

Living in a Post-Nuclear World
On the Form of Testimonial Literature in Svetlana Alexievich "Chernobyl's Prayer"

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Abstract

In this paper, I provide a structural analysis of "Chernobyl's Prayer" by Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich. The book is a form of testimonial literature consisting of the voices of ordinary people concerning the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. A nuclear explosion occurred at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant built on the Ukrainian side of the border when Ukraine and Belarus were still neighboring republics within the Soviet Union. This caused Belarus as much damage as Ukraine. Further, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed when little could be done to eliminate the negative effects of radioactive contamination. Alexievich visited the contaminated areas and conducted a series of interviews, listening to the anguish of ordinary people affected by the disaster. She published this in 1997 as "Chernobyl's Prayer". The book features the Soviet memories and mentality of the people, which have been retained even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

As a premise for the analysis of this book, I confirm the characteristics of the testimonial literature literary genre. Testimonial literature aims to preserve the memories of individual people, which get erased in history. It helps construct a collective memory and sometimes becomes a counter-historical narrative to orthodox history as "history with a capital letter". Testimonial literature is not a subgenre of literature that has not been fully sublimated but rather a genre that has the potential to push the limits of prose.

Some heartless accusations have been made about Alexievich's works in general—that they are nothing more than a collection of voices that have been heard. These accusations, however, are untrue because all her works are widely recognized and appreciated by readers worldwide. In "Chernobyl's Prayer," in particular, there seems to be a sublime sense of the extraordinary, akin to festivity, in the way the witnesses tell their stories. What is it that moves us so much in this literary form that involves listening to testimonies and assembling them, a form of apparently simple origin depending on the reader's point of view Alexievich's work is more than a simple

arrangement of testimonies—a formal argument hidden is hidden in it, carefully planted by Alexievich herself. A recognition of this argument makes it possible to read the story in a different light than merely being overwhelmed by the tragedy of the victims' testimonies.

There are three stylistic manipulations by the author.

First, the testimonies are selected, cut, and arranged with precision, and the "ground text (explanatory text)" is eliminated so that the testimonies resonate with each other. As stylistic devices, I refer to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory proposed in "The Language of the Novel". According to Bakhtin, linguistic diversity in polyphonic prose activates internal dialogue, encourages decentering, and orchestrates the voice according to the theme of the work. Such a structure is believed to allow the speaker's words to acquire social significance and social universality, thus enhancing the artistry of the work.

Second, although testimonial literature is inherently plotless, Alexievich has created a plot by loosely linking the testimonies based on their semantic properties. In the first chapter, we are in the immediate stage. The world is captured by our physical senses, and we are the victims of Chernobyl. The second chapter describes the stage of self-consciousness in which the events of Chernobyl and the state begin to come into view and, in turn, reflect on oneself. The testimonies in the third chapter are a contemplative grasp of the true nature of the state: its concealment, inaction, and deception. At the same time, they also lead to a higher realization that despite the awareness of its nature, people continued to support it. In other words, Alexievich has depicted the relationship between the testimonies as a dialectical movement. Along with the main plot, the story also contains two subplots. One is a story of love and redemption—wives struggling to ensure a dignified death for their husbands heavily exposed to the disaster and women facing the impact of the exposure on their children. The other is the popular history of the Soviet Union. Many soldiers risked their lives during the decontamination process. They were driven by heroism and sacrificial spirit that they believed was their inherent desire to serve the nation. However, it was later clarified that these heroic sacrifices were a result of Soviet ideological education that attempted to create a body that would serve the state. Although the nation had been weakened, the sacrificial spirit of the people remained.

Third, the use of "chorus" in the book suggests a theoretical framework. It complements and overrides the chapters, fosters dialogue, and is similar to the chorus in classical drama. This book presents the problem of civilizational crisis. The tragic events of Chernobyl are not narrated in the tragic form in which they deserve to be narrated. Rather, is the author creates a linguistic space in which irony resonates as an

echo, and even a faint sense of humor is expressed. She does not give the story the usual cathartic ending. Rather, she attempts to create a perspective that can be viewed objectively from a distance, similar to that of comedies. From this perspective, the reader can obtain a bird's eye view of the testimonies that resonate and repel polyphonically on stage, without being submerged in the individual anguish and misery of each testimony. The question of how human beings can live in a world transformed by the Chernobyl disaster emerges as a challenge for the future. At the same time, the age-old question of what it means to be human also emerges as irony throughout the story.

In our present "post-3.11" era, we cannot talk about Chernobyl without thinking about Fukushima. The Fukushima disaster has been narrated in a collection of essays on fiction called "Post-Disaster Literature as World Literature". These events make us realize that we are just one species in an ecosystem. It also makes us look at the curse of modernity, which gave birth to nuclear power plants. In this regard, one of the most pressing issues in Chernobyl and Fukushima is the confrontation of the world affected by radiation to protect the next generation. A possible solution involves living in the radiation-contaminated land and carefully assessing the risks ourselves, rather than leaving it all to the state.