

Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism by **Sarah Ahmed**. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. vii + 222; \$34.95 (paperback).

Sarah Ahmed begins her *Differences That Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* with the concern that readers may shirk from "yet another" book on this topic. My own concerns were a little more pedestrian. Such is the breadth of postmodern feminist theory, that seemingly innocuous "and" in her subtitle compelled me to wonder if it served as a signifier of difference, or an attempt to forge a closer proximity. It's a small concern but for those of us not entirely familiar with debates that raged predominantly last decade it's an important one. Arguing that there is yet to be a true dialogue between feminism and postmodernism compelled me to wonder what exactly I've been doing for the past six years. Having never been led to believe that feminism and postmodernism occupied entirely separate theoretical spaces, many of the points that Ahmed initially raises to defend herself from inevitable "sinking hearts" are clearly, therefore, aimed at another generation. Perhaps things really have moved on after all, and rather than thinking about theory as monolithic blocks (feminism *and* postmodernism) I've always been taught to use whatever works - to use a cliché, in the manner of Foucault's toolbox. The question for me has, therefore, never been whether or not feminism and postmodernism must occupy separate terrains or whether or not one is better than the other. Instead, the question has always been what works, what does a theory do, how is it performed, and most importantly, how does it or can it connect up with other texts, methods, and sites. Fortunately, the "and" in Ahmed's title points to a similar conclusion.

Rather than setting out to critique postmodernism as if it were a "thing," an entity with its own internal logic, Ahmed argues that postmodern *and* feminist theory must be approached as doing something, rather than merely being something. In a manner that Joanne Hodge refers to as labyrinthine (though I would prefer something more four-dimensional), Ahmed argues for a model of reading postmodern texts as if they exist within an intertextual space. Over the course of some two hundred pages, Ahmed thus delves into the work of, amongst others, Deleuze, Lyotard, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida and uses their work to think through such topics as film theory and semiotics, questions surrounding modern and postmodern ethics, legal discourses and body rights, as well as considering the reach of autobiography and anecdotes. For her part, Ahmed claims that

the book will raise the question of how writings of postmodernism might relate to each other in terms of the constitution of their objects, rather than assuming that such connections are determined by the singularity of the name, "postmodernism."(8)

Taking the chunky topics of "Rights," "Ethics," "Woman," "Subjects," "Authorship," "(Meta)fictions," and "Screens," Ahmed threads these together by the common question of "which differences matter?" To put it crudely, *Differences that Matter* questions postmodernism and feminism's differentiated relations to the very notion of *difference*. Often claiming to be about "difference," "heterogeneity" or "flux," as well as sometimes appearing to assume a position of unboundedness, the postmodern texts Ahmed critiques are instead read as both very much located and bounded. Rather than subsequently replicating what she takes to be the "violence" of much postmodern theory which

subsumes the notion of difference into the single catch cry of "oh...well everything's in flux," Ahmed cuts through this and "speaks back" as it were. Furthermore, the very notion of difference is also not left untouched and instead recognised as neither "pure" not "undifferentiated." Ahmed does not achieve this by pitting one theory against another, nor does she seek to merely highlight inadequacies within other people's work. And though her own position is sometimes slightly elusive, for the most part, she enacts both patience and insight in stabilising key texts and debates long enough to make critical and generative observations, all the while recognising that these debates and texts are themselves inscribed and authorised.

Like most interesting and generous writers, Ahmed is at her best when dealing with texts she appears to enjoy rather than those that she doesn't. Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming woman or the body-without-organs are obviously not close to Ahmed's heart, and, as a result, her reading of their work in the chapter entitled "Woman" is brief and not entirely convincing. Derrida, whilst given much greater consideration in regards to ethics and autobiography, is equally not explored to quite the same depth as are Lacan or Lyotard. Advocates of psychoanalytic theory may enjoy Ahmed's invoking of the "phantasic" to work though Deleuze and Guattari's becoming woman. Others may wonder why she went there at all rather than expanding upon the topics which bear much greater results such as the enjoyable "(Meta)fictions," or her earlier piece on "Rights." Equally, "Screens," the final essay in the book, will disappoint those not inclined towards psychoanalysis. Her readings of Greenaway's *Baby of Macon* and Lynch's *Blue Velvet* successfully highlight the shrouding of some postmodern film theory behind a veil of assumed impartiality and subsequent lack of engagement with the misogyny of certain texts. An entirely different and less limited reading would have eventuated by drawing upon either a Deleuzian or queer framework.

Ultimately, such criticisms do not detract, however, from the fact that Ahmed remains committed throughout to highlighting how the question of difference is so often subsumed in the race towards a celebration of heterogeneity. Working in a manner that I would figure as rhizomatic, Ahmed draws together and moves between texts, questioning, highlighting, and critically reading the differences between them. As a result, *Differences That Matter* is a timely and necessary contribution to feminist theory that cuts through long-standing assumptions and "theoretical differences." Commendable in her reach, and mostly productive in her conclusions, Ahmed offers us an engaging reading of "authorising texts" of postmodernism. As such, it will make for excellent pedagogical material. And those of us who are not entirely comfortable with the debate between postmodern and feminist theory, and who never ascribed to the belief that *all* early feminist analysis was blind to difference, may well finally understand what the debate was all about.

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