certain pressures to conform and to share the values and ambitions of those around them, even over upholding one's ties to their native culture, in which case one's previous sense of possibility regarding their life may be quickly challenged. One may realize over time, through their own experience, that what once seemed promising of happiness, like the promise that "if you work hard enough, you can achieve anything," has fallen short. "Objects can become happiness-causes without causing happiness"[58]; one can refer to this quote by Ahmed when taking into consideration how certain objects carry with them a kind of

[55] Ahmed, Sara. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness," p. 572.
[56] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 133.
[57] Bauman, Zygmunt. *The Art of Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press (2008). Quoted in Sara Ahmed. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 181.
[58] Ahmed, Sara. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness," p. 577.

anticipatory happiness, that is, an expectation that such will make one happy. Ahmed refers to one's wedding day as a prime example of an object which is almost always prescribed as being one of the greatest sources of happiness (sometimes even the "happiest day of one's life") before it has even arrived. Perhaps one can relate this idea of "anticipatory happiness" to the American Dream. Perhaps for many migrants in particular, the "American Dream" is promising of happiness as long as they are willing to be made happy by what is already deemed "happy" in the country that they are embracing as their new home. In other words, perhaps the American Dream provides migrants, in particular, with an already established plot/script more than it does a true opportunity to fully create or live out the life they desire. In the next section, I will explore how, despite their differences, the "feminist killjoy, unhappy queer, and melancholic migrant" are similar and what all three archetypes have in common.

Affect Aliens

One thing that the "unhappy queer," "feminist killjoy," and "melancholic migrant" all encompass is a refusal to be "happy" for the sake of appearing happy. Moreover, all three encompass an inability to access or claim happiness through the scripts which they have inherited, alienating them from the world and from themselves. This struggle to be "made happy" seems to point out how forms of happiness are inherited, and moreover, how some – like the "melancholic migrant, feminist killjoy, unhappy queer" – "inherit the elimination of the *hap"*[59]; the *chance*, one might say, to be "happy" by what one wants, and more broadly, to remove the expectation or goal of happiness altogether, to simply *be or become* with as little resistance as possible.

If one's life experiences do not fit into the conventional happiness script, or the happiness script requires one to forget one's past, how does one find another script? One of the greatest vehicles

---

[59] Ahmed, Sara. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness," p. 581.

for self-awareness and what some scholars may refer to as "consciousness-building" resides

within the creative world – within film, music, literature, and visual art. So much of what we fail

or are unable to express – by virtue of, for example, not having the time or the proper tools – can

be found in the creative work of every generation. The work of one artist has the potential to

speak on behalf of many. Art can express both the struggle to be happy as, for example, a queer

or colonized subject thus, it can help articulate the unhappiness of being refused inclusion into

happiness. Art can also paint a view of how alternative happenstances might provide us with

ways to deviate from the happiness script of the normalizing powers that inform conventions of

happiness. The creative process can provide new pathways to happiness for those who we may

consider "alien affects," namely those [people] who are alienated (from the world and

themselves) by "virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the

world."[60] One can certainly relate this idea of alienation to the lives of "feminist killjoys,"

"unhappy queers," and "melancholic migrants," as well as when considering how one's identity

can lead to their own alienation: "To become conscious of alienation is to become conscious of

how one's being has been stolen."[61] This idea can be related back to Ahmed's description of how

one's being can act as a form of disappearance in this world and how, to reference Marilyn Frye's

article on oppression, one's performance of happiness or contentment might ensure their

participation in their own erasure.[62] The "feminist," the "migrant," and the "queer" are alienated

from the world by virtue of challenging what is generally accepted as normal or good. One does

not have to act to be alienated from the world but rather exist in a way that perhaps challenges

the comfort of the majority. To become conscious of one's alienation is to realize how one's

being is encountered as negative by default and how this negativity can lead to a life of

---

[60] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 164.
[61] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 167.
[62] Frye, Marilyn. "Oppression," Ch. 2, Oppression and Resistance, p. 42.

misunderstanding and further alienation. In the next section, I will analyze two literary examples – Camus' *The Stranger* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* – to further interpret Ahmed's description of "alien affects" and to further explore how one being systematically encountered as negative (and therefore a potential source of unhappiness) may contribute to one's unhappiness and lack of wellbeing, and how on the contrary, one's willingness to challenge conventions of happiness (being made happy by "x" or "y"), and risk appearing unhappy, may actually be most promising of their happiness. In other words, I wish to examine how pointing out unhappiness or merely not being made happy by what's expected or "promised" to ensure happiness may not be an obstruction to one's happiness but perhaps a more promising pathway to one's authentic happiness and well-being.

Section III: Artistic Examples

There are many representations of people fighting for their own happiness scripts all around the world, as well as in the United States, whether it be on behalf of, to relate back to Ahmed's "feminist killjoys," "unhappy queers," or "melancholic migrants," the rights of women and LGBTQ+ individuals, migration laws, and the lives of migrants. Even outside of the context of protest or activism and in the more subtle moments of our daily lives, people fight for happiness in quiet ways, through, for example, the intake of novels, music, and visual art. "Art reflects society … it also creates elements which the society is unable to realize."[63] With this in mind, one might consider how art – in broad terms – may increase our engagement with aspects of life that we may not otherwise openly accept, consider, or realize. "When we compare art with its society … we also find, in certain characteristic forms and devices, evidence of deadlocks and

---

[63] Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution*. 2nd Ed. Cardigan, Wales: Parthian (1961/2011). Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,*" p. 3.

unsolved problems of the society."[64] In this way, art, in many cases, effectively captures societal conventions and cultural idiosyncrasies which we may be inclined to overlook or outright fail to see. In the next section, I will examine two literary works, Albert Camus's *The Stranger* and Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,* in order to further explore how creative works can challenge conventions of happiness (imperatives to be made happy or unhappy by "x" or "y"), an act which, Ahmed seems to argue, is imperative to expanding the possibilities – "horizons" – of happiness.

Camus - *The Stranger*

In Albert Camus' acclaimed novel *The Stranger*, originally published in 1942, readers meet Meursault, a middle-aged man living in Algiers who seems to live a rather isolated life with little to no attachment to anything. The novel reads from the perspective of Meursault, who describes his daily life and various mundane activities with what many readers might perceive as an unusual apathy or lack of amusement. One could also, however, interpret Meursault's "apathy" as a refreshing lack of performativity or a disregard for how he is perceived by others – whether that be unamused or unhappy. What makes the character of Meursault intriguing, however, is not his general lack of "self-consciousness" per se (although it may be to some readers), but – poignantly – his seeming neutrality to the death of his mother, an impression which is made at the very beginning of the novel:

> Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from the home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.[65]

---

[64] Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution*. Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,*" p. 3.
[65] Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc, 1988): 3.

One might consider how people rarely feel the need to affirm things that they truly believe, in which case perhaps Meursault's declaration that his mother's death does not mean anything might right off the bat in some way imply a kind of meaningfulness. On the one hand, Meursault's failure to show conventional signs of grieving or loss may be seen as a lack of feeling – or, as Ahmed might describe it – a "failure" to be affected by the loss of the mother as expected by others. However, one can also view Meursault's lack of external grieving not as displaying a dislike for his mother but as a willingness to not convene, or as Ahmed might describe, meet up over the convention, for example, that one should outwardly grieve in "x" way, and more broadly, that one should feel and act in "x" way. Furthermore, one might say that Meursault challenges (albeit unintentionally) the convention that one must be affected by the loss of their mother in "x" way. With this in mind, one might be inclined to view Meursault's reaction as a kind of revolt, not against his mother, per se, but more metaphorically, a revolt against cultural convention which naturally ties into the mother figure, and the family as a form of inheritance (inheritance of cultural expectations and norms). Hence, one might view the mother, as Scherr does, as "the embodiment of the socialization process and the superego."[66] Furthermore, one might define the "socialization process" as involving the ways in which all people are, in a gradual fashion, culturally conditioned to view certain things as "good" and to accept or value certain happiness norms (such as that of heterosexuality or celebrating distinctly gendered roles) over others. Moreover, we can also attribute the socialization process to the factors which may pressure us to act one way or another in various situations – to be, or at least appear, happy because of this or unhappy because of that. In failing to portray his grief in a way that is deemed "normal" or "expected," Meursault renders himself an *affect alien* in that he

---

[66] Scherr, Arthur. "Albert Camus: Revolt Against the Mother." *American Imago* 34, no. 2 (1977): 175.

reveals himself to be seemingly affected by convention differently than most others, which contributes to his distinct affect on readers.

While it's worthwhile to consider how Meursault can be classified as an *affect alien*, it's also important to consider how Meursault's *affect alienness* may be challenged and put into a different perspective when, in the latter half of the novel, he murders an innocent Arab man on a beach, in an attempt, some might argue, to elicit a sense of feeling within himself (something which Meursault may feel inclined to "prove" to others succumbing to a kind of cultural convention). While Meursault's relationship with certain objects (such as loss) alienates him from the world in some capacity, one may seek to define an *affect alien* differently when they compare Meursault, for example, to the murdered Arab. If one returns to Ahmed's description of affect aliens, as summarized earlier in the paper, and how one's being may act as a form of disappearance, one can consider how the Arab's identity renders him "erasable" by others, namely by Meursault. An examination of identity and oppression is further explored in Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation*[67], which responds to the erasure of the Arab – who remains nameless – in *The Stranger*. Daoud's work also highlights, as Ahmed's work on the "melancholic migrant" does, how histories of unhappiness have been altered and erased in the name of the white colonizer, in the name of the "happy," "civilized" cause. For one to focus more on Meursault's "external" grief for his mother than, for example, the lost happiness and life of the innocent Arab man who he murdered would seem to suggest that the feared *dismissal of the convention* of the mother and family as a "happy object," is seen as more problematic, and therefore garnering of more attention, than the removal and erasure of an innocent man, a man who represents a plurality of otherness, beings who may identify, for example, with the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer, and the melancholic migrant.

---

[67] Daoud, Kamel. *The Meursault Investigation*. Trans. John Cullen. London, England: Oneworld Publications, 2015.

In conclusion, Camus' work seems to provide two characterizations of Ahmed's *affect aliens*; the first being Meursault, who seemingly lives with a lack of regard for what is expected of him. Secondly, Camus' characterization, or rather lack of characterization, of the Arab provides perhaps a more poignant representation of what it means to be an *affect alien* – to have one's being (by virtue of their identity) act as a form of disappearance, and as a potential "justification" for one's endurance of a particular reality or history, in the case of the Arab, an unjust death, one which is representative of the many injustices that have been committed in attempts to preserve the apparent happiness of a select few, covering over histories of struggle. I will now turn to analyze Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* in order to explore another poignant representation of what it might mean or look like to be an *affect alien* and how one's being – by virtue of how they are affected by the world and how they affect others – may act as a form of disappearance. I will also explore how the "rejection" or mere questioning of the mother figure, as a representation of the conventional placement of women in society, may symbolize, in certain contexts, a more empowering and rightful claim to happiness, namely for women.

Plath - *The Bell Jar*

In order to further consider Scherr's notion of challenging the "socialization process" through challenging the mother figure (or conventions surrounding motherhood) and Ahmed's characterizations of "affect aliens," one might consider the work of Sylvia Plath. Plath's highly acclaimed novel *The Bell Jar*, published in 1963, follows the story of an ambitious nineteen-year-old, Esther Greenwood, who dreams of becoming a writer. Esther's ambitions, however, are complicated by the tumultuous and competitive social world around her and her own battle with severe depression. Throughout the novel, Esther struggles to find a clear sense of

self in a world that doesn't wish to see her in the same way that she wishes to see herself as a successful writer and intellectual.

The Bell Jar is autobiographical and provides, through Esther, an intimate look into the life of Sylvia Plath. Poignantly, though, *The Bell Jar* encapsulates the experience of many women during the 1950s through the 1970s in the United States, when gender-based inequality and discrimination were pervasive and when second-wave feminism was taking root. As one might deduce from the title *The Bell Jar*, the experience of women which Plath illustrates, as emphasized by Fejer and Talif, is that of containment.[68] One could go a step further and suggest that the novel signifies, through the character of Esther, "a society that destroys the female character."[69] One could compare this destruction of the female character to the ways in which women have been deprived of opportunities to grow to "full identity" through, for example, a lack of professional work, intellectual stimulation, and sexual liberty, all factors which, as Friedenfels suggests, contribute to an individual's ability to live a "pleasant, engaging, and meaningful life."

To briefly return to Freidman's *The Feminine Mystique* and the image of the happy housewife, one may note how Plath's work points to women's struggle to obtain both a career and a family. As Fejer and Talif poignantly note, perhaps Plath's emphasis and integration of Esther's internal dialogue throughout the novel is perhaps not as much about mental illness but on the relationship of Esther's personal obsession with her larger social situation, an obsession which is likely applicable to many women living in the 1950s-60s as they navigated a relatively one-dimensional, family-focused life.[70] As noted by Stephanie Coontz, "women who could not

---

[68] Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," *Sage Journals* 4, no. 3 (2014): 5.

[69] Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 4.

[70] Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 5.

walk the fine line between nurturing motherhood or who had trouble adjusting to creative

'homemaking' were labeled neurotic, perverted, or schizophrenic."[71] With this in mind, it may be

easier to understand why Esther is often approached by various characters – as Plath may have

been in real life – as a neurotic woman – because, at this time, women were not celebrated for

their intellect or ambition, but rather their willingness to find value in that which has also been

assigned to them, such as, for example, exclusively, the role of the mother and wife. Esther is

aware of and seems to perhaps internalize, as any woman would, the neuroticism that is assigned

to her by virtue of her intellect and inability to be confined to a box:

> If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm
>
> neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and
>
> another for the rest of my days.[72]

While on the one hand, Esther seems rather unapologetic or even nihilistic, she still struggles to

exert her own desires and wishes, not by fault of her own, per se, but by virtue of being an

ambitious woman in her time.

Esther's struggle to navigate the pressures of settling down and getting married alongside

her own aspirations of becoming a writer is prevalent throughout the novel. The ability for

women in Esther's time to balance education and occupation with the home and family was

virtually impossible, and furthermore, the desire to do so would likely have resulted in one's

alienation. Hence, "the generation of the 1950s suffocated in the roles that could not co-exist,"

namely that of the mother and wife and the "working" women.[73] "Even women, often single

---

[71] Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap.* New York, NY: Basic, (1992). Print. Quoted in Baljeet Kaur. "The Problematics of Existential Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar." International Journal of English Language, Literature, And Translation Studies* 4, issue 3 (2017): 49.

[72] Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2006): 94.

[73] Kaur, Baljeet. "The Problematics of Existential Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar." International Journal of English Language, Literature, And Translation Studies* 4, issue 3 (2017): 50.

women, who chose to pursue or focus on their careers may have been considered 'talented individuals' but were rarely considered 'successful.'"[74] Women, for the greater part of the 1960s and 1970s (albeit not exclusively), were rarely, if ever, given the true validation or self-credit that, for example, their male counterparts would have likely been credited for the same work or achieving the same goals. In one sense, progressive or more creative thinking women were encountered as being the causes of their own troubles or unhappiness (as Esther is defined and somewhat ostracized by her mental illness and neuroticism, rather than being taken seriously by those around her) and were conversely, not given credit for their own accomplishments or ways in which they may have been able to achieve self-satisfaction.

When considering what may contribute to one's happiness and one's ability to live an engaging, meaningful, and pleasant life, it is worthwhile to consider the role of one's social mobility, an ability to move from one social position to another or, more broadly, not be restricted to a particular social sphere. Social mobility is not only a major theme in Plath's work but was seemingly a prominent theme in a lot of 20th-century literature.[75] "Social mobility in the 20th century was generally discussed in individual terms, and the writer [as an archetype] was frequently taken as an example; in other words, individual mobility was often represented through 'the individual career' by the writer himself/herself."[76] With this literary theme in mind, one can likely greater appreciate the characterization of Esther as a writer beyond echoing the life of Plath. The resistance Esther faces as an aspirational writer reflects (in intersection with her gender) her lack of social mobility.

---

[74] Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 3.

[75] Raymond, Williams. *The Long Revolution*. Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 3.

[76] Raymond, Williams. *The Long Revolution*. Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 3.

As articulated by Raymond Williams' *The Long Revolution,* one who lacks social mobility often "mocks or rages at the institutions which are made available to him/her to join," or "he acquiesces, suffering rapid personal deterioration."[77] Poignantly, readers can observe Esther's willingness to mock or belittle external institutions such as that of marriage, which is reflected in Esther's following proclamation: "In spite of all the roses and the kisses … what a man secretly wanted when the wedding services ended was for the wife to be flattened out underneath his feet…"[78] Furthermore, in many instances, Esther strongly rejects the notion that women should be or are inherently inferior or subservient to men: "The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way."[79] Despite Esther's periodic brazenness and the ways that she mocks external institutions and conventions such as marriage and misogyny, readers can also observe Esther's personal deterioration and the ways in which she falls victim to the world around her – mentally, emotionally, and physically – leading her to ultimately attempt suicide more than once. "Plath situates her protagonist in a world full of contradicting choices that would cause bewilderment to any sensitive, intellectual person like Esther."[80] I think this insight from Fejer and Talif helps unveil the seeming impossibility of life for so many women in the 1950s through the 1970s and the ways in which women were presented with difficult, if not implausible, ultimatums and contradictory choices, contributing, in large part, to the assurance of their continued residence in the home and in the family sphere. Building off this sentiment, the following quote also encompasses the struggle Esther and likely Plath in her real life faced, as ambitious, imaginative women living in a world which, quite frankly, much preferred to keep them contained: "She is

---

[77] Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution*. Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,*" p. 3.
[78] Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2006): 34.
[79] Sylvia Plath. *The Bell Jar*, p. 72.
[80] Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 9.

either loved for denying her needs or she is abandoned as punishment for exploring the world on her own, for using her unprecedented emotions and desires as a guide."[81]

One may apply this notion of using one's emotions and desires as a guide to Esther's relationship with their mother. From the novel's first-person narration, readers can glean Esther's general distaste and inability to relate with her mother, a dynamic which is largely borne out of Mrs. Greenwood's seeming inability to acknowledge and support Esther in her struggles of identity and womanhood. Mrs. Greenwood's inability or unwillingness to do so stems largely from the fact that she views women's place in society very differently them Esther. One could even say, like Baljeet Kaur, that Mrs. Greenwood is a "representation of the conventional structures regarding the placement of women in society."[82] Hence, Esther's distaste for her mother is not merely a distaste for her as an individual but as a reminder of the society in which she lives, one which cannot (or will not) accept her in her full form, one which will not support her "growth to full identity."

In conclusion, the tension that readers can perceive between Esther and her mother parallels the tension between Esther and her world, namely Esther's isolation from self and society. As Kaur points out, "Esther could never confide in her mother as her mother always remained embedded in the conventional structure." In this way, one could view Mrs. Greenwood as "an embodiment of parental and generational difference."[83] Poignantly, the mother figure - as a representation of the conventional placement of women in society – encapsulates how the mother (and home) act as a form of inheritance, not only of generational values but cultural values and

---

[81] Leonard, G.M. "The Women is perfected. Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment:" Sylvia Plath and Mademoiselle magazine. *College Literature* 19, no. 2 (1992): 70. Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 6.

[82] Kaur, Baljeet. "The Problematics of Existential Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 50.

[83] Kaur, Baljeet. "The Problematics of Existential Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 52.

conventions. For Esther, these conventions pertained largely to the restriction of women to the home and the suppression of their intellect and independence. One may relate the experience and challenges of Esther to the nature of women's oppression, as outlined by Marilyn Frye: "Our [women] simply being dispersed makes it difficult for women to have knowledge of each other and hence difficult to recognize the shape of our common cage"[84] Here, Frye speaks to how oppression is perpetuated on behalf of, for one, isolation, which I suggest is especially poignant when considering how women – like Esther/Plath – were "kept" home and were, in any way that was possible, incentivized to stay away and removed from the world, and notably *other women*. As noted by Adrienne Rich in her Essay "On Lies, Secrets, and Silence": "Not biology, but ignorance of ourselves has been the key to our [women's] powerlessness."[85] Rich's point here speaks to the experience of women historically and the ways in which their restriction of knowledge and experience has been a metric of keeping them unaware of their own ability and potential, and the ability and potential of other women, helping to reinforce their oppression.

In conclusion, Esther's "rejection" of her mother was a rejection of her time and of her inability to escape the restrictions imposed upon her on the basis of her gender. As Kaur notes, Esther "had to resent her mother's impositions to succeed in her attempts at individuation."[86] One can view Esther and Plath as someone whose life was restricted not by any lack of aspiration or ability but by the world's inability to value such traits in women. Both Esther and Plath struggled to receive validation and support from their mothers, paralleling their inability, one might say, to be validated and have their aspirations and abilities supported by the world around them.

---

[84] Frye, Marilyn. "Oppression," Ch. 2, Oppression and Resistance, p. 45.

[85] Rich, Adrienne. "On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-78." Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies. 5.1 (1980): 75. Print. Quoted in Baljeet Kaur. "The Problematics of Existential Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. 240.

[86] Kaur, Baljeet. "The Problematics of Existential Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," p. *53*.

The Bell Jar encapsulates a moment of history that we can compare present-day societal dynamics and cultures to when considering what true progress has been made as it relates to the experiences and freedoms of women in America today. I will now turn to the final section of this thesis, in which I will interpret Ahmed's final takeaways on the factors which may influence one's happiness and how happiness may be at its highest potential when it is approached as something more than an individual project, but as a collective responsibility. I will also consider how Camus and Plath's work (despite their differences) might support and challenge Ahmed's conclusions.

Conclusion

To review, one of the primary ideas Ahmed explores in her novel is the notion of *affect*, moreover, how our sense of being or "well-being" is shaped by the external world, from our interactions with other objects, whether they be people, places, things, or broader social systems. As I emphasized at the beginning of this paper in my section on "Feminist Killjoys" and Unhappy Queers," to acknowledge the role of *affect* in happiness is to distribute the responsibility of happiness more broadly and to challenge the notion that happiness is merely a personal project or responsibility. Ultimately, everyone is affected (albeit in different ways and to different degrees) by large and complex social structures, which, as poignantly outlined in *The Bell Jar*, cannot be dismantled by any one individual, no matter how yearning or bright, like Esther Greenwood, or Plath herself. Ahmed largely centers her concept of *affect* on three archetypes, all of which are relevant to her own identity as an immigrant, lesbian, and feminist scholar: the "feminist killjoy," the "unhappy queer," and "melancholic migrant, all of whom, I would suggest can be classified as "affect aliens," a term which Ahmed denotes to anyone who is

alienated by virtue of how they are affected by the world or how they affect others in the world.[87]

Ahmed's description of "affect aliens" prompts thoughtful conversations on how one's being can

act as a form of disappearance, and how the performance of happiness – under the imperative to

appear happy or content – can render one invisible, and moreover, for some, risk the erasure of

one's oppression. For example, one can consider how the "feminist killjoy, unhappy queer, and

melancholic migrant" are encountered as negative by virtue of challenging or merely contrasting

(by existing) what might be considered normal or acceptable. Their willingness to reject the

conventions of happiness, that is, to "meet up over happiness," or what is labeled as a "happiness

cause" in order to validate something as "right" or "good," can further accentuate their being,

and [social] cause as negative or invalid. To attribute unhappiness to that which demands

reparation (such as social injustice) is a convenient way to attribute the subject which has been

negatively affected as the cause and origin of their own [systemic] negative affect contributing to

a cyclic pattern of injustice and social contempt on behalf of those who identify or are seen as

"other." As Ahmed emphasizes in her conclusion, "the failure of transcendence constitutes the

necessity of a political struggle."[88] By introducing the concepts of *affect* and *affect aliens,*

Ahmed helps reinforce the notion that one's happiness reflects our position in and relationship

with the outside world more than it does [reflect] our "natural" deposition or condition, herby

making one's potential unhappiness not merely "dismissible" or to be able to "let go of," but a

point of collective consideration and responsibility.

The cultural imperative and pressure to be happy or appear happy is pervasiveness across

many cultures including in the United States, which prides itself on its commitment to the

"pursuit of happiness for all." For one to adopt another culture's "promise of happiness," for

---

[87] Ahmed, Sara, *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 164.
[88] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 187.

example – like for the melancholic migrant chasing the "American Dream" – is to also adopt that which has been established as good, a good which may easily contradict one's personal and native values and beliefs. "To be bound to happiness is to be bound to what has already been established as good."[89] How can one be made happy by what one cannot accept as good? Hence, the "prompts" or expectations of happiness arise, outlining the following demand: "If you want to be happy," accept this, do that, be this way." As is the case for Esther, "happiness" is possible for her if she embraces the version of womanhood which has been assigned to her and other women in her time, but she can not accept such as "right" or "good," leading to her deterioration. With this in mind, one can consider how embedded within many cultures' imperatives to be happy for the sake of appearing happy is often a lack of true individual mobility for ethnic and racial minorities and women. Social mobility, moreover individual mobility, is integral to ensuring the possibility of one living a pleasant, meaningful, and engaged life. As Friedenfels claims, if one cannot exercise their distinct skills and pursue their unique interests, one is less likely to experience self-satisfaction in life. Such can certainly be applied to the character of Esther, who, by virtue of her time, is unable to find the self-assurance and social support to flourish – to "grow to full identity.".

If we consider both Plath and Camus' work, we might consider how both Esther and Camus, in their struggle to be made easily happy by conventional forms of happiness, or moreover their inability to "be" what others expect or that which affirms "happy objects," questions cultural convention(s). For Esther, her rejection of her mother is rooted in her rejection of the conventional placement of women in society, which her mother, in many ways, represents. With that said, in analyzing the mother figure as a representation of the conventional placement of women in society, I do not mean to antagonize the figure of "the mother" as an individual or

---

[89] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness,* p. 133.

to portray motherhood negatively (an experience which I cannot speak on) but to bring into question that ways that the mother-figure and "promotion of motherhood" – by default – has served as a mechanism by which women's struggles for freedom and autonomy have been perpetuated. Moreover, I do not wish to challenge women's desire to have children or cultivate a family or to undermine the ways that "conventionally" feminine roles may be objectively fulfilling for some women (although that notion warrants more nuanced consideration) but rather, to bring into question the ways that the family has by default, been promoted as a kind of "happiness-granting" institution, one which has contributed to women's struggles with identity. There is also something poignant, one might add, about considering the unique power embedded in motherhood as it relates to promoting or challenging certain cultural conventions and norms. Of course, women as individuals are not responsible for the cultural landscape that may shape the reality they face as mothers. One may also consider how mothers, in particular, are often more likely to be encountered as negative or be seen – to a greater extent than fathers – as the potential cause of the perceived shortcomings of their children or family as a whole. As in the case of *The Bell Jar*, for example, one might consider Esther's mother not merely as an embodiment of her time and a certain history of womanhood but also as a *product* of her time and history. Perhaps in this way, one can consider the life of Mrs. Greenwood not dissimilarly from Esther's in that they both live lives of containment; only Esther's perception of her reality and personal aspirations undoubtedly set her apart from not only her mother but most other women, further alienating her from the world.

For Meursault, his "abnormal" response to his mother's death signifies – on some level – his seeming rejection of convention (not that it's particularly intentional or conscious). Secondly, the murder of the Arab, to a greater extent than Camus, provides a representation of what it

might mean to be a true *affect alien* – to by virtue of your identity, for example, or association with a given group on the basis of gender or ethnicity/race, not only remain nameless, but have your life, your story, and your happiness erased and not so much as *questioned*.

Ultimately what I hope my work here has done is first, like Ahmed, encourage people to think of unhappiness as more than a feeling that should be overcome.[90] To reiterate, unveiling the unhappiness in our world does not *cause* unhappiness; to call out unhappiness – injustice, for example – by its name does not make one the source or origin of said unhappiness or injustice.

Through my work, I don't mean to suggest that we are all inherently "unhappy" beings or that we should be wary of positive feelings which can be utterly genuine, but rather to be willing when such feelings arise in one's own life and in the lives of others, to not encounter unhappiness – or something uncomfortable or deviating from what we expect or know – as negative, per se, but as something which can be utilized to access an alternative pathway towards a potentially more individualized and inclusive form of happiness. To echo Ahmed, perhaps then we can view the struggle against happiness as a necessity as a struggle for happiness as a possibility.[91] Moreover, perhaps we can more thoughtfully consider what it is we may be valuing or protecting (or failing to protect) in upholding or appealing to conventional forms of happiness and [re]encounter the promise of happiness as a promise of possibility, which I would argue is only possible if we engage with happiness from a place of curiosity, open-mindedness, and inclusivity rather than – by default – as a mechanism to justify our realities as we know them, or namely the realities of those who may face greater challenges on behalf of their identity or life circumstances. We must work to ensure that our desire for and experience(s) of happiness does not obstruct our ability or commitment to continue questioning the world around us and the ways

---

[90] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness,* p. 217.
[91] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, p. 222.

it may objectively serve certain bodies over others – how the pursuit of happiness is not for all, but rather a select few. In the wise words of Simone de Beauvoir: "It's always easy to describe as happy the situation in which one wishes to place [others]."[92] "Embracing possibility involves returning to the past, recognizing what one has lost, what one has given, and what one has given up,"[93] a sentiment which I believe centers Ahmed's work and is the primary cause which my thesis hopes to support: in facing our unhappiness, and the unhappiness around us, may we refrain from learning the same historical lessons over and over again, and live more fulfilling lives and with a greater sense of investment in one another's wellbeing, and future.

---

[92] Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. London: Vintage (1949/1997): 28. Quoted in Sara Ahmed: The Promise of Happiness (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010): 204.
[93] Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness,* p. 218.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness."

    Signs 35, no. 3 (2010): 571-594. https://doi.org/10.1086/648513

Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.

Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. William Kaufman.

    New York: Dove Publications (1998). Quoted in Sara Ahmed: The Promise of Happiness

    (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010): 26.

Bauman, Zygmunt. *The Art of Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press (2008): 15. Quoted in Sara Ahmed:

    The Promise of Happiness (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010): 181.

Beauvoir, Simone de. "'Introduction' to The Second Sex." *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M.

    Parshley. New York: Knopf, 1953.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley.

    London: Vintage (1949/1997): 28. Quoted in Sara Ahmed: The Promise of Happiness

    (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010): 204.

"Cambridge Dictionary," Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2023.

https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/think-tank

Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1988.

Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap.* New

York: *Basic*, (1992). Print. Quoted in Baljeet Kaur. "The Problematics of Existential

Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar." International

Journal of English Language, Literature, And Translation Studies* 4, issue 3 (2017): 49.

Csíkszentmihályi, Mihály. *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*. London: Rider (1992). Quoted

in Sara Ahmed: The Promise of Happiness (Durham and London: Duke University Press,

2010): 11.

Daoud, Kamel. *The Meursault Investigation*. Trans. John Cullen.

New York: Other Press, 2015.

Downes, Julia. "Review: Sara Ahmed. The Promise of Happiness."

Graduate Journal of Social Science 9, issue 2 (2012): 231-234.

Fejer, Azhar Noori, and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock: A Cultural

Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*."

Sage Journals 4, issue 3 (2014): 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014547180

Frey, Bruno S., and Alois Stutzer. *Happiness and Economics: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Human Well-Being* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). Quoted in Sara Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs* 35, no. 3 (2010): 572.

Friedenfels, Roxanne. "PLEASURE AND BEYOND: A Feminist Look at Happiness." *Off Our Backs* 37, no. 4 (2007): 18–22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20838870.

Friedman, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. Harmondsworth: Penguin (1965). Referenced in Sara Ahmed: The Promise of Happiness (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010): 50-54.

Friedman, Betty. The Feminine Mystique. New York: Dell (1973). Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of 'Deadlock: A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Sage Journals* 4, issue 3 (2014): 2.

Frye, Marilyn. "Oppression," Ch. 2, Oppression and Resistance. *The Feminist Philosophy Reader* by Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo, page(s): 41-49.

Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*.

Trumansburg, NY: Crossing (1983): 2. Quoted in Sara Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism

and the History of Happiness." *Signs* 35, no. 3 (2010): 582.

"Happiness Research Institute," The Happiness Research Institute, 2022.

https://www.happinessresearchinstitute.com/

Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals,* Ed. Lara Denis. Trans. Thomas

Kingsmill Abbott. (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, [1785] 2005): 78. Quoted in Sara

Ahmed, "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs 3*5, no. 3 (2010):

572.

Kaur, Baljeet. "The Problematics of Existential Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Slyvia

Plath's *The Bell Jar." International Journal of English Language, Literature And

Translation Studies* 4, issue 3 (2017): 48-54.

Leonard, G.M. "The woman is perfected. Her dead body wears the smile of accomplishment":

Sylvia Plath and Mademoiselle magazine. *College Literature* 19, no. 2 (1992): 70.

Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of

'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," *Sage

Journals* 4, no. 3 (2014): 6.

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: The Politics of Loss in Queer History*. Cambridge,

    Mass.:Harvard University Press (2007): 127. Quoted in Sara Ahmed: The Promise of

    Happiness (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010): 89.

Makerere Institute of Social Research. "Who is Afraid of Gender? Prof. Judith Butler," YouTube

    Video, 2:07:59, June 11, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cqc3uCold08

Mill, James. *History of British India*. London: Routledge [1818] 1997. Essays reprinted from the

    Supplement to the Encyclopaedia of Britannica. London: J. Innes (1828). Quoted in Sara

    Ahmed: The Promise of Happiness (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010):

    125.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar.* New York: HarperPerennial, 2006.

Rich, Adrienne. "On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-78."

    Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies. 5.1 (1980): 240. Print. Quoted in Baljeet Kaur.

    "The Problematics of Existential Anguish: Mother-Daughter Conflict in Sylvia Plath's

    The Bell Jar," International Journal of English Language, Literature And Translation

    Studies 4, issue 3 (2017): 53.

Rottenberg, Catherine. "Happiness and the Liberal Imagination: How Superwomen Became

    Balanced." *Feminist Studies* 40, no. 1 (2014): 144-168.

    https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.15767/feministstudies.40.1.144

Scherr, Arthur. "Albert Camus: Revolt Against the Mother." *American Imago* 34, no. 2 (1977):

170-178. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26303216

The Royal Institution. "The Psychology and Neuroscience of Happiness," YouTube Video,

36:23, Oct. 11, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Gpxjeq2CJ8

Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution.* 2nd Ed. Cardigan, Wales: Parthian (1961/2011).

Quoted in Azhar Noori Fejer and Rosli Talif. "Individual Mobility and the Sense of

'Deadlock': A Cultural Materialist Analysis of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar,*" *Sage*

Journals 4, no. 3 (2014): 3-4.