

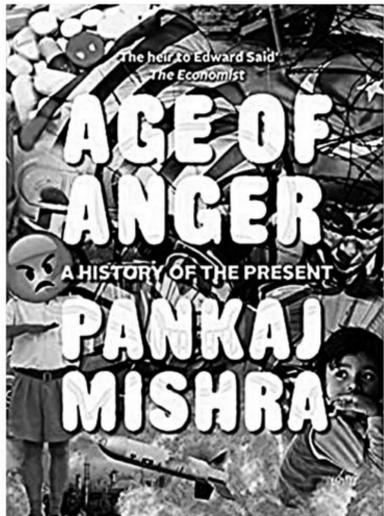
Anger and Ressentiment in Our Common Present

Age of Anger: A History of the Present, by Pankaj Mishra, Farrar, Straus & Giroux; ISBN: 1542842093, 2017

REVIEWED BY AFRIN ZEENAT

The fast moving changes in the world in the past few years have forced us into deep introspection and sparked anxiety about the future. Have the changes in technology and its power to collapse time and distance really benefitted mankind, or is it exposing our latent biases? What explains the rise in national, ethnic, or religious rhetoric over common human concerns, neighborly love, caring for each other irrespective of caste, creed, or religious differences? What explains the global conservative backlash against modernity? Are Muslims the only community resisting the power of globalization to homogenize the world? Is there a connection between the rise of religious extremism across all religious faiths? Are there any common beliefs between the gun-toting Taliban in Afghanistan protesting the burning of Quran by a Christian pastor in Florida, or the cow-vigilantes in India or even the radical Buddhist monks in Myanmar and Sri Lanka spewing hateful rhetoric calling for the extermination of Muslims from their lands?

We cannot deny that these, and more such questions, have not troubled us recently. Pankaj Mishra, an Indian essayist, attempts to explain the rise in "the virulent expressions of rage" around us in his book *Age of Anger: A History of the Present*. The publication of this book in February this year is very timely as it attempts to explain the possible reasons behind the recent wave of anti-intellectualism that may have given rise to extremist identitarian politics around the world. In addition to winning numerous literary prizes for some of his fictional and non-fictional works, Mishra is a columnist for *Bloomberg*, and *The New York Review of Books*. Some of his books have been controversial ("If your writing collides with the conventional wisdom, there's going to be some kind of friction"), but they have also received strong



and good reviews.

In *Age of Anger*, Mishra borrows Hannah Arendt's notion of the "common present" to explain the current global political unrest. He writes that in this shared "common present, advancements in technology and communication have redistributed wealth and power to create new hierarchies creating what Nietzsche had referred to as "men of *ressentiment*," who share a "negative solidarity." According to Mishra, the *ressentiment* is a reaction against both Western capitalism and Russian communism. Their failed promises created a vacuum ripe for a third space where such angry identitarian politics could creep in.

The numerous acts of terror in Western metropolises like Paris and London and the

mayhem and bloodshed in Asia and Africa, although underreported and garnering relatively less outrage worldwide, have come to define our "common present" (Hannah Arendt, "Karl Jaspers: Citizen of the World"). Although we live in a "common present," "this common factual present is not based on a common past." This creates a disjunct in the lives of global citizens. The inability of the different pasts to blend into a uniform common present is what causes *ressentiment*.

Mishra points out that life in our time with its growing sense of disillusion and disenchantment is not unique. Like Michel Foucault, Pankaj Mishra traces the origin of the world's current problems in the past, specifically the transition in the political and social systems around the world that were triggered by Enlightenment ideals emphasizing personal freedom and individual liberty for all. Sadly, in the current geo-political scenario, these ideals seem utopian and unattainable. Dismissing the "the clash of the civilization" hypothesis that is so often cited by many political pundits as the real cause behind the world's present troubles, Mishra identifies a crisis in (neo-)liberalism which restricted liberty to the elites and the surge in violence by disgruntled individuals as some sort of protest against the elites who control every aspect of life.

While offering us his understanding of history, Mishra punctuates his historical narrative with names and personal histories of numerous anarchists who waged ideological wars against the *philosophes* shaping European thought. Mishra takes us into the legendary animosity between Voltaire and Rousseau to explain the polarization of our times. While advocating enlightenment ideals, Voltaire had voiced new hope for mankind and celebrated democratic zeal; on the other hand, Rousseau was highly critical

of the enlightenment promises. In highlighting the rift between their ideologies, Mishra offers readers an understanding into the current rift in politics between the right and the left. Identifying the Western way of life as one steeped in individualism, materialism and self-aggrandizement, Mishra stresses that anti-modern, anti-capitalist extremist ideologies, too, are laden with contradictions. It simultaneously criticizes and celebrates consumerism. How else can we understand Modi's call for Hindutva with his fetish for a \$15000 Savile Row suit emblazoned with his name or Baghdadi's call for an Islamic caliphate while sporting a Rolex? Mishra unearths an interesting story of a developing friendship between Timothy McVeigh, the anti-government domestic terrorist executed for blowing up a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, and Ramzi Yousef, the Muslim terrorist behind the 1993 World Trade center bombing, while serving in the same prison. The point Mishra makes is that their crimes might have been different, but they shared the same ideology: disillusionment in the democratic promise of liberty, equality, fraternity.

Despite his disclaimer at the beginning that this book is not an intellectual history, Mishra does write a highly cerebral history of the changing ideologies in Europe and the sparring *philosophes*. The transition from monarchy to democracy in Europe, sometimes thrust on other nations like Iraq and sometimes voluntarily embraced by countries like India and China, may have caused widespread disenchantment in their citizens. For example, the concept of universal suffrage, embraced by many countries including some South Asian countries without undergoing the struggle that accompanied them in Europe, may have resulted in people experiencing *ressentiment*.

The forced transition from their old ways of community living to a new capitalist way of living that values trade and commerce over other forms of sustenance created problems for people. Mishra adds that social media has compounded existing problems. Already denied a good material life, the illusions of better life created by social media has increased *ressentiment*, enabling people to vent out their anger through mean comments aimed at celebrities and people they consider living a better life.

For Mishra, the "pervasive panic" in the world, like our own experience after the Holy Artisan attack, can be traced back to anarchists in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. In fact, Mishra does bring up the Dhaka Holy Artisan happening in his book and aligns it with the numerous terrorist attacks in other parts of the world. He points out that there is an attempt by many political pundits to paint these attacks as mostly Islamic terrorist attacks, to present the problem as purely Islamic in nature, and to Islam's inability to adjust to the modern global world, but stresses that such a view lacks a nuanced understanding of the situation. The European anarchists were the true intellectual precursors of present-day terrorist organizations. Despite the similarities, Mishra warns us that "Our predicament, in the global age of frantic individualism, is unique and deeper, its dangers more diffuse and less predictable." Mishra does not offer solutions, nor does he discuss ways in which this rage can be mitigated, but he certainly leaves us with plenty of foreboding about what is yet to come.

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The Seven leaders accept the plan for the transfer of power, 3 June 1947.

POETRY NABINA DAS

The Many Uses of Pillows in Times of Parting

Carts. Midnight. Crossing.
The women at the borders.
No one saw them. Saw only pillows.
A pillow under her belly.
It's how she fooled all
-- wanted to look with a baby
The nights had waned.
Her belly was slashed split.
The grass turned purple.
Another had a pillow on her side
under the unloved cover.
This woman called it her man
The boatmen sang a dirge.
Kadam trees hung their arms.
Her spirit walked over to her lover.
A third one, she had tied
a pillow on her body
to avoid the sticks and kicks.
Even a dead body can sing
if peace comes in extinguishing
-- this body was broken notes.
The cotton on the pillows
are all stories of grief
each fluff pared of dreams.
Even before the border turned crimson
each cowbell rang the news --
on each side pillows propped high
each looking more human than those limbs.

(Based on oral account of women crossing borders with pillows tucked with their money, gold, and small belongings)



Imagine
I imagine a house of ponds and fields
Night on it an umbrella of peace
All doors leading into more doors and then suddenly --
No more distance in their sandal straps
My mother's frock soiled. Face asunder.
Her fingers smelling of dry fish. Eyes mute.
I imagine a road where feet become a river
where the chhatim tree swelling with fragrance
waits for the passers-by. This is where they went past
the bell metal glass in householders' cloth bags
and tinkrinks the grandmother will gift me later
I imagine all unrest being laid on their breasts
like a child gone weary. Nothing happened.
The dust of feet fleets back to the dirt track
the fire bombs dive like ducks in serene pools
the knives soar up to become birds only to fell the stars
the blood all back in the heart throbbing,
sobbing, in love
all barbed wire turns into homecoming, never a partition.
I imagine -- our words, yours, you are mine.

Partition Stories

1. Mashi spurned gandma's chemise, cotton course cut -- her lament: my only bra I left at the border trafficker's hut
2. Left an adaab at your doorstep, a wound brought my gods this side, scattered them in the wind
3. She had ease in marigold and trees. Then in water -- jal and paani sealed her future

(dedicated to Selina Hossain's "Meyeti")

Nabina Das is a poet and writer based in Hyderabad, India. A 2016 Commonwealth Writers correspondent and 2012 Charles Wallace alumna, she is the author of two poetry collections, a novel and a short fiction volume.

Patrick Modiano's So You Don't Get Lost in the Neighborhood

ISBN: 9780544635067; Harcourt, 2015

REVIEWED BY ABDULLAH SHIBLI

So You Don't Get Lost in the Neighborhood is Patrick Modiano's first publication since 2014 when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Modiano specializes in mystery novels, but not the kind that involve crime and murder, but ones where human beings search for their identity and are engaged in solving puzzles from their past. In this book, the principal character, Jean Daragane, writer and recluse, has purposely built a life of seclusion away from the Parisian hustle and bustle. He doesn't see many people, rarely goes out, and spends his time in a solitary world of his own. Then one day he comes in contact with two individuals, Gilles Ottolini and Chantal Grippay, who in triggering memories from his past lead him to search for his own roots.

A few words about the writer Patrick Modiano is in order. Modiano has been called a "psycho-geographic" writer. Psycho-geography is defined as "a whole toy box full of playful, inventive strategies for exploring cities... just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape" (Joseph Hunt, "A New Way of Walking"). So here we come across Daragane, a Parisian, roaming around in the neighborhoods of Paris in search of his identity. He recalls his childhood days when he lived here and tries to connect many unsolved memories that emanate from two events that trigger his journey—the loss of his address book and a phone call.

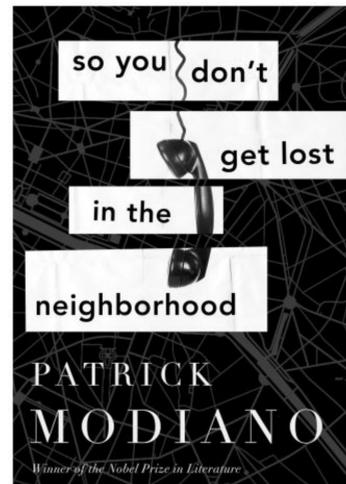
Jean Daragane had lost the address book a month ago at the train station, or on a train that was taking him to the Cote d'Azur. He gets a call from Gilles who found the notebook and wanted to give it to Jean in person. They arrange to get together at a café, where Jean also meets Chantal, Gilles' companion and a woman who eventually renews Jean's interest in two characters who played significant roles in his childhood: a woman named Annie Astrand and her associate Guy Torsel. Gilles asks Jean about Guy Torsel, a name found in his phonebook, and their conversation at the café motivates Jean to find his birth mother, from whom he was separated as a child and his foster mother, Annie Astrand.

The tale of Daragane's fascinating self-discovery is brilliantly translated by Euan Cameron. The author throws his reader a challenge, so to speak. Jean starts to follow the lead given by Gilles Ottolini, and like a well-honed detective, tries to find the individuals that Ottolini is interested in as well as of those who are connected to his childhood, the early years and the mysterious figure of Roger Vincent. The title of the book came from an advice he received from Annie when

he was five or six years old. She had given him a note and a hand-drawn map and had written on the note that the map was for him to carry along. "So you don't get lost in the neighborhood".

At one level So You Don't Get Lost in the Neighborhood is a mystery novel, a detective story. At another level, it is about Jean himself who was separated from his mother and raised by Annie. In his search for his roots, he looks for people who knew him as a child.

Charles R. Larson, Emeritus Professor of Literature at American University, Washington, in a review of Modiano's book calls it a "puzzling but deeply satisfying novel." In his review Larson further writes, "The unfolding of the past in So You Don't Get Lost in the Neighborhood is one of the most remarkable accounts of sleuthing, of unburying painful events from the past,



that I can ever remember reading." Indeed Daragane unearths the past lives of those around him. Annie Astrand, for one, turns out to be an enigmatic character.

My own puzzlement over Annie's second disappearance is shared by Larson, but that is a signature feature of Modiano, whose narrative leaves a few questions up in the air, and who appears to be a teaser or a writer who wants to engage readers in finding their own conclusion about the questions he raises. For example, we never learn who Annie Astrand is. Daragane says, "She meant a great deal to me." We learn that she was in prison but we never find out why. But, Modiano offers us a clue which could possibly explain a lot of the puzzles in the book: "In the end, we forget the details of our lives that embarrass us or are too painful."

When Daragane meets Annie, he would have preferred her to talk about her own life but she seemed not to want

to do so." Throughout the novel, we suspect one or possibly two murders taking place, but Modiano only hints at them. An overarching puzzle: Why did Jean Daragane's mother leave him in Annie's care? And then, another question: did Jean and Annie have an affair after they reconnect fifteen years later even though Annie was many years older than him and was his nanny?

Modiano specializes in interpretation of memory and is conversant with modern research which confirms that memory is selective and people forget the unpleasant things. His Nobel Prize citation recognizes this talent to give him credit "for the art of memory with which he has evoked the most ungraspable human destinies and uncovered the life-world of the occupation." His foray into psycho-analysis also gives us another important theory: our memory plays an important role in the formation of our identity, i.e., who we think we are.

A case in point is the conversation between Jean and Annie when they meet. Anne does not remember going to the restaurant or the boarding school but he does. Annie asks him,

"So, you don't remember Colette?"
"Yes... of course," said Daragane.
"You knew each other at boarding school."

She looked at him in surprise.
"How did you know?"
"One afternoon, you took me to visit your old boarding school."
"Are you sure? I have no memory of it."

"It was on the other side of Montmorency forest."
"I never took you there with Colette..."
He did not want to contradict her. He might find explanations in the book that the doctor had inscribed to him, that little book with white covers about forgetfulness.

Modiano is an interpreter of the psyche and the ways of the mind. Memory and its role in our personality play out in his novels. Daragane is searching for his roots, but according to Modiano, "However much he racked his memory, he had not the slightest recollection of what in present-day language is known as 'a home of one's own.'" After finishing the book I kept on wondering. In his own poetic way, Modiano seems to give us a clue though. As he puts it:

"... children never ask themselves any questions. Many years afterwards, we attempt to solve puzzles that were not mysteries at the time and we try to decipher half-obliterated letters from a language that is too old and whose alphabet we don't even know."

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