

## AN EMPATHETIC ACCOUNT OF AN APOCALYPSE: A VIGNETTE OF SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH'S *VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL*

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### **Abstract:**

*Svetlana Alexievich, the Belarusian journalist has been awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in literature for her “polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage”. *Voices from Chernobyl* is an oral history of numerous human testimonies and the voices of those caught in the labyrinth of nuclear web. This article is an exploration of the consciousness of the survivors and the victims, speaking eloquently that one has been exposed to, forced into, as a pawn in a great geopolitical game, depicting the elements of personal anguish, self-pity, philosophical outpourings, blaming fate and criticizing the government. It is also an assessment of the public outpourings for the narrator, for the readers and for the author and whether such documentary exercises serve any therapeutic or practical purposes.*

**Keywords:** *Chernobyl, Voices, Polyphonic, Testimony, History, Suffering.*

### **Introduction**

Svetlana Alexievich's books trace the emotional history of the Soviet and the post-Soviet individual through carefully constructed collages of interviews. Alexievich specializes in crafting narratives based on witness testimonies, she wrote oral histories of several dramatic events in the Soviet history: The Second World War, the Afghan war, the fall of the Soviet Union and the Chernobyl disaster. She compiled a whole Soviet experience because her “fundamental project is to uncover the Russian soul” with a non-judgmental quality. Alexievich has always been searching for a literary method that would allow the closest possible approximation to real life. Reality has always attracted her like a magnet; it tortured and hypnotized her that she wanted to capture it on paper. So, she appropriated this genre actual human voices and confessions, witness evidences and documents. This is how she hears and sees the world as a chorus of individual voices and a collage of everyday details.

*Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* is a book that explores the psychological and personal tragedy of the Chernobyl accident and explores the experiences of the victims and how the disaster affected their lives. Alexievich interviewed hundreds of people affected by the meltdown- from innocent citizens to firefighters to those who were called up to clean up the disaster, and their stories reveal the fear, anger and uncertainty with which they still live. The 1986 accident at the Chernobyl nuclear reactor is one of the best-known industrial accidents of all the time, but there has been relatively little reporting of its human consequences. The personal details of the stories are what grabs the reader, but they often touch on broader themes. The Chernobyl disaster is linked by many to the Second World War, which still looms large for the older generation, and by some to the end of communism and the break-up of the Soviet Union, which followed soon afterwards.

### **Morphology of Misery**

In the very first interview, Lyudmila Ignatenko, wife of the fireman whose brigade was the first to arrive at the reactor, talks about the total degeneration of her husband's skin in the week before his death, describing a process so unnatural one should never have had to witness it. The nurse at the hospital comments that her husband was not a person anymore but a nuclear reactor. He was being photographed for further studies. He was not being considered as a human being that made her burst out, yells at them and pushes them all out. Lyudmila was continuously persuaded by others to get rid of her husband claiming that he was a radioactive object and nursing and serving him is equivalent to committing suicide.

An ordinary man suddenly changes into a Chernobyl man. A normal person who goes to work, returns from work, earning an average salary, one day turns out to be a Chernobyl person, an animal everyone is interested in, and that no one knows anything about. People look at him differently. They ask several daunting questions like was it scary? How did the station burn? What did you see? Can you have children? Did your wife leave you? The word Chernobyl is like a signal. Everyone turns their head to look. At the same time people seem to develop a sense of self-pity. They had worked hard and honestly throughout their whole life, but not only did they not get the deserving justice but were subjected to indescribable physical and psychological trauma. The sheer hard work and perseverance to move forward with their life turned out to be futile and meaningless with the single nuclear disaster. They took pity on themselves for such a futility. The soldiers had to execute the evacuation programme. Old women were crawling on their knees in front of their houses, begging not to be led away from the only place they knew as their home. People did not just lose their homes and savings. They almost lost their lives.

The natural order of things was shaken. The daily routine of the people was shattered. A woman could milk her cow but next to her would be a soldier to make that she poured the milk out to the ground. An old woman would carry a basket of eggs, and next to her was a soldier to make sure that she buries them. The farmers raise their precious potatoes only to bury them. Things went ineffectual and unavailing. Animals behaved strangely. The livestock was lowing. The birds did not come out for two days. It seemed like the cats and dogs had gone mad. They did not recognize people. There were animals in the houses, the schools, and the clubs instead of people. There were episodes of loneliness and isolation to contend with. People were buried separately.

Another psychological problem that seemed insurmountable was the absence of ownership of the problem. There was no one to blame for their troubles and thus vent their bitterness. People wanted to curse someone, the authorities, the government and the communists. They had nothing else to do other than to curse after losing their homes, their lives, their companions. The question was who was to blame? What should they do? How do they save themselves? People saw the reactor light up with a bright crimson glow, as if the reactor was glowing. It was not an ordinary fire but seemed to be some kind of emanation. It seemed so pretty. People worked at the reactor stood in the black dust, talking, breathing, wondering at it. They did not know that death seemed so beautiful. They had a fancy looking at the reactor without knowing that they were looking at their forthcoming death. People have become apathetic to such a devastating situation. Death has become a frequently used term and they gave importance to it no more. They had philosophical outpourings that they were the prisoners of materialism and that were what limited them to the objects of the world, but Chernobyl to them was portal to infinity. Russian culture had its pull towards the tragic. Nothing was comprehensible without the shadow of death. And only on the basis of Russian culture could one begin to make sense of the catastrophe. Only Russian culture was prepared for it.

The personal accounts of the victims have a very literary quality, denuded of hope, fatalistic and despondent, and intertwined with dark humour and absurdity that is sometimes earthly, sometimes poetic. That poetry comes from the real pitifulness of the human situations and the surreal quality of many things that happened. There is nothing uplifting about the stoic acceptance and the will to recover shown by many

of the victims. On the other hand the book also exposes the pessimism that can afflict human nature, which produces a fatalism that paralyzes people, when they lose faith in their ability to shape their own destiny.

### **A Glimpse of the Government**

This composite narrative overtly focuses on faithfully conveying the various stories of misery, isolation, ignorance and hopelessness of Chernobyl victims but what a reader also gets is a portrait of the government that is soaked in corruption, deceit and callousness. The article sketches the profile of the government that did everything in its power to keep its citizenry and the world outside in absolute ignorance of the tragedy and callously incentivized its employees and its people to do the clean-up act, while making sure that its own interests were well protected. As a result of the accident, 50 million Ci of radio nuclides were released into the atmosphere. Seventy percent of these descended in Belarus; 23% of its territory was contaminated by caesium 137 radio nuclides with a density of over 1 Ci/km was over 18 million hectares; 2.4 hectares had been taken out of the agricultural economy. Belarus was a land of forests. But 26% of all forests and a large part of all marshes near the rivers Pripyat, Dnieper and Sozh were subsequently inhospitable because they came under the radioactive zone.

The Kremlin's first reaction was to conceal the mess even from the rescue workers. The authorities maintained double standards. They did not inform the people about the radiation right away; instead, they closed off all the roads. The trolleys and trains stopped running. The town was inundated with military vehicles. The military people wore surgical masks. Meanwhile the common people were carrying bread from the stores, open sacks with loaves in them. People were even eating cupcakes on plates. No one talked or informed about the radiation; for them the actual repercussions of the tragedy remained unknown. There was a kind of official secrecy. Radios and papers kept silent. Soldiers were warned that in the interest of the state, it would be better not to go around telling people what they had seen. As one of the soldiers says "Before we went home, we were called in to talk to a KGB man. He was very convincing when he said we should not talk to anyone about what we have seen(41)".

There was an oath of concealment. It was more like a conspiracy of ignorance and obedience. The important principle the authorities followed was never to stick their heads out and better to keep everyone happy. According to the civil defence instructions then, an iodine prophylaxis was supposed to be carried out for the entire population in case of a nuclear accident or nuclear attack. And in case of Chernobyl accident, it was 3000 micro-roentgen per hour. The city had 700 kilograms of iodine concentrate for the very purpose but it remained where it was. They could simply have introduced it into the fresh water reservoirs or added it to the milk. But the government decided to settle the mess without making any announcements and creating any panic. The residential quarters were so close to the reactor (which should have been prohibited) that the residents were within the proximity of the reactor. It is evident from Lyudmila Ignatenko, wife of the deceased fire fighter:

We lived in the dormitory of the fire house where he worked. On the second floor. There were three other young couples, we all shared a kitchen. On the first floor they kept the trucks. That was his job. So, I always knew what was happening. (5)

How could the authorities possibly build the residential quarters so close to such vulnerable nuclear station? This alludes to their ignorance and lack of concern for the common people. Firefighters and thousands of other workers were dispatched to the burning station with no warning. No information about the nature of the disaster was given to them. They were not provided with the safety equipment and no special clothing was distributed to safeguard from being affected by the radiation. Thirty-one workers died immediately from the exposure. There were no emergency drills for the workers and they went to the station under the impression that they had been called to put out a fire. The self-sealing attitude of the politicians is observed when the soldiers are made to sign the non-disclosure form which is evident from

the monologue of one of the soldiers: “They made us sign a disclosure form. So, I did not say anything. Right after the army I became a second -group invalid. I was twenty-two. I got a good dose. We lugged buckets of graphite from the reactor. That's ten thousand roentgens (48)”.

The reactor burned for ten days. The scale of tragedy it unleashed was quite unbelievable and unjustifiable. No one listened to the scientists and doctors. The government pulled science and medicine into politics. The KGB kept working and making secret searches. “Western voices” were shut out. There were a thousand taboos, party and military secrets. And in addition, everyone was made to think that the peaceful soviet atom was as safe as peat or coal. Finally, the government claimed that they had thrown army and all their military equipment to the breach. Now what aid did it serve when they already had thousands of tons of caesium, iodine lead, zirconium, cadmium, beryllium, barium, an unknown amount of plutonium and 450 types radio nuclides in all. It was the equivalent of 350 atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima. The government needed to talk about physics but they talked about enemies. It was a country of authority not people. The state came first and the value of human life was zero. Everyone waited for the order, for the call...

There was misinformation all around. Even in the newspaper people were informed that the fire has been put out and everything was back to normal. The papers discussed the political consciousness and meticulous organization, about the fact that just four days after the catastrophe the red flag was already flying over the fourth reactor. The bureaucratic incompetence of the Soviet system was demonstrated both by the scale of the accident and the elaborate cover up that followed. Millions of Soviet citizens lost faith in the system and silently watched it implode under the reforms of Gorbachev, a few years later. The republic of Belarus suffered the most, having 20 percent of its territory contaminated. The number of people would ultimately die of thyroid cancer, birth defects and leukaemia are yet to be known.

### **From the Horse's Mouth - The Authentic Experience**

Interestingly, Svetlana Alexievich does not dwell on the larger picture- about how the nuclear particles spread tragically all over the planet or about the prognosis made by scientists about the longevity of the repercussions or their fears about the intensity of suffering it would trigger. Instead, she focuses on a smaller but more blood-curdling picture of a pathetic condition- physical and psychological- of the victims and their care givers. This worm's eye view gives a more convincing and graphic picture of the “man-made tsunami “and provides a testament, as no other official document or white paper can, to the scale of destruction caused by an act of reckless experimentation. Alexievich had always been drawn to miniature stories that came to her from where no one would expect anything and she had her sensitivity to capture the sounds that would fall well below the decibel range of other humans. As she admitted in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

Flaubert called himself a pen; I would say that I am a human ear. When I walk down the street and catch words, phrases and exclamations, I always think- how many novels disappear without a trace! Disappear into darkness. We haven't been able to capture the conversational side of human literature. We don't appreciate it, we aren't surprised or delighted by it. But it fascinates me, and has made me its captive. I love how humans talk... I love the lone human voice. It is my greatest love and passion.

What does Alexievich really achieve by documenting this catastrophe? In the same interview, she says it is her firm belief that in doing so she is sensitizing the entire world about how human beings are more vulnerable than they ever were in any time in history because the very products of science and technology that humans gloat over, have the power to wipe out not only the local populations but rather life on the entire globe. And the end will not come suddenly but will inflict lingering misery that no one will be in a position to alleviate. Alexievich opines that it is important to start nuclear plants right away but it is

more important to consider what one should do, what one should take care of in such a pursuit. She tries to list people whom no one sees or hears. There is much more power in their emotions than any economic or medical data. So, it is important to remember their lives. Alexievich makes the voices of the people heard. The sufferings of the people had renewed her sense of determination. No one completely understands the horrors of nuclear power. Alexievich emphasizes the need to look forward what happened in Chernobyl to form a new knowledge. She saw the future and not the past. And the voices of people never go unheard in the future.

Alexievich believes in the extraordinary power of the ordinary. The role of the witnesses has become so much important for her when she says that each person contains a piece of knowledge about the time in which he or she lived, the little stories that portray the picture of the time which one cannot simply tell. There is a search for freedom after the endless suffering. And this freedom can be attained only if we understand our past by identifying the errors within ourselves. Alexievich wants people to think about themselves. She describes herself as being obsessed with the reality. She always wanted to write the truth. For such an endeavour people is her hope. It is through the voices of the poor victims Alexievich solidifies the existence of those who had been the victims of such a lethal event. It is as though Alexievich wanted the world to know what really happened and she sets the book as an example of what can possibly happen if nuclear equipment is not safeguarded properly. One can see the incident through multiple voices because Alexievich believes that it is difficult for a single consciousness to grasp everything that has happened. Thus, the book serves as a great reminder of history. Her work is an accumulation of her family, an accumulation of all these cultures of soviet, post-soviet, Belarusian and Russian, which is indeed a historical artefact, making it unique and salient through a multidimensional understanding.

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