

THE POLITICS OF GOOD FEELING¹

SARA AHMED

Abstract

This paper explores 'the politics of good feeling' with specific reference to debates about multiculturalism and immigration. The paper considers how certain bodies are seen as the origin of bad feeling, as getting in the way of public happiness, exploring the negative affective value of the figures of the feminist kill-joy, unhappy queer and melancholic migrant. Drawing on a reading of the film *Bend it Like Beckham*, the paper explores how the would-be-citizen who embraces the national game is rewarded with happiness. The migrant who refuses to integrate becomes an unhappy object for the nation, as the cause of unhappiness, terror and insecurity. The film participates in a wider discourse that reads public speech about racism as melancholic, as the refusal to let go of suffering. The paper explores how this conversion between unhappy racism and multicultural happiness takes place, and in so doing, offers a critique of what we would call 'the affirmative turn'.

Introduction

Multicultural communities tend to be less trusting and less happy...people frankly, when there are other pressures, like to love in a comfort zone which is defined by racial sameness...people feel happy if they are with people like themselves. (Trevor Phillips, 2006, Chair of Commission of Equalities and Human Rights, UK).

Trevor Phillips suggests that the problem with multiculturalism is that it makes people unhappy. Or we could say that multiculturalism becomes a problem by being attributed as the cause of unhappiness. When we are 'in' multiculturalism, we are 'out' of our comfort zone. Phillips made these comments in the third episode of the BBC programme, 'The Happiness Formula' aired in the UK in 2006.¹¹ The episode argued that the social project 'to make people happier' means to 'make societies more cohesive,' or to 'put glue back into communities'. The mission to put glue back into communities not only suggests that communities lack such glue, but also they once had it. Happiness becomes here like glue; we need to glue communities back together through happiness. The programme imagines a world where people are less physically and socially mobile as a happier world; for example, it describes a small French village, where people stay put over generations, as being the happiest possible way of living together. We might note here that such a nostalgic vision is a vision of a white community, of white people happily living with other white people. Likeness or racial sameness gets quickly translated here into whiteness. The programme mourns the loss of such a world implying that migration causes unhappiness by forcing people who are 'unlike' to live together.

The programme does not simply give up on multiculturalism but suggests that we have an obligation to make multicultural communities happy, premised on the

model of 'building bridges'. Trevor Phillips evokes unhappy instances of community conflict or violence between communities by claiming: '*this* is exactly what happens when people who look very different, and think they are very different, never touch and interact'. The 'this' stands for all that is unhappy, sliding into forms of violence that are evoked without being named (from personal distrust, to inter-group conflict, to international terrorism). Unhappiness is here read as caused not simply by diversity, but by the failure of people who embody that diversity, who are recognizable as unlike, to interact. Phillips recommends that communities integrate by sharing 'an activity' such as football, 'that takes us out of our ethnicity and connects us with people of different ethnicities if only for hours a week'. If we do this, he says, 'then I think we can crack the problem'.

We can see here that the shift from unhappy to happy diversity involves the demand for interaction. The image of happy diversity is projected into the future: when we have 'cracked the problem' through interaction, we will be happy with diversity. That football becomes a technique for generating happy diversity is no accident: football is not just a national sport, but is also proximate to the ego ideal of the nation, as being a level playing field, providing, as it were, a common ground.ⁱⁱⁱ The fantasy of football is that it can take us 'out of our ethnicity'. So we could say that diversity becomes happy when it involves loyalty to what has already been given as a national ideal. Happiness is promised in return for loyalty to the nation, where loyalty is expressed as 'giving' diversity to the nation through playing its game.

We need to place this account of unhappy diversity within a wider context. I would describe this context as 'the happiness turn' (see Ahmed 2008), which has meant a return to classical questions

of what is happiness, and what makes for a good life or a life good. In the past few years, numerous books have been published on the science and economics of happiness, some of which are explicitly framed as revivals of nineteenth century English utilitarianism (Gilbert 2006; Haidt, 2006; Layard 2005). Within this new science of happiness, it is taken for granted that there is something called happiness; that happiness is good; that happiness can be known and measured; and that the task of government is to maximise happiness. These systems of measurement have been called 'hedonimeters' (Nettle 2006: 3), and are mostly based on self-reporting: what they actually measure is how happy people say they are. Happiness studies proceeds by looking for correlations between reported happiness levels and other social indicators, creating what are called 'happiness indicators'.

The turn to happiness has involved a narrative of happiness as being in crisis. The crisis in happiness works primarily as a narrative of disappointment: the accumulation of wealth has not meant the accumulation of happiness. What makes this crisis 'a crisis' in the first place is of course the regulatory effect of a social belief: that more wealth 'should' have made people happier. For example, Richard Layard begins his science of happiness with what he describes as a paradox, 'as Western societies have got richer, their people have become no happier' (2006: 1). The new science of happiness restores the expectation that happiness means wealth, even when it appears to uncouple happiness from wealth. The new science still locates happiness in certain places, especially marriage, widely regarded as the primary 'happiness indicator', as well as in stable families and communities, where that stability takes some forms and not others, as I have already suggested. Happiness is looked for where it is expected to be

found, even when happiness is reported as missing. Happiness is a kind of wish that motivates where we look for it. Simone de Beauvoir expresses this point powerfully when she says 'how it is always easy to describe as happy a situation in which one wishes to place (others)' (1997: 28). Happiness translates its wish into a politics, a wishful politics: if we wish for happiness, we might also wish that others live according to our wish.

What is striking is that the crisis in happiness has not put social ideals into question, and if anything has reinvigorated their hold over psychic and political life. The demand for happiness is increasingly articulated as a demand to return to social ideals, as if what explains the crisis of happiness is not the failure of these ideals, but our failure to follow them. In this paper, I will consider how happiness functions as promise, which directs us towards certain objects which then circulate as social goods. My example will be the film, *Bend it like Beckham*. I have chosen this film not only given that it is a 'happy film'; it is marketed as a 'delightful, feel good comedy', but also because it is one of Britain's most successful films. It also tells a very happy story about British multiculturalism. My reading of the film will explore how multiculturalism is attributed with positive value through the alignment of a story of individual happiness with the social good.

Happy Objects

If it is true to say that much recent work in cultural studies has investigated what we could call 'the politics of bad feeling' (shame, disgust, hate, fear and so on), it might be useful to take good feeling as our starting point, without presuming that the distinction between good and bad will always hold.^{iv} Of course, we cannot conflate happiness with good feeling. As Darrin McMahan (2006) has argued in his monumental history of happiness, the

association of happiness with feeling is a modern one, in circulation from the eighteenth century onwards. If it is now hard to think about happiness without thinking about good feeling, then we can think about the relationship between feeling good and other kinds of goods.

I would not begin by assuming there is something called happiness that corresponds to an object in the world. My starting point is the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds and what I think of as 'the drama of contingency', how we are touched by what comes near. It is striking that the etymology of 'happiness' relates to this question of contingency: it is from the Middle English 'hap', suggesting chance. Happiness would be about whatever happens. Only later, does 'the what' signal something good. Happiness becomes not only about chance, but evokes the idea of being lucky, being favoured by fortune, or being fortunate. Even this meaning may now seem archaic: we may be more used to thinking of happiness as an effect of what you do, say as a reward for hard work, rather than as what happens to you. But I find this original meaning useful, as it focuses our attention on the 'worldly' question of happenings.

What is the relation between the 'what' in 'what happens' and the 'what' that makes us happy? Empiricism provides us with a useful way of addressing this question, given its concern with 'what's what'. He argues that what is good is what is '*apt to cause or increase pleasure, or diminish pain in us*' (1997: 216). We judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us a pleasure or pain. Locke example is the man who loves grapes. Locke suggests that 'when a man declares in autumn, when he is eating them, or in spring, when there are none, that he *loves grapes*, it is no more, but that the taste of grapes

delights him' (216). When something causes pleasure or delight, it is good for us. For Locke, happiness is a form of pleasure: 'the greatest happiness consists in the having those things which produce the greatest pleasure' (247). Happy objects could be described simply as those objects that affect us in a good way.

Note the doubling of positive affect in Locke's example: we *love* the grapes, if they taste *delightful*. To say we love what tastes delightful is not to say that delight causes our love, but that the experience of delight involves a loving orientation towards the object, just as the experience of love registers what is delightful. To be affected 'in a good way' thus involves an orientation toward something as being good. Happiness can thus be described as *intentional* in the phenomenological sense (directed towards objects), as well as being *affective* (contact with objects). To bring these arguments together we might say that happiness is an orientation toward the objects we come into contact with.

To describe happiness as intentional does not mean there is always any simple correspondence between objects and feelings. I would suggest is that happiness involves a specific kind of intentionality, which I would call 'end orientated'. It is not just that we are happy about something, but some things become happy *for us*, if we imagine they will bring happiness *to us*. Classically, happiness has been considered as an end and not a means. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes happiness as the Chief Good, as 'that which all things aim at' (1998: 1). Happiness is what we 'choose always for its own sake' (8). Anthony Kenny describes how, for Aristotle, happiness 'is not just an end, but a perfect end' (1993: 16). The perfect end is the end of all ends, the good that is good always for its own sake.

We don't have to agree with the argument that happiness is the perfect end to understand the implications of what it means for happiness to be thought in these terms. If happiness is the end of all ends, then *all other things become means to happiness*. As Aristotle describes, we choose other things 'with a view to happiness, conceiving that through their instrumentality we shall be happy' (1998: 8). Aristotle is not referring here to material or physical objects, but is differentiating between different kinds of goods, between instrumental goods and independent goods. So honour or intellect we choose 'with view to happiness' as being instrumental to happiness, and the realisation of the possibility of living a good or virtuous life.

If we think of instrumental goods as objects of happiness then important consequences follow. Things become good, or acquire their value as goods, insofar as they point towards happiness. Objects become 'happiness means'. Or we could say they become happiness pointers, as if to follow their point would be to find happiness. If objects provide a means for making us happy, then in directing ourselves towards this or that object, we are aiming somewhere else: toward a happiness that is presumed to follow. The temporality of this following does matter. Happiness is what would come after. Given this, happiness is directed towards certain objects, which point toward that which is not yet present. Happiness does not reside in objects; it is *promised through proximity to certain objects*. The promise of happiness takes the form – that if you do this or if you have that, then happiness is what follows.

This is why the social bond is rather sensational. Groups cohere around a shared orientation towards some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight. When we feel pleasure from objects that are agreed

to cause happiness, we are aligned; we are facing the right way. We become alienated – out of line with an affective community - when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good. The gap between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object can involve a range of affects. If we are disappointed by something, we generate explanations of why that thing is disappointing. Such explanations can involve an anxious narrative of self-doubt (why I am not made happy by this, what is wrong with me?) or a narrative of rage, where the object that is 'supposed' to make us happy is attributed as the cause of disappointment, which can lead to a rage directed towards those that promised us happiness through the elevation of such objects as good. We might even become strangers, or affect aliens, at such moments.

So when happy objects are passed around, it is not necessarily the feeling that passes. If anything, what passes is the promise of the feeling, which means that feeling always lag behind the objects that are assumed to contain them. To share such objects (or have a share in such objects) means you would *share an orientation towards those objects as being good*. We are familiar with the image of the happy family. This family is evoked by Toni Morrison in her book, *The Bluest Eye*: 'Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy' (1979: 1). The familiarity of the story has affective resonance. The white nuclear family is happy not because it causes happiness, but because of a shared orientation towards that family as being good, as being 'what' would promise happiness in return for loyalty.^v Indeed, Morrison disturbs this happiness of the image by removing the punctuation from the sentence: 'hereisthehouseitis'

(Morrison 1979: 2). Disturbing happiness requires disturbing the technologies through which we make sense; it requires blocking the passages of communication that allows happy messages to be sent out.

What passes through the passing around of happy objects remains an open question. Objects become sticky, saturated with affects as sites of personal and social tension (Ahmed 2004: 11). After all, the word 'passing' can mean not only 'to send over' or 'to transmit', but also to transform objects by 'a sleight of hand'. Like the game Chinese whispers^{vi}, what passes between proximate bodies, might be affective precisely because it deviates and even perverts what was 'sent out'. What interests me is how affects involve perversion; or what we could describe as conversion points.

One of my key questions is how such conversions happen, and 'who' or 'what' gets seen as converting bad feeling into good feeling and good into bad. We need to attend to such points of conversion, and how they involve explanations of where good and bad feelings reside. When I hear people say 'the bad feeling is coming from "this person" or "that person" I am never convinced. I am sure a lot of my scepticism is shaped by life long experiences of being an outspoken feminist, at odds with the performance of good feeling, whether at home or at work, always assumed to be bringing others down, for example, by pointing out sexism in other people's talk. Let's take the figure of the 'kill joy feminist'. Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced or negated under public signs of joy? Does bad feeling enter the room when somebody expresses anger about things, or could anger be the moment when the bad feelings that saturate

objects get brought to the surface in a certain way? The feminist is an affect alien for sure: she might even kill joy precisely because she refuses to share an orientation towards certain things as being good, because she does not find the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising. Her 'failure' to be made happy by the right things is read as sabotaging the happiness of others.

We can place the figure of the feminist kill joy alongside the figure of the angry Black woman, explored so well by writers such as Audre Lorde (1984), Suneri Thobani (2003), bell hooks (2000), and Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2003). The angry black woman can be described as a kill joy; she may even kill feminist joy, for example, by pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics. The black woman might not even have to make any such point to kill joy, or to 'ruin the atmosphere'. Listen to the following description from bell hooks: 'a group of white feminist activists who do not know one another may be present at a meeting to discuss feminist theory. They may feel bonded on the basis of shared womanhood, but the atmosphere will noticeable change when a woman of color enters the room. The white woman will become tense, no longer relaxed, no longer celebratory'. (56)

It is not just that feelings are 'in tension', but that the tension is located somewhere: in being felt by some bodies, it is attributed as caused by another body, who thus comes to be felt as apart from the group, as getting in the way of its organic enjoyment and solidarity. The black body is attributed as the cause of becoming tense, which is also the loss of a shared atmosphere. hooks shows how as a black feminist you do not even have to say anything to cause tension. The mere proximity of some bodies involves an affective conversion. To get along you have to go along with things which might

mean for some not even being able to enter the room.

To speak out of anger as Black woman is then to confirm your position as the cause of tension. Black woman's anger gets in the way of the social bond; it injures or hurts the feminist group. As Audre Lorde describes: 'When women of Color speak out of the anger that laces so many of our contacts with white women, we are often told that we are "creating a mood of helplessness", "preventing white women from getting past guilt", or "standing in the way of trusting communication and action"' (1984: 131). The exposure of violence becomes the origin of violence. The black woman must let go of her anger for the white woman to move on.

Some bodies are presumed to be the origin of bad feeling insofar as they disturb the promise of happiness, which I re-describe as the social pressure to maintain the signs of 'getting along'. We could describe such bodies as blockage points, points where the smooth communication stops. Consider Ama Ata Aidoo's wonderful prose poem, *Our Sister Killjoy*, when the narrator Sissie, as a black woman, has to work to sustain the comfort of others, which means working hard at not killing their joy. On a plane, a white hostess invites her to sit at the back of the plane with black people she does not know. She is about to say that she does not know them, and hesitates: 'But to have refused to join them would have created an awkward situation, wouldn't it? Considering too that apart from the air hostess's obviously civilized upbringing, she had been trained to see the comfort of all her passengers' (1977: 10).

Power speaks here in this moment of hesitation. Do you go along with it? What does it mean to not go along with it? To create awkwardness is to be read as being awkward. Maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies are

kept out of view; for them to refuse to go along with this placement would be to seen as causing discomfort for others, as the origin of bad feeling. There is a political struggle about how we attribute good and bad feelings, which hesitates around the apparently simple question of who introduces what feelings to whom. Feelings can get stuck to certain bodies in the very way we describe spaces, situations, dramas. And yes, bodies can get stuck depending on 'what' feelings they get associated with.

Just Happiness

I have suggested that some objects more than others embody the promise of happiness. In other words, happiness directs us to certain objects, as if they are the necessary ingredients for a good life. What makes this argument different to John Locke's account of loving grapes because they taste delightful, is that the judgment about certain objects as being 'happy' is already made, before they are even encountered: certain objects are attributed as the conditions for happiness so that we arrive 'at' them with an expectation of how we will be affected by them, which affects how they affect us, even in the moment they fail to live up to our expectations. Happiness is an expectation of what follows, where the expectation differentiates between things, whether or not they exist as objects in the present. For instance, the child might be asked to imagine the future by imagining 'happy events' in the future, such as a wedding day, the 'happiness day of your life'. This is why happiness provides the emotional setting for disappointment, even if happiness is not given: we just have to expect happiness from 'this or that', for 'this and that' to be experientiable as objects of disappointment.

So when we find happy objects, we do not just find them anywhere. The promise of happiness directs life in some ways, rather than others. As I argued in *Queer Phenomenology*, for a life to count as a good life, then it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. If happiness might be what allows us to reach such points, it is not necessarily how we feel when we get there.

Happiness is not only promised by certain objects, it is also what we promise to give to others as an expression of love. I am especially interested in the speech act, 'I just want you to be happy'. What does it mean to want 'just' happiness? What does it mean for a parent to say this to a child? In a way, the desire for the child's happiness seems to offer certain kind of freedom, as if to say: 'I don't want you to be this, or to do that; I just want you to be or to do "whatever" makes you happy'. You could say that the 'whatever' seems to release us from the obligation of the 'what'. The desire for the child's happiness seems to offer the freedom of a certain indifference to the content of a decision.

Take the psychic drama of the queer child. You could say that the queer child is an unhappy object for many parents. In some parental responses to the child coming out, this unhappiness is not so much expressed as being unhappy about the child being queer, but about being unhappy about the child being unhappy. To give you just one example, take the following quote from the lesbian novel *Annie on my Mind* by Nancy Gordon:

'Lisa', my father said, 'I told you I'd support you and I will... But honey...well, maybe it's just that I love your mother so much and you and Chad so much that I have to say to you I've never thought gay

people can be very happy – no children for one thing, no real family life. Honey, you are probably going to be a very good architect – but I want you to be happy in other ways, too, as your mother is, to have a husband and children. I know you can do both’.... (1982: 191)

The father makes an act of identification with an imagined future of necessary and inevitable unhappiness. Such an identification through grief about what the child will lose, reminds us that the queer life is already constructed as an unhappy life, as a life without the ‘things’ that make you happy. The speech act, ‘I just want you to be happy’, can be directive at the very point of its imagined indifference.

One of the most striking aspects of the film *Bend it like Beckham* is how the conflict and obstacle of the film is resolved through this speech act, addressed from father to daughter that takes the approximate form: ‘I just want you to be happy’. Jesminder, a young Indian girl brought up in London loves to play football. Her idea of happiness would be to bend it like Beckham, which requires that she bends the rules about what Indian girls can do. The generational conflict between parents and daughter is also represented as a conflict between the demands of cultures: as Jess says, ‘anyone can cook Aloo Gobi but who can bend the ball like Beckham’. This contrast sets up ‘cooking Aloo Gobi’ as common place and customary, against an alternative world of celebrity, individualism and talent. So Jess’s love puts her in conflict with her family, who want Jess to follow family tradition especially as their other daughter Pinkie is about to get married. Jess is forced to play football in secret given her parent’s disapproval. In this secretive life she forms new bonds and intimacies: first with Jules who gets her on the girl’s team, and then with Joe, the football coach, with whom she ‘falls in

love’. This other world, the world of freedom, involves proximity to whiteness.

It is possible to read the film by putting this question of cultural difference to one side. We could read the story as being about the promise of happiness for girls who bend the rules of femininity. We might cheer for Jess, as she ‘scores’ and finds happiness somewhere other than where she is expected to find it. We would be happy about her freedom and her refusal of the demand to be a good girl, or even a happy housewife. Yet, such a reading would fall short. It would not offer a reading of ‘where’ the happiness of this image of freedom takes us.

The climatic moment of the film is when the final of the football tournament coincides with Pinkie’s wedding. Jess cannot be at both events at once. She accepts her own unhappiness by identifying with the happiness of her parents: she puts her own desire for happiness to one side. But the father is not happy with her being unhappy, even though she wants him to be happy. He lets her go because he wants to see her being happy. He cannot be indifferent to her unhappiness: later he says to his wife, ‘maybe you could handle her long face, I could not’. Her long face might even ‘ruin the video’, getting in the way of picturing the family as happy, as being what causes happiness.

At one level, the father’s desire for the daughter’s happiness involves a form of indifference to ‘where’ she goes. From the point of view of the film, the desire for happiness is far from indifferent. After all, this moment is when the father ‘switches’ from a desire that is out of line with the happy object of the film (not wanting Jess to play) to being in line (letting her go), which in turn is what allows the film’s happy ending. Importantly, the happy ending is about the co-incidence of happy objects. The daughters are happy

(they are living the life they wish to lead), the parents are happy (as their daughters are happy), and we are happy (as they are happy). Good feeling involves these points of alignment. We could say positive affect is what sutures the film, resolving the generational and cultural split: as soon as Jess is allowed to join the football game, the two worlds 'come together' in a shared moment of enjoyment. Whilst the happy objects are different from the point of view of the daughters (football, marriage) they allow us to arrive at the same point.

And yet, the film does not give equal value to the objects in which good feelings come to reside. It is Jess that invests her hope for happiness in an object that is already attributed as happy: the national game. Jess's happiness is contrasted to her sister Pinkie, who is ridiculed throughout the film as not only wanting less, but as being less in the direction of her want. Pinkie asks Jess why does not want 'this'. Jess does not say that she wants something different; she says it is because she wants something 'more'. That word 'more' lingers, and frames the ending of the film, which gives us 'flashes' of an imagined future (pregnancy for Pinkie, photos of Jess on her sport's team, her love for her football coach Joe, her friendship with Jules). During the sequence of shots as Jess gets ready to join the football final, the camera pans up to show an airplane. Airplanes are everywhere in this film. They matter as technologies of flight, signifying what goes up and away. Happiness in the film is promised by what goes 'up' and 'away'. The desire to play football, to join the national game, is read as going up and away, and as leaving a certain world behind, as the world of tradition. Through the juxtaposition of the daughter's happy objects, the film suggest that this desire gives a better return.

In reading the 'directed' nature of narratives of freedom, we need in part to

consider how the film relates to wider discourses of the public good. The film locates the 'pressure point' in the migrant family; who pressurises Jess to live a life she does not want to live. And yet, many migrant individuals and families are under pressure to integrate, where integration is a key term for we now call in the UK 'good race relations'.^{vii} Although integration is not defined as 'leaving your culture behind' (at least not officially), it is unevenly distributed, as a demand that new or would-be citizens 'embrace' a common culture that is already given. The promise of happiness is located in the very aspiration to become British. The migrant daughter who identifies with the national game is thus a happy object for the nation; she becomes a sign of the promise of integration. *The unconventional daughter of the migrant family may even provide a conventional form of social hope.*

Melancholic Migrants

I want to quote from one film critic, who identifies the film aptly as a 'happy smiling multiculturalism':

Yet we need to turn to the U.K. for the exemplary commercial film about happy, smiling multiculturalism. Bend it like Beckham is the most profitable all-British film of all time, appealing to a multicultural Britain where Robin Cook, former Foreign Secretary, recently declared Chicken Tikka Massala the most popular national dish. White Brits tend to love Bend it like Beckham because it doesn't focus on race and racism — after all many are tired of feeling guilty.

What makes this film 'happy' is in part what it conceals or keeps from view, the negative affects surrounding racism. You

might note that the negative affects are not attributed to the experience of racism, but to white guilt: the film might be appealing as it allows white guilt to be displaced by good feelings: you do not have to feel guilty about racism, as you can be 'uplifted' by the happiness of the story of migrant success. The film 'lifts you up'.

Migrant success is read not only offered as a reward for integration, but also as 'evidence' that that racism can be and even has been overcome. In some of my earlier work on the politics of bad feeling (Ahmed 2005), I explore how happiness or good feeling is attributed to the white anti-racist subject (a subject that is proud about its anti-racism). In turn, I investigated what it means for racism to be understood as being caused by depression. Not only does this allow racism to be located in the bodies of unhappy racist whites, but it also suggests that the unhappiness of those who experience racism can be overcome, in part through the agency of happy anti-racist whites. Happiness itself becomes a technology of reconciliation, which in allowing us to leave bad feeling behind, enables us to embrace a common good.

It might seem that today, we are a long way from such a happy smiling multiculturalism, as my opening remarks about unhappy diversity would seem to suggest. Paul Gilroy has noted how multiculturalism has been declared dead in the UK^{viii}, and has been made responsible for segregation and terrorism. And yet, I would suggest that the film expresses the same rather deadly logic: multiculturalism can only be happy if migrants integrate. The happiness of this film is partly that it imagines that multiculturalism can deliver its social promise by extending freedom to migrants on the condition that they embrace its game. Those who refuse to embrace the

game are attributed as the cause of unhappiness.

So although *Bend it Like Beckham* seems to be about the promise of happiness, injury and bad feeling do play an important narrative function in the film. As you know, I am interested in how bad feelings are converted into good feelings. What are the conversion points in this film? We can focus here on two speeches made by Jess's father; the first takes place early on in the film, the second at the end:

When I was a teenager in Nairobi, I was the best fast bowler in our school. Our team even won the East African cup. But when I came to this country, nothing. And these bloody gora in the club house made fun of my turban and set me off packing....She will only end up disappointed like me.

When those bloody English cricket players threw me out of their club like a dog, I never complained. On the contrary, I vowed that I would never play again. Who suffered? Me. But I don't want Jess to suffer. I don't want her to make the same mistakes her father made, accepting life, accepting situations. I want her to fight. And I want her to win.

In the first speech, the father says she *should not play* in order not to suffer like him. In the second, he says she *should play* in order not to suffer like him. The desire implicit in both speech acts is the avoidance of the daughter's suffering, which is expressed in terms of the desire not to repeat his own. For Jess to be happy, he lets her go. By implication, not only is he letting her go, he is also letting go of his own suffering, the unhappiness caused by accepting racism, as the 'point' of his exclusion.

I would argue that the father is represented in the first speech as melancholic^x: as refusing to let go of his suffering, as incorporating the very object of own loss. His refusal to let Jess go is readable as a symptom of melancholia: as a stubborn attachment to his own injury, as a form of self-exclusion, or even self-harm (as he says: 'who suffered? Me'). The melancholic migrant holds onto the unhappy objects of difference, such as the turban, or at least the memory of being teased about the turban, which ties it to a history of racism. Such differences become sore points or blockage points, where the smooth passage of communication stops. The melancholic migrant is the one who is not only stubbornly attached to difference, but who insists on speaking about racism, where such speech is heard as labouring over sore points. The duty of the migrant is to let go of the pain of racism by letting go of racism as a way of understanding that pain.

It is important to note that the melancholic migrant's fixation with injury is read not only as an obstacle to their own happiness, but also to the happiness of the generation-to-come, and even to national happiness. This figure converts quickly in the national imaginary to the 'could-be-terrorist'. His anger, pain, misery (all understood as forms of bad faith insofar as they won't let go of something that is presumed to be already gone) becomes 'our terror'.

To avoid such a terrifying end point, the duty of the migrant is to attach to a different happier object, one that can bring good fortune, such as the national game. The film ends with the fortune of this re-attachment. Jess goes to America to take up her dream of becoming a professional football player, a land which makes the pursuit of happiness an originary goal. We should note here that the father's experience of being excluded

from the national game are repeated in Jess's own encounter with racism on the football pitch (she is called a 'Paki'), which leaves to the injustice of her being sent off. In this case, however, Jess's anger and hurt does not stick. She lets go of her suffering. How does she let go? When she says to Joe, 'you don't know what it feels like', he replies, 'of course I know how it feels like, I'm Irish'. It is this act of identification with suffering that brings Jess back into the national game (as if to say, 'we all suffer, it is not just you'). The film suggests that whether racism 'hurts' depends upon individual capacity: we can let go of racism as 'something' that happens, a capacity that is both attributed to skill (if you are good enough, you will get by), as well as the proximate gift of white empathy, where the hurt of racism is re-imagined as a common ground.

The love story between Jess and Joe offers another point of re-attachment. Heterosexuality becomes itself a form of happy return: promising to allow us to overcome injury; heterosexual love is what heals. It is worth noting here that the director of the film Gurinder Chadha originally planned to have the girls falling in love. This decision to drop the lesbian plot was of course to make the film more marketable. We can see here the importance of 'appeal' as a form of capital, and how happiness can function as a moral economy, a way of making what is good into things that can circulate as goods. Indeed, we could argue that the narrative of bending the rules of femininity involves a straightening device: you can bend, only insofar as you return to the straight line, which provides as it were our end point. So here girls playing football leads to the male football coach. Narratives of rebellion can involve deviations from the straight line, if they return us to this point.

Heterosexuality also promises to overcome the injury or damage of racism. The acceptance of interracial heterosexual love is a conventional narrative of reconciliation as if love can overcome past antagonism and create what I call hybrid familiarity: *white with colour, white with another*. Such fantasies of proximity are premised on the following belief: *if only we could be closer, we would be as one*. Proximity becomes a promise: the happiness of the film is the promise of 'the one', as if giving love to the white man, as the ego ideal of the nation, would allow us to have a share in this promise.

The final scene is a cricket scene: the first of the film. As we know, cricket is an unhappy object in the film, associated with the suffering of racism. Jess's father is batting. Joe, in the foreground, is bowling. He smiles as he approaches us. He turns around, bowls, and gets the father out. In a playful scene, Joe then 'celebrates' and his body gestures mimics that of a plane, in a classic football gesture. As I have suggested, planes are happy objects in the film; associated with flight, with moving up and away. By mimicking the plane, Joe becomes the agent that converts bad feeling (unhappy racism) into good feeling (multicultural happiness). It is the white man who enables the father to let go of his injury about racism and to play cricket again. It is the white man who brings the suffering migrant back into the national fold. *His body is our conversion point*.

Conclusion: Happiness and Reconciliation

It matters how feelings are distributed. It matters who promises our conversion. Some bodies become sore points, points of trouble, where communication stops. Other bodies become bearers of the promise of happiness. And yet, some

critics suggest that we have paid too much attention to melancholia, suffering and injury and that we need to be more affirmative. Rosi Braidotti, for example, suggests that the focus on negativity has become a problem within feminism, calling for a more affirmative feminism. She offers a bleak reading of bleakness: 'I actively yearn for a more joyful and empowering concept of desire and for a political economy that foregrounds positivity, not gloom' (2002: 57).

What concerns me is how much this turn to happiness actually depends on the very distinction between good and bad feelings that presume bad feelings are backward and conservative and good feelings are forward and progressive. Bad feelings are seen as orientated towards the past; as a kind of stubbornness that 'stops' the subject from embracing the future. Good feelings are associated here with moving up, and getting out. I would argue that it is the very assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed that allows historical forms of injustice to disappear. The demand for happiness is what makes those histories disappear by reading them as a form of melancholia (as if you are holding onto something that is already gone). These histories have not gone. We would be letting go of that which persists in the present. To let go would keep those histories present.

The history of happiness is inseparable from the history of empire, and this history is not behind us. We must attend to that history, as what shapes the ground in the present. It was worth recalling happiness was used to justify European imperialism as a moral project. Utilitarian ideas of maximising happiness were used to justify colonial rule, as can see in the quote from James Mills: 'The pace of civilisation would be quickened beyond all examples. The courts, the knowledge, and the manners of Europe would be brought to their doors,

and forced by an irresistible moral pressure on their acceptance. The happiness of the human race would thus be prodigiously augmented.’ (cited in To Leung 1998).^x

The civilising mission could be described as a happiness mission. For happiness to be a mission, the colonised other must first be deemed unhappy. The imperial archive is an archive of unhappiness. Colonial knowledges constitute the other as not only an object of knowledge, a truth to be discovered, but as being unhappy, as lacking the qualities or attributes required for a happy state of existence.^{xi} It was argued that through empire, the colonised other would acquire good manners, becoming elevated into a happier state of existence. As Homi Bhabha (2004) has shown us, the colonised other is required to mimic the coloniser by approximating their habits. Such mimicry produces a hybrid subject: *almost the same but not quite, almost the same but not white*. One wonders whether happiness for the colonised rests also on the hesitation of this almost: *almost happy, but not quite; almost happy, but not white*.

In the UK, imperial history is being remembered as a happy history; even as the gift of happiness, as a gift given to colonised others. One speech by Trevor Phillips, ‘We need a High-way code for a Multi-ethnic Society’ (2005), evokes the history of imperialism in happy terms: ‘And we can look at our own history to show that the British people are not by nature bigots. We created something called the empire where we mixed and mingled with people very different from those of these islands.’^{xii} Happiness works powerfully here: the violence of colonial occupation is re-imagined as a history of happiness (as a story of mixing and mingling). Empire itself becomes a sign of a loving happy national disposition.

We need to challenge the presumed happiness of the history of happiness. We might speak with bad feeling, speak of our inheritance of unhappiness, and speak about racism and empire in the present. From where am I speaking, is a question I ask myself, as someone who lives and works in London, whose anti-racist work has primarily taken place in the UK. From where do I speak, as I write primarily about the politics of racism in Britain for an Australian journal, having first given this paper at a conference in Adelaide, the town where I grew up. A child of empire, I am, with my own family history carrying me from Pakistan, to England to Australia and back to England.

I no longer reside in Australia – and this simple fact does matter.^{xiii} It should affect what I say and how I say what I say. And yet my own life world is saturated by Australia, the place I grew up, which has shaped my skin, my sense of myself. After all, I first learnt about whiteness in Australia. I learnt what it means not to be white. My experiences taught me all about being not. I also learnt about what it means to be a migrant, to be living on somebody else’s ground without permission. You inherit unhappiness when you walk on this ground. We need to recognise this inheritance without assuming our unhappiness means inhabiting the same ground. Non-white migrants need to recognise Indigenous sovereignty as the starting point, before we can begin the political work of troubling whiteness, where the trouble we can cause will depend on how we inhabit this not. We might need to be willing to be attributed as the cause of unhappiness, to be seen as ill-adjusted, making trouble, being trouble, and putting whiteness into trouble. We cannot let go of this history, we cannot give up laboring over its sore points, until the ground is recognised as Indigenous ground.

To learn from films like *Bend it Like Beckham* would be to learn how reconciliation as a fantasy is premised on happiness, on being reconciled into the nation, providing as it were its cover. As a fantasy, the moment of reconciliation is what creates the impression that the past is behind us. At this moment in Australia, it is the risks of being covered by happiness are clear. The recent apology by Kevin Rudd is an important political moment, in its recognition of injury, suffering and wrong. While it might not be a time for cynicism – although his emphasis on the ‘primal feelings’ of non-Indigenous Australians could make us cynical – it is a time for caution. The recognition of injury and injustice does matter – it matters to those who are recipients of the apology, Indigenous Australians who have carried the burden of this history for too long. The recognition of suffering and injustice matters, but it does not mean the overcoming of that suffering. Far from it. This is not a moment for national happiness, nor a moment to be proud of shame.

I was very struck by Tony Birch’s reading of the film *Dust* in his article in Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s wonderful edited collection *Sovereign Subjects*. As he argues so eloquently:

Dust concludes with the silent gathering of indigenous and non-indigenous teenagers. This is not a reconciliation moment; this is one composed of discomfort, fear and grief. Nothing is spoken between those present, and no neat conclusions are reached. *Dust* does not offer neat solutions to the problems confronting Australia today, and it is a better film for this. Unlike the formal reconciliation process, it is not an end-point either. It is the potential of a beginning, the commencement of an exchange, as it recognises that before dialogue

about a future can be accomplished, Indigenous people who live on the ground and the past they inhabit need to be recognised and commemorated so that the burden carried by elders such as Aunty Ruby can be lifted. This can only be done when White Australia takes vigilant responsibility for the past’ (2007: 114).

We need to find ways of gathering that do not allow us to cover over bad feelings and that the pasts they keep alive. To gather in this way is to offer, in Birch’s terms, the potential of a beginning, the commencement of an exchange. To gather in this way is not to turn over a page in history; it is not even to start a new page. To gather in this way is to attend to history, to what does not simply go away, in the moment of recognition of the unhappiness of that history. A concern with histories that hurt is not a backward orientation: to move on, you must make this return. We might need to hold onto histories of suffering, to stay as sore as our points. And we might even need to be prepared to kill some forms of joy.

Author Note

Sara Ahmed works at the intersection between Black feminism, critical race studies and queer theory. She was brought up in Adelaide, and now lives and works in London. Her writing and research has reflected on race politics in Australia and the UK. Her books include: *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (1998); *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000); *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Others, Objects* (2006). Her next book, *The Promise of Happiness*, is forthcoming with Duke University Press.

Email: s.ahmed@gold.ac.uk

References

- Ahmed, Sara (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- (2005). 'The Politics of Bad Feeling'. *ACRAWSA Journal*, 1, 1.
- (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- (2008). 'Editorial: The Happiness Turn', *New Formations*, 63, 7-14.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata (1997). *Our Sister Killjoy*. Harlow: Longman.
- Aristotle (1998). *Nicomachean Ethics*, editor William Kaufman. New York: Dover Publications.
- Back, Les, Tim Crabbe and John Solomos (2001). *The Changing Face of Football: Racism, Identity and Multiculture in the English Game*, Oxford: Berg.
- Ballaster, Rosalind (2005). *Fabulous Orient: fictions of the East in England, 1662-1785*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bhabha, Homi (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Birch, Tony (2007). "'The Indigenous Fire": Indigenous Sovereignty, History and Responsibility'. *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*. Allen and Unwin.
- Blackman, Lisa (2008). 'Is Happiness Contagious?', *New Formations*, 63: 15-32.
- Blassingame, John W. (1992). "Some Precursors of the Amistad Revolt." *The Connecticut Scholar: Occasional Papers of the Connecticut Humanities Council* 10: 26-36.
- Braidotti, Rosi (2002). *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge Polity.
- Brennan, Teresa. (2004). *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Cheng, Anne-Anlin (2001). *The Melancholia of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Douglass, Frederick (2004). *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing.
- Eng David L and Shinhee Han (2005). 'A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia' in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (eds), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: University of California Press. Pp.343-371.
- Garden, Nancy (1982). *Annie on My Mind*. Aerial Fiction: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Gibbs, Anna (2001). 'Contagious Feelings: Pauline Hanson and the Epidemiology of Affect', *Australian Humanities Review* <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-December-2001/gibbs.html>
- Gilbert, Daniel (2006). *Stumbling on Happiness*. Harper Collins.
- Gilroy, Paul (2006). 'Multi-Culture in Times of War', Inaugural Lecture, London School of Economics, May 10 2006.
- Haidt, Jonathon (2006). *The Happiness Hypothesis*, William Heinemann.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. (1997). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- hooks, bell (2000). *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Centre*. London: Pluto Press.
- Kenny, Anthony (1993). *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Layard, Richard (2005). *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science*, Allen Lane: London.
- Locke, John (1997). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. London: Penguin Books.
- Massumi, Brian (2002). *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McMahon, Darrin M. (2006). *Happiness: A History*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Mill, James (1813). 'Bruce's Report on the East-India Negotiation', *The Monthly Review*,

70: 20-37.

----- (1997). *History of British India*, Vol 9. London: Routledge.

Moreton-Robinson, Aileen (2003). 'Tiddas Talkin Up to the White Woman: When Huggins

et al took on Bell', in M.Grossman (ed). *Blacklines: Contemporary Political Writing*

by Indigenous Australians, Carleton: Melbourne University Press.

Morrison, Toni (1979). *The Bluest Eye*. London: Picador.

Nettle, Daniel (2006). *Happiness: The Science Behind Your Smile*, Oxford.

Ngai, Sianne (2005). *Ugly Feelings*. Stanford University Press.

Probyn, Elspeth (2005). *Blush: Faces of Shame*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Reid, Gordon (2006). *That Unhappy Race: Queensland and the Aboriginal Problem, 1838-*

1901. Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

Sedgwick, E. (2003). *Touching Feeling: Affect, Performativity, Pedagogy*.

Durham: Duke University Press.

Stokes, Eric (1959). *The English Utilitarians and India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Thobani, Sunera (2003). 'War and the Politics of Truth Making in Canada', *International*

Journal of Qualitative Study in Education, 16, 3: 399-414.

To Leung (1998) 'James Mill's Utilitarianism and British Imperialism in India',

<http://www.tamilnation.org/Oneworld/imperialism.htm>, last accessed August

16

2008.

i This paper was presented at the ACRAWSA conference in Adelaide, December 2007. Can I think the organisers for all their work in making this event very memorable. My appreciation to Irene Watson and Tony Birch for their inspirational lectures. A different version of this paper was published as 'Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness', *New Formations*, 63: 121-137.

ii Information about the BBC programme, *The Happiness Formula*, can be accessed on:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/happiness_formula/.

iii I will not be considering the relation between football and multiculturalism beyond considering the symbolic function of football in the film *Bend It Like Beckham*. For an important analysis of football in relation to racism and national identity see Back, Crabbe and Solomos 2001.

iv See my article published in the first volume of the ACRAWSA journal, 'The Politics of Bad Feeling'.

<http://www.acrawsa.org.au/ACRAWSA1-6.pdf>. Key texts in cultural studies that

investigate bad feelings from shame to irritation, include Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2006); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2004) *Touching Feeling*, and Elspeth Probyn *Blush: Faces of Shame*. (2005)

v In my forthcoming book on happiness, I offer a close reading of *The Bluest Eye* and its critique of what we could call 'happy whiteness'. See Ahmed 2005 for further reflections on happiness and whiteness.

vi The name of this game is of course problematic. Ballaster argues that 'The sinophobic name points to the centuries-old tradition in Europe of representing spoken Chinese as an incomprehensible and unpronounceable combination of sounds' (2005: 202-3)

vii Commission for Racial Equality, *Good Race Relations Guide*, 2005:

Endnotes

<http://www.cre.gov.uk/duty/grr/index.html>.

viii As Paul Gilroy (2006) describes 'Multiculturalism was officially pronounced dead in July 2005'.

ix For excellent readings of racial melancholia see Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholia of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; and David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, 'A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia' in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (eds), *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003

x For a helpful account of the relationship between utilitarianism and British imperialism see Stokes 1959: 52-69. See also volume 9 of James Mill's *History of British India*, where imperialism is justified via the greater happiness principle: 'For, although the country has suffered, and must ever suffer, many and great disadvantages from the substitution of strangers for its own functionaries, its own chiefs, its own sovereigns; it has been, in some degree, compensated for their loss, by exemption from the fatal consequences of native mis-rule – by protection against external enemies – by the perpetuation of internal tranquillity – by the government of trade – the increase of cultivation – and the progressive introduction of the arts and sciences, the intelligence and civilisation of Europe' (1997: 396). Contemporary US led imperialisms use similar utilitarian cost-benefit logic: the suffering of war and foreign intervention is justified by the benefits brought by civilisation, democracy and freedom. Ideas of maximising happiness can become justifications for war.

xi We can also consider the significance of the production of the myths of happiness, such as the myth of the happy slave, which is a myth that finds happiness in the violence of colonial

subjection. See Saidiya V. Hartman's powerful book, *Scenes of Subjection*, for a critique of this myth of happiness which reads slave songs not only as 'songs of sorrow' in Du Bois's terms, but as involving an opacity of feeling (1997: 48). The myth of the happy slave has a powerful function, even suggesting slavery liberates the other to happiness. Consider Fredrick Douglass's debunking of this myth: 'I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.' (2004: 19). The defence of slavery insists on hearing misery as happiness. Defenses of slavery also relied on descriptions of the unhappiness of the to-be-enslaved others. A Pennsylvania surgeon, William Chancellor, in 1751 wrote 'It is accounted by numberless people that a voyage to Africa in regard to the purchasing Slaves is very vile, but in my opinion, and I think I know, it is not in the least so, tis redeeming an unhappy people from inconceivable misery' (cited in Blassingame 1992). Descriptions of 'the natives' as unhappy peoples in need of liberation saturate the colonial archive. The Aboriginal peoples in

Queensland were also described as 'that unhappy race' (see Reid 2006).

xii This speech is available on:

<http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/cre/Default.aspx?LocID=0hgnew07y&RefLocID=0hg00900c002&Lang=EN.htm>. Last accessed September 3 2008.

xiii It has taken me a long time, maybe even 15 years, to recognise that I now actually live in the UK and that I don't just temporarily reside here. I had always thought of myself as on my way toward going home to Australia. This recognition that England is where I live has affected my work – whilst in my earlier writing I mainly focused on the politics of racism in Australia, I now tend to focus more on the UK. This is not because Australian politics no longer matters to me, but because it does. I have come to believe that Australians who are non-residents of Australia have a responsibility to think and speak from the point of non-residence. This does not should mean a prohibition against thought or speech, but a call for a more responsible speech, a speech that responds to the places from which we respond.