



**NEW FRONTIERS IN FICTION: A STUDY OF
DOCUMENTARY PROSE IN SVETLANA
ALEXIEVICH'S *THE UNWOMANLY FACE OF WAR***

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ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts to study Svetlana Alexievich's use of the documentary style in her first book translated into English as *The Unwomanly Face of War: A Oral History of Women in World War II*. Alexievich is a journalist turned novelist who predominantly practises a style of literary journalism. She received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2015 specifically for her use of documentary prose in a new kind of literary genre. The book that this work examines is explicitly a collection of interviews with female combatants that served in the Second World War for erstwhile USSR or Soviet Union. The paper explores the array of approaches and the aesthetics of Svetlana Alexievich's construction of documentary fiction in the book.*

Keywords *Documentary prose, fiction, Nobel Prize, Svetlana Alexievich, new genre.*

INTRODUCTION

Ever since fiction started being written and read, the genre has shown itself to be the most pliable to growth and evolution. Over the centuries, newer forms of the 'Novel' kept surfacing and revolutionizing the literary world. This trend of fiction acquiring new frontiers has reached incredible limits in contemporary times as umpteen styles, themes, genres and

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sub-genres have flooded the world of fiction. The Post-Modern Novel has many faces. New genres like ‘mythopoeia’, ‘cli-fli’, ‘bizzaro’, ‘interactive fiction’, ‘fanfic’, ‘chick-lit’, ‘gran-lit’ and many more are being created by the day.

The phrase ‘documentary fiction’ is comprised of two confutational terms. In common parlance, the word “documentary” is used for a work of art- literary, cinematic or any kind of audio-visual media including news, television and radio- that is based on an interview pattern with persons of interest or investigation with the witnesses in the concerned event, situation or theme. In short, documentaries as a genre, strive for depicting a true story. “Fiction”, on the other hand, is by definition, a self-crafted and made-up narrative or story. In contrast with material truth, it stems from the imagination. Therefore, though on the face of it, the act of penning fiction and that of documenting an event may seem to be diametrically opposed pursuits, post-Thaw Russian literature combined these two opposite creative impulses: "In the 1960s an old tendency in Russian literature reemerged under a new label: documentation. This amorphous continuum, variously known in the West as “life writing” or historical fiction, encompasses autobiography at one end and truth-oriented fiction at the other" (Sutcliffe 19).

This drive that was "autobiographical in impulse and performative in impact" (Hutcheon 115) has been bubbling for years under the socialist-realist novels of the Soviet era that fictionalised history and historicised fiction. The only way out of which seemed to be Blanchot's axiom that the everyday life is rebellious and revolutionary in its chaotic multitude. (Blanchot 12-20). However, this new genre of documentary prose was not met with general approval. For Roman Jakobson, the excessive focus on the everyday was a “stabilizing force of an immutable present, overlaid, as this present is, by a stagnating slime, which stifles life in its tight, hard mold" (Jakobson 277). This was regarded as a threat to the Russian high culture and its spiritual dimension. The question then was how to carry the revolutionary fervour of everyday reality with the pursuit of a higher, deeper meaning. I. Grekova talked about the art hidden in our most commonplace and basic feelings or the most trivial things around us: “Art is a strange thing. We notice it when it is reflected in great things, but from day to day we live surrounded by petty, forgotten, transitory little things. In a sense these, too, are art” (Grekova 403).

And this is exactly what Svetlana Alexievich did when she took all these ideas much ahead and created a ‘literary genre’ out of it. It is for this special feat that she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for the year 2015. Alexievich is a non-fiction prose writer who writes in Russian. Born in 1948 to a Ukrainian mother and Belorussian father, she earned a degree in journalism from the Belorussian State University. Right after this, she worked as a reporter in several local newspapers before becoming a correspondent for the literary



magazine *Neman* in Minsk. During this time, she developed a flair for crafting narratives based on witness testimonies. She then went on to write novels which were, in fact, collages of interviews with survivors of epic events in Soviet history like the Second World War, the Soviet-Afghan War, the Chernobyl disaster and the collapse of the Soviet Union, etc. The Nobel Prize Committee explained her work as “a literary non-fiction genre that is entirely her own. She writes “novels of voices.” She has developed this genre book after book, constantly honing the aesthetic of her documentary prose, which is based on hundreds of interviews.” (Nobel Press Release, 2015).

Alexievich’s *The Unwomanly Face of War*, first published in Minsk, Belarus in 1985, is made up of monologues of Soviet women who fought in the Second World War or as the Soviets called it, The Great Patriotic War. Alexievich spent about seven years travelling the length and breadth of the USSR with her tape recorder and spoke to nearly 800 women war veterans before condensing those stories in the shape of a book.

Why war, one asks? And why women in those wars? To answer the former, the history of the Soviet Union has been one of war and suffering. In her preface to the book, Alexievich says that for the people of the Soviet Union, war and violence had been the most familiar reality. It had been the way of life for them and everything around them pointed towards or spoke about their history of armed conflict. It was the Soviet Union that suffered the highest number of casualties during the Second World War, losing almost a quarter of its population. Out of the approximately 12 million people that were mobilized into the army in the first year of the war itself, about a million were women. The first section of *The Unwomanly Face of War* titled ‘From a Conversation with a Historian’ tells us that World War II was, in fact, a “women’s phenomenon.” (Alexievich x). These women honed their skills in all military tactics and combat practices, even the most male-dominated ones. They earned feminine forms for military terms like “machine-gunner”, “tank driver,” “minesweeper” “infantryman,” “sniper”, etc. for which no gender neutral terms had existed till then. Despite this huge participation and value of women’s role in the war, Alexievich found that everything we know about war is through a male lens or perspective. We have heard the history and meaning of war only in “a man’s voice.” She calls us captives of “men’s notions” and “men’s words” (xiii). Women’s stories and their history was silenced and neglected.

“No one but me ever questioned my grandmother. My mother” (Alexievich xiii). She set about writing the history of that war. A women’s history.

It is often contested that real stories, however ordinary, are inadvertently more pungent than crafted ones. They have the kind of intensity that fiction cannot really compete with. Alexievich herself states that for the longest time, she was both frightened and attracted by reality. In the preface to *The Unwomanly Face* she says, “I searched for a long time... What

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words can convey what I hear? I searched for a genre that would correspond to how I see the world, how my eye, my ear are organized” (xiii). Soon, she came across the book, *I Am From a Burning Village*, by A. Adamovich, Ya. Bryl, and V. Kolesnik, reading which was veritable shock for her. She writes: “Here was an unusual form: the novel was composed from the voices of life itself, from what I had heard in childhood, from what can be heard now in the street, at home, in a café, on a bus. There! The circle was closed. I had found what I was looking for. Ales Adamovich became my teacher...” (xiii) And, therefore, at the roundtable for documentary writers in 1978 Alexievich spoke to Adamovich about her planned project: to interview everyday women who had served in the war and to record their experiences, feelings and memories, which eventually culminated into this book.

Alexievich’s narrative strategy is such that it creates an aura of authenticity. Therefore, before she puts forth their account, Alexievich gives the complete name of each of her interview subjects. She also provides the exact nature of service each of these women performed during the war. For instance- Klara Vasilyevna Goncharova, Antiaircraft Gunner; Maria Semyonovna Kaliberda, Sergeant, Radio Operator; Klavdia Ivanovna Terekhova, Air Force Captian; Olga Nikitichna Zabelina, Army Surgeon; Galina Dmitrievna Zapolskaya, Telephone Operator, Vera Danilovtseva, Sergeant, Sniper. Each of the section or chapter titles is also a direct quotation from one or the other woman’s story in that section. The titles are intimate and informal but very eloquent like, “I don’t want to remember”; “Grow up, girls... You’re still green...”; “I alone came back to Mama”.

Wherever Alexievich has made insertions of authorial voice in the book, they are often philosophical and reflective, like: “A road and many roads ... dozens of trips all over the country, hundreds of recorded cassettes, thousands of yards of tape. Five hundred meetings, after which I stopped counting; faces left my memory, only voices remained. A chorus resounds in my memory. An enormous chorus; sometimes the words almost cannot be heard, only the weeping. I confess: I did not always believe that I was strong enough for this path, that I could make it. Could reach the end. There were moments of doubt and fear, when I wanted to stop or step aside, but I no longer could. I fell captive to evil, I looked into the abyss in order to understand something ...” (Alexievich 3). Thus, we see that it is as much Alexievich- a child of the war herself, and something she too lost family to, who is coming to terms with that episode in history as it is the women who fought and served in the war.

The women pour out myriad experiences. What they were doing when the war was declared, how they went to the recruiting office, how they fought, spied, bandaged, shot. How they saw death and evil in the face. What was their lot in the war and how they saw the victory. But more than that what really informs their speech, what gives it uniqueness is the tiniest of details they put in. Alexievich’s interest is “not great deeds and heroism, but small, human



things, the most interesting and intimate for us.” (Alexievich xviii) Things like, “Mama wrote a prayer for me. I put it into a locket;”, “The German submachine guns go rat-a-tat-tat ... And you think: will you ever hear again how the wheat rustles? This sound ...;”, “We were so young when we went to the front. Young girls. I even grew during the war. Mama measured me at home... I grew four inches...;”, “You ask me: what is happiness? I answer. To suddenly find a living man among the dead ...;”. Such little, sensitive details that no war histories/accounts mention perhaps because they can only be gotten in actual human conversation. Details that may seem trivial and yet once one reads them, they seem supremely significant in truly understanding these women’s war experience. The author tells us, “more than once during my journalistic travels I witnessed I was the only hearer of totally new texts... “Women’s” war has its own colors, its own smell, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. Its own words. There are no heroes and incredible feats, there are simply people who are busy doing inhumanly human things. And it is not only they (people!) who suffer, but the earth, the birds, the trees. All that lives on earth with us. They suffer without words, which is still more frightening” (Alexievich xiv). Through her prose, therefore, Alexievich has tried to bring about a newer understanding of the term “hero”. Through the collages of interviews that make up the book she has tried to rewrite or rather write an alternative history of war and suffering. She does not write just another book on war. Alexievich also talks about the invisible zone and space that each teller is surrounded by when recalling the past and inviting the readers into. She says “at least three persons participate in the conversation: the one who is talking now, the one she was then, at the moment of the event, and myself” (Alexievich xviii).

Svetlana’s work is not about the presentation of cumbersome facts through the interviews. She has the documentary drive to seamlessly join life and literature. The monologues in *The Unwomanly Face of War* portray stunning imagery aside from communicating a story. It is a case of art depicting reality. As Leona Toker says, documentary literature is an intermediate between artistic and non-artistic discourse (Toker 188). The following excerpt from the section “Of Horses and Birds” from the book will illustrate the point, “—The field and forest were burning ... The meadow was smoky. I saw burned cows and dogs ... An unusual smell. Unfamiliar. I saw ... Burned barrels of tomatoes, of cabbage. Birds were burned. Horses ... Many ... Many completely charred ones lay on the road. We also had to get used to that smell ... I realized then that anything can burn ... Even blood burns ...” (Alexievich 126-7).

Over and over the women say, “How to describe it ... I’m too weak ... Too weak to describe it”, “I don’t know how to put it ...” Alexievich records these breaks in thoughts, these pauses of speech, ever so pregnant with meaning. With her, even the moments of muteness speak volumes. One of her diary entries she has inserted in the chapter, ‘Two Wars Live in Our House’ reads, “The tape recorder records the words, preserves the intonation. The pauses.

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The weeping and embarrassment. I realize that when a person speaks, something more takes place than what remains on paper. I keep regretting that I cannot “record” eyes, hands. Their life during the conversation, their own life. Separate. Their texts” (Alexievich 94).

Alexievich’s documentary prose in *The Unwomanly Face of War* may be about a specific historical event but her approach and the final product entail so much more. She seeks not the external realities of the war but the deepest feelings it engendered in the human that underwent it. She calls herself “a historian of the soul.” Authenticity is the benchmark of all documentary prose. Books like *The Unwomanly Face of War* use genuine testimony to present an event to us. And yet, to quote Angela Brintlinger, “in their construction these texts lean toward fiction with author as narrator” (Brintlinger 4). The 2015 Literature Nobel that Alexievich received is the first to be awarded to a writer who works exclusively with living people. The Nobel Committee lauded not just the 'polyphonic' nature of her writings but also hailed them as "monuments to suffering and courage in our time" (Nobel Press Release, 2015). She crosses over boundaries and mixes the enterprises of a writer, a reporter, sociologist, psychologist and preacher making her work post-modernist in its true sense. The movement, at least at this scale, has only just begun in fiction. But, with the ever-increasing platforms of social media, this kind of writing could well establish a literary tradition where human voices speak for themselves- to form the collective voice of a nation. Specifically, it provides a viable future for female writers- Russian as well as now internationally, and brings in hope to make literature more inclusive of both male and female experience.

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