

Idit Alphandary. *Forgiveness and Resentment in the Aftermath of Mass Atrocity: Jewish Voices in Literature and Film*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024. 226 pages, EUR 99.95, ISBN 978-3-11-124233-0

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Idit Alphandary's new book is a study of the relationship between affect and memory, trauma and testimony. It explores literary, cinematic and philosophical efforts to pave new paths of political reconciliation and restoration in the wake of collective trauma and mass atrocity. Encompassing a dizzying array of writers, film-makers, and thinkers, the study demonstrates how the work of memory unfolds through a dialectical process involving the supposedly antithetical responses of forgiveness and resentment. In fact, it is the study's main argument that forgiveness and resentment are two interrelated responses to trauma, and that it is precisely their interdependence that renders them such potent affective agents of commemoration and cultural change in the wake of catastrophe. This abstract-theoretical argument is concretized through a series of close readings that bring together Jean Améry, Heinrich Böll, Paul Celan, Jacques Derrida, Hannah Arendt, Vladimir Jankélévitch, W.G. Sebald, Bruno Schulz, J.M. Coetzee, James Baldwin, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as well as filmmakers Wojciech Has, Christian Petzold, Wladyalaw Pasikowski, Alain Resnais, and Raoul Peck.

The book argues against the idea that forgiveness involves the relinquishing of past harm or the claim to moral injury. It further reclaims resentment as a kind of ethical lens that when applied to past wrongdoing, asserts the moral necessity of preserving its memory. Far from being mutually exclusive responses to experiences of national trauma, the dialectical interplay between forgiveness and resentment offers the possibility of breaking cycles of historical violence and charting new paths towards reconciliation, fashioning new forms of collective identity, redrawing relationships between warring entities, and advancing mutual understanding between them. There is, according to Alphandary's reading, no forgiveness without residual resentment and there is no resentment without the possibility of forgiveness.

The timeliness of Alphandary's work is found in the way it implicitly addresses our contemporary moment. Although it was written before the horrific events of October 7 and does not directly engage with the question of Israel/Palestine, *Forgiveness and Resentment in the Wake of Mass Atrocity* reads like an oblique meditation on the ongoing Israel-Gaza war. We live in a world in which political identities are often anchored in traumatic memories of victimhood and violence. Such absolute identification with past suffering fosters a narcissistic collective consciousness that directs its full attention to its

own wounds while refusing to turn its gaze towards the future or beyond itself, to the harm it perpetrates against others.

Wendy Brown, in her seminal essay “Wounded Attachments” (1993), analyzes the limitations inherent to a collective identity rooted in trauma through a discussion of the Nietzschean concept of *Ressentiment*. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche defines *Ressentiment* as the moralizing and sanctimonious retribution of the weak. The victim instinctively searches for the source of his pain, the agent responsible for his suffering. He searches for an external entity to direct his hostility and fury. *Ressentiment* is driven by the desire to dampen the pain, and make it bearable. Through it, violent emotions are turned outwards. *Ressentiment* obsesses over a guilty party that is responsible for its suffering and fashions a fantasy of revenge which transfers the pain of the victim back to the victimizer. *Ressentiment* converts the suffering of the victim by aspiring to inflict the same kind of pain and suffering upon the other. The mechanism of *ressentiment* serves to externalize the insufferable pain of the victim.

A collective identity anchored in trauma that is founded on a historical wound is thus the product of that Nietzschean dialectic. It is an identity that is exclusively reactive, in that it perpetuates the helplessness of the victim as a substitute for action. Identities based in *ressentiment* thus lack an active dimension, they refuse to recognize their own moral agency. A political identity that is the product of *ressentiment* will sacralize its past suffering as a moral virtue and celebrate it as a marker of superiority. This is a political identity that remains bound to the experience of past harm. Yet, this total and exclusive dedication to victimhood, to the experiences of humiliation, persecution, and subjugation, not only does it not lead to collective liberation, it brings about a state of paralysis, by projecting past helplessness onto the present.

An identity anchored in a historical wound is one that demands recognition of past injustice perpetrated against it. Yet when the identification with this wound is total and exclusive, when it is the sole reason for one’s existence, the identity in question becomes incapacitated by its past without the ability to envision a future. Nietzsche’s solution to this stalemate was forgetting. Yet forgetting does not truly allow one to overcome the past or heal one’s wounds; it only removes the problem from the realm of consciousness. It does not liberate the individual or collective from their trauma, which continues to percolate from under the surface. Furthermore, the demand to forget is immoral and cruel in its insensitivity towards the victim.

Alphandary’s study offers an alternative to the binary of *ressentiment* and forgetting by focusing on the transformative power of forgiveness and resentment. The book counters the Nietzschean model of *ressentiment* with a different understanding of resentment. One that is forward-looking and serves the purpose of collective healing and future building. Alphandary seeks to shed light on the moral and political potential of resentment and the power of literature to reveal this potential.

In her compelling interpretation of resentment Alphandary argues that forgiveness as a social and political process is not necessarily the opposite of resentment. Rather, forgiveness can occur and exist alongside resentment. This resentment is not the paralyzing kind described by Nietzsche and taken up by Wendy Brown. The resentment

that she refers to and which she develops through her readings in Améry, Arendt and others does not serve as the basis for a political identity and does not have its gaze fixed to the past. It is a resentment that insists on accountability for the past in the name of the future. Whereas the political identity that gives into Nietzschean resentment finds itself trapped in an ongoing monologue with itself and narcissistically wallowing in its wound (like the narrator in Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*), Alphandary shows us a different kind of resentment—one that is dialogical. In this case, resentment is an expression of the victimized community's commitment to reestablishing the moral norms that were violated and its ongoing efforts to prevent the recurrence of wrongdoing. She reads resentment as an expression of the wronged party's effort to break the cycle of past historical harm.

Alphandary's original and in-depth analyses of literary, philosophic, and cinematic texts convincingly demonstrate how the language of forgiveness and resentment allows historical actors to articulate alternative paths towards restorative justice and collective healing. This book complements such works as Gil Hochberg's *In Spite of Partition: Jews, Arabs, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination* (2007), Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (2009), and Bryan Cheyette's *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History* (2014)—studies that turn to fiction and philosophy in search of new spaces of solidarity between different collective groups whose identities and cultural legacies have been defined by historical violence and trauma. It will be of interest to scholars of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Trauma Theory, Literary Studies, and those working at the intersection of Jewish Studies and Postcolonial history and theory.