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Writing the Hidden Histories: A Study of Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*

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Abstract

This paper sets out to analyse the political aesthetics of the genre documentary prose in revealing the hidden realities of the disaster as employed in Svetlana Alexievich's Nobel prize-winning work, *Chernobyl Prayer*. Since it was a time when the Soviet Union was under communist rule, and the government stifled dissident voices, a multitude of facts about the incident was concealed from the world. Alexievich endeavours to expose the otherwise unheard realities of the event in the selected work under study by recording and documenting the diverse voices of Chernobyl disaster survivors. The study provides an alternate narrative of the tragic incident that contradicts the Soviet Union's propaganda. In this sense, the work represents resistance to an autocratic government.

Keywords: Chernobyl disaster 1986, documentary prose, narrative structure, polyphony, svetlana Alexievich

Introduction

On April 26, 1986, at 1.23 hr, the fourth reactor of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded in the former Soviet Union. The explosion emitted radioactive waves that were two hundred times stronger than those produced by the atomic bombs unleashed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This disaster remains a unique industrial accident because of its societal, financial, and environmental longevity. However, the Soviet Union's lack of transparency and openness, contradicting Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, or openness, exacerbated the catastrophe. It was only on April 28th 1986, that the government made a statement reporting, "There has been an accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station...the consequences of the accident are being taken care of, help is being given to the victims of the accident, a government commission has been set up" (ABC News 1.12-1.20). Here, Soviet officials hesitated to provide information on the magnitude of the tragedy or even acknowledge that an accident had transpired. Although the leaders justified withholding the facts from the public by claiming that it would panic the masses, the truth seemed that they had never wanted the world to discover that they were incapable of handling modern technologies. In the shadow of this nuclear catastrophe, Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian journalist and laureate of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, embarked on a monumental literary endeavour to bring these buried voices to the forefront of global consciousness. *Chernobyl Prayer*, the magnum opus for which Alexievich received the highest academic honour, transcends the boundaries of traditional storytelling. It is a heart-wrenching, polyphonic narrative that captures the lived experiences of those who endured the Chernobyl tragedy and its enduring aftermath.

At this juncture, where the debate over the truth of the Chernobyl disaster remains an enigma, the need to examine the highly acclaimed oral testimonial work of Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (2016) translated by Anna Guinn and Arch Tait is relevant, Svetlana Alexievich (born 1948), a contemporary Belarusian journalist and writer, was awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature for her "polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage on our time" ("The Nobel Prize in Literature 2015")^[4]. According to the Russian writer and critic Dmitry Bykov, Alexievich's writings pertain much to the ideologies of the Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich, who felt the best way to describe the horrors of the 20th century was not by creating fiction but through recording the testimonies of witnesses.

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A few of her notable works in English translation include *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War* (1989), *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II* (1985), and the select work under study, *Chernobyl Prayer* as told by witnesses and victims of the catastrophic Chernobyl nuclear power station accident amongst the rest of the results highly confirmed the influence of Adamovich. It is worth noting here that she employs the narrative framework of polyphony, which means "multi-voicedness" (Bakhtin 163) in her works. By foregrounding the voices of the individuals, the Russians made a new endeavour to represent their statements, which offers a parallel narrative to that of the dominant state narratives. Svetlana Alexievich defines the Chernobyl disaster in the select work as "a catastrophe of all times" (Alexievich 24). The magnitude of the Chernobyl catastrophe and its insidious character is arguably beyond the individual mind's ability to conceive, which is one reason why Alexievich's application of the polyphonic form garnered her the Nobel Prize and was an ideal genre to define the diabolic Chernobyl disaster. Thus, according to Alexievich, polyphony is an effective resistance to an overarching authority.

Alexievich's work is a literary testament to the indomitable human spirit in the face of unspeakable disaster and political oppression. By employing a documentary narrative structure, Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer* embarks on a mission to expose the hidden histories of the Chernobyl Disaster (1986) through a series of monologues by the people affected by the Chernobyl accident. As a result, the text transcends its literary framework of a testimonial narrative to function as a political instrument, providing individuality and voice to the unheard and silenced, who frequently challenge governmental narratives. In the pages of *Chernobyl Prayer*, Svetlana Alexievich masterfully crafts a counter-narrative discourse that transcends mere historical documentation. It becomes the psychobiography of a nation, not defined by geographical boundaries but by the shared human experience of a catastrophic event. Through the voices and stories of survivors, responders, and witnesses, Alexievich's work challenges official narratives, unearths the raw emotions and psychological scars of the Chernobyl disaster and ultimately reveals a universal human narrative. Drawing upon Leona Toker's insights from her seminal work, *Towards a Poetics of Documentary Prose* (1997), and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony as expounded in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), this paper delves into the deliberate and thought-provoking arrangement of documentary prose within Alexievich's work. We explore how this intricate narrative structure generates captivating tensions within the text and holds significant political implications for the state.

The Politics of Writing the Hidden Histories

In her work, *Towards a Poetics of Documentary Prose- From the Perspective of Gulag Testimonies* (1997), Leona Toker discusses how the aesthetic arrangement of documentary prose texts plays an essential role in creating positive tension within the text. The first tension point is between a text's aesthetic and sociological functions. Second, the tension between verifiable facts and their artistic reinterpretation (198). Alexievich avoids these weaknesses by grounding her domain materials in tangible tape-recorded evidence and eliminating extraneous

information from individual narratives to restrict the emphasis. On the other hand, the political aesthetics of the documentary prose genre also facilitate its reader to consider the work as a crafted piece of literature under the classification of non-fiction or fact-based literature. In this sense, the potential challenge for documentary prose authors is a large amount of verifiable material, which requires confirmation by other historical sources. Since no historical model is sufficient to help the victims make sense of their devastated world, Alexievich's goal was to capture the type of confusion and various coping methods specific to the Chernobyl victims. In this sense, her methodology was highly sensory and challenging, as it was grounded on the documented evidence from the survivors to prove the experiences were not fabricated.

Chernobyl Prayer, curated from the experiences of the victims, can be termed as a polyphonic narration, a concept propounded by Michael Bakhtin's landmark work, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. According to him, "polyphony in literature is an attempt to refute the objectification of man through the pluralistic intervention of the dialogue" (4). In this theoretical insight, using the polyphonic structure in *Chernobyl Prayer* by Alexievich provides a fluidity to translate memories' fragmented and disembodied flow from non-narrative to the narrative. In essence, this narrative technique breathes life into the disjointed recollections of those affected by the Chernobyl disaster, giving voice to their collective experiences and allowing readers to engage with the profound human dimensions of the tragedy.

Svetlana Alexievich includes the testimony of Alexander Kudryagin, a clean-up worker, who goes, "They wrote in the newspaper, 'The air above the reactor is clean.' We read that and laughed, and swore with gusto...What the newspaper print is a pack of lies. Lies from start to finish" (Alexievich 228-229). In this passage from Svetlana Alexievich's work, Alexander Kudryagin's testimony vividly illustrates the profound disconnect between the official narratives surrounding the Chernobyl disaster and the harsh realities faced by those on the ground. Kudryagin's blunt assertion that the newspaper's claims of clean air were lies highlights the pervasive mistrust and anger felt by individuals who directly experienced the catastrophe. This poignant testimony is a powerful indictment of the state's attempts to manipulate information and control the narrative, shedding light on the deeply politicised nature of the Chernobyl event. This testimony underscores Svetlana Alexievich's overarching goal in crafting *Chernobyl Prayer*. Through the skilled use of polyphony within the genre of documentary prose, she seeks to unearth the untold and often marginalised history of the Chernobyl disaster. By weaving together hundreds of monologues from diverse segments of society, Alexievich constructs a literary artefact that unveils various facets of this traumatic event that continues to cast a long shadow today. While the *Chernobyl Prayer* does bring to light the hidden or suppressed aspects of the disaster, it also emphasises a profound shift in perspective. The loss of the Soviet ideological foundation emerges as a central theme, overshadowing the personal losses of health, loved ones, livelihoods, and homes. She writes, "Two catastrophes coincided with one another: a social- the Soviet Union fell apart before our very eyes, the gigantic socialist continent went underwater- and the cosmic- Chernobyl-two global explosions" (Alexievich 34). This shift in focus underscores the enduring impact of

Chernobyl on physical well-being and the ideological landscape of the affected region, emphasising the deep and lasting repercussions of this catastrophe.

The Soviet ideology of '*glasnost*' (openness) and '*perestroika*' (restructuring) was the dual program employed by Mikhail Gorbachev, the eighth and final leader of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev introduced these two pivotal programs intending to bring about substantial changes within the Soviet system, encompassing economic reforms, domestic governance, and international diplomacy. '*Glasnost*' aimed to promote transparency and openness in the government's actions, while '*perestroika*' focused on restructuring and revitalising the Soviet economy and society. However, the Chernobyl disaster, during Gorbachev's leadership, starkly contradicted these reformist ideals. Instead of embodying '*glasnost*' and '*perestroika*,' the Soviet government's response to the Chernobyl crisis was characterised by secrecy, misinformation, and an attempt to downplay the severity of the situation. For instance, Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*, through the monologue of Marat Filippovich, former chief engineer of the Institute of Atomic Energy, Belarus Academy of Sciences, entitled, 'Monologue on the symbols and secrets of a great country', depicts the trepidations the people endured due to the secrecy governed fostered on the case. He says, "Every piece of information had become a secret...we were continually writing internal memoranda. Continually. Nevertheless, to say anything publicly about the results would see you stripped of your academic degree, and even your Party card" (Alexievich 201). Here, it is apparent that the policies of *glasnost* or openness have failed in their significance. The Soviet ideology by Gorbachev that preached and proliferated the policy of transparency for months lapsed into an eighteen-day silence before addressing the nation about the Chernobyl disaster. This contrast between the professed ideals of openness and restructuring and the actual handling of the Chernobyl catastrophe highlighted the entrenched bureaucracy and resistance to change within the Soviet system, ultimately contributing to the erosion of public trust in the government and accelerating the Soviet Union's decline.

On a similar note, Zoya Danilovna Bruk, nature conservation inspector, says, "There were mountains of papers stamped 'top secret', 'Classify information about the accident as secret', 'Information on outcomes of medical treatment to be classified'. 'Information on the extent of radiation poisoning of personnel involved in the clean up to be classified'" (Alexievich 204). A revealing passage by Zoya Danilovna Bruk, a nature conservation inspector, lays bare the chilling extent of secrecy and censorship that shrouded the Chernobyl disaster. Her words illuminate a disturbing bureaucratic landscape where information critical to understanding the crisis was systematically concealed under "top secret" and "classified." This testimony not only underscores the authoritarian grip of the Soviet government during that era but also the stark contrast between the quiet, natural unfolding of the tragedy and the deliberate, artificial veil of secrecy imposed by those in power. It serves as a poignant reminder of the official deception and manipulation that characterised the Chernobyl disaster, with far-reaching consequences for the affected population and a narrative throughout Svetlana Alexievich's work.

Apart from resisting the state narratives, *Chernobyl Prayer* also delineates the personal, in-depth experiences of the

victims. In the book, through many firsthand accounts and testimonies, readers are immersed in the deeply personal and often harrowing stories of individuals who lived through the catastrophe. These accounts offer an emotional and human perspective on the disaster, going beyond statistics and political narratives to reveal the individual suffering, resilience, and trauma experienced by those directly impacted. The section entitled 'A Lone Human Voice' features the narrative of Lyudmila Ignatenko, wife of Vasily Ignatenko, a deceased fireman working at the Chernobyl nuclear plant at the time of the disaster. Her ordeal, positioned at the beginning of the book, relates to her husband's unimaginable painful death from radiation exposure. For instance, Lyudmila's detailing of her husband's death is far beyond the grasp of ordinary consciousness. She says, "I would lift his arm, and the bone would be all woody, hanging loose, the tissue falling away. Pieces of the lung, lumps of his liver were coming up through his mouth. He was choking on his own innards. I'd put a bandage on my hand and slip it into his mouth scoop it all out..." (Alexievich 18). Lyudmila's harrowing description vividly captures the horrifying physical effects of radiation on the human body, painting a gruesome picture that defies ordinary comprehension. Her account delves into the visceral and surreal nature of her husband's suffering as he choked on his deteriorating organs. Lyudmila's desperate attempts to alleviate his pain, even at the risk of her own health, epitomise the extraordinary courage and sacrifice displayed by many in the face of the Chernobyl disaster.

Similarly, the second section with the same title, positioned towards the end of the book, features the ordeal of Valentina Apanasevich, the wife of a clean-up worker. By positioning these ordeals at the onset and end of the book, Alexievich frames them as the first introduction to the hidden history and as a final reminder of the profound trauma experienced by the victims. A similar description of the physical transformation of Valentina's husband after the exposure is also provided, which is beyond imagination. She says, "The man I loved...turned in front of my eyes into a monster. They took out his lymph nodes, and that affected his circulation. His nose got somehow out of place and three times bigger and his eyes were not the same anymore. They moved in opposite directions" (ibid., 285). As recounted in *Chernobyl Prayer*, the description of Valentina's husband's physical transformation after radiation exposure mirrors the shocking and nightmarish ordeal that Lyudmila's husband underwent. Valentina's narrative underscores the Chernobyl disaster's profoundly personal and devastating consequences on individuals and their loved ones. Her account portrays how the man she loved underwent a horrifying metamorphosis, with his appearance and health deteriorating in ways that defy comprehension. The mention of his swollen nose and misaligned eyes is a stark reminder of the grotesque and often irreversible physical toll that radiation poisoning exacted on its victims. Both Lyudmila and Valentina's narratives exemplify the book's ability to convey the unimaginable suffering experienced by those affected by Chernobyl, emphasising the disaster's deeply human and profoundly tragic dimensions.

The deeply personal and gut-wrenching experiences described by individuals like Lyudmila and Valentina in *Chernobyl Prayer* are closely intertwined with the author's writing style, characterised by polyphony and documentary prose. Polyphony, as employed by Svetlana Alexievich, is

the art of weaving together multiple voices and perspectives to create a rich, multi-layered narrative. In the context of these personal accounts, polyphony allows for a collective chorus of voices, each with its unique and vivid recollections of the Chernobyl disaster. This narrative technique enables readers to witness the physical and emotional toll of radiation exposure and empathise with the individuals who endured it. On the other hand, documentary prose is the genre Alexievich utilises to construct her narrative. This genre allows for the meticulous compilation of firsthand testimonies and interviews, resulting in a factual and highly detailed account of historical events. In the case of "Chernobyl Prayer," documentary prose lends credibility and authenticity to the personal stories shared within its pages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer* underscores the intricate and powerful narrative structure that she employed in her work. As an accomplished author and journalist, Alexievich's mission was to weave countless hours of audio material into a compelling and coherent singular narrative. Delving deeper into these diverse narratives reveals a disturbing truth: the Soviet Union imposed stringent political controls to conceal the devastating consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe from the world. Through her polyphonic storytelling, she vividly captures the harrowing human experiences of the Chernobyl disaster, making it an almost unbearable yet essential read for her audience. From a humanitarian perspective, Alexievich's use of polyphony in *Chernobyl Prayer* emerges as the most democratic means to reconstruct this tragedy in all its visceral detail, urging global awareness and action.

The article's conclusion echoes Alexievich's sentiments, as demonstrated in her self-interview within the book. In this revealing section, she passionately discusses the imperative of documenting the voices of the voiceless and providing a platform for the untold stories of Chernobyl. Her words, "Chernobyl is a mystery that we have yet to unravel. An undeciphered sign. A mystery, perhaps, for the twenty-first century; a challenge for it" (Alexievich 25), reminds us of the ongoing importance of unveiling hidden histories and confronting the enduring trauma experienced by countless individuals worldwide. *Chernobyl Prayer* is a powerful example of how the art of polyphony, coupled with the genre of documentary prose, can paint a comprehensive historical panorama in all its complexity. It unveils the obscured histories surrounding the Chernobyl tragedy and amplifies the marginalised voices, ensuring the world bears witness to their anguish. Alexievich's work serves as a testament to the enduring impact of the disaster and the urgency of acknowledging the untold stories it left in its wake.

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