



Polyphonic Authorship: Narrative Technique Assimilated by Svetlana Alexievich to Investigate the Consternation Caused by Cataclysmic

Incidents

Ms. S. Pinky Shama Johnny
Research Scholar
Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education
Tamilnadu, India

Dr. S. Rema Devi
Head of the Department of English and Research Supervisor
Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education
Krishnan Kovil - 626126
Tamilnadu, India

Abstract

Polyphony is a pre-existing hypothesis, analysed extensively by Russian Linguist and Literary Critics. Polyphonic authorship aims at countenancing the readers to interpret the outcome based on the multi-dimensional voices of the characters involved in the text or discourse. The message to reader is conveyed by first hand people who have been a part of the episode, thus enabling a connect that is intense in comparison to the historical books which contradictorily glorify; and at times camouflage the goriness involved in the actual event. Svetlana Alexievich assimilates polyphony to facilitate readers to visualize anecdotes which is closely associated with cognitive psychology. The sequencing of multiple voices with interrelated emotions enables precise comprehension of her writings. Alexievich features the polyphonic narrative technique, in her collection of monologues, to depict the reality of unsung heroes and innocent war victims. She relinquishes monologic control over the work and allows the characters to interact in their own terms which are iconic of polyphonic authorship. The impact of war and disaster has permanently scarred the minds of people who have survived the catastrophe, which seemed to surpass all external injuries and mutilations. Super-realism is a key feature implemented in her writing style to describe the ramifications of traumatising historical episodes.

Keywords: Polyphonic authorship, Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Super-literature, Super-realism

Writing is a permanent medium of communication which is precise and explicit as opposed to the oral medium. In literature, style is defined as a literary element that explains the mode in which an author chooses to present arguments or concepts. Language and tone are additional components that elucidate the writing style adopted by an author. Readers often experience a psychological connect with the kind of writing they are exposed to, irrespective of their linguistic, cultural or social background. Thus, language and psychology are interrelated disciplines when it comes to perception and memory as explained by Ulric Neisser, the father of cognitive psychology. Written communication and its interpretation by readers is directly linked to individual perception and experiences. The impact of written narratives can have a lasting effect or a nil effect on readers, based on the ability of the author or a creator in aiding a more channelized thought process. Modern polyphonic writings work in manifold ways in order to reproduce more precisely the modes in which we create and convey our modern narrative self in the world. Every author follows a course, and every passage crafted by an author will relate with the reader in different ways. It is these differences in expression that form the crux of style in textual discourse. Writing styles exemplify how an author delivers an idea, incorporating the totality of the writer's diction, syntax, use of literary devices and use of semantics, thereby contributing the gestalt of every decision made by the author intentionally and unintentionally. Svetlana Alexievich is an investigative journalist and non-fiction prose writer whose unique writing style has fetched her world-wide recognition. Her birth in Belarus and devastating exposure to a series of appalling events during the twentieth century, triggered her to record the testimonies of those

who were impacted by war and other catastrophic episodes. Alexievich's fortitude and unfaltering spirit to provide an opportunity for the oppressed to voice out their sufferings, is farfetched. In 2015, Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time".

During her lecture, Alexievich acknowledges her teacher, Ales Adamovich:

My teacher, Ales Adamovich, whose name I mention today with gratitude, felt that writing prose about the nightmares of the 20th century was sacrilege. Nothing may be invented. You must give the truth as it is. A "super-literature" is required. The witness must speak. Nietzsche's words come to mind – no artist can live up to reality. He can't lift it. It always troubled me that the truth doesn't fit into one heart, into one mind, that truth is somehow splintered. There's a lot of it, it is varied, and it is strewn about the world.¹

Adamovich was a Soviet Belarusian writer, screenwriter, literary critic and democratic activist. He wrote in both the Russian and Belarusian languages. His experience after fighting as a child soldier in the Belarusian resistance during World War II, made him write about the impact of war. *I am from the Fiery Village* is a work for which Adamovich collaborated with two other Belarusian writers, Janka Bryl and Uladzimir Kalesnik, in interviewing three hundred survivors of the German occupation of Belarus. Alexievich uses a similar approach to reconstruct oral memoirs of ominous events in Soviet history like the Second World War, the Afghan War, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the Chernobyl disaster by interviewing hundreds of people who were impacted by war and disaster. Some of her notable works such as: *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985), *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* (1989), *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997) and *Second-Hand Time* (2013) are exemplars of her

¹ Svetlana Alexievich, 'On the Battle Lost' (Lecture, Swedish Academy, Stockholm, December 7, 2015)

polyphonic writing style with true accounts of survivors. Alexievich uses persuasive language to convince the readers of the horrendous impact caused by human made disasters.

Narrative techniques are literary devices used in a work of art by writers to bind the narrative elements like plot, perspective, style, character, theme and genre. Authors use backstory, flashback, flash-forward and foreshadowing to present the events in their writing. While there are three styles of narrative styles like the first person, the second person and the third person narrative commonly used by authors, a combination of narratives is also adopted by contemporary writers to heighten the perspective in their literary works. Narrative writing is of four types: Linear narrative, Non-Linear Narrative, Quest Narrative and Viewpoint Narrative. Linear narratives have a plot that unfolds in a chronological order as in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Non-linear narrative like Virginia Woolf's *To the Light House* disregards chronology, with author's use of the stream of consciousness technique to oscillate between the past and present. Quest narrative focuses on the protagonist working towards a goal or an adventurous journey as in Homer's *The Odyssey*. Viewpoint narrative aims at emphasizing the personal experience of the main character or several characters involved in the work of art. Alexievich's incorporates a combination of all four narrative types in her polyphonic books, providing a platform for real life characters to narrate true accounts of war and disaster in their own language and tone. Although the language is coarse and depressing which is an outcome of the frustration and hopelessness, there is absolute truth revealed in its original form.

Etymology traces the origin of the word Polyphony to the Greek term 'polyphonia' which means having many tones or voices. The word "polyphonic" was first used as a musical term, referring to the harmonious co-existence of a variety of tones in order to create a whole new independent melody. In a novel or a written work of art, polyphony is in most cases metaphorical, as is the term "voice". According to David Lodge, a polyphonic novel is a

“novel in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice”² Polyphony is a pre-existing hypothesis, analysed extensively by Russian Linguist and Literary Critic, Mikhail Bakhtin who coined the axiom ‘the polyphonic novel’ in his paper titled, “Discourse in the Novel” in 1934.

Polyphony, literally meaning many voiced, describes literary writing that has succeeded in emancipating the voice of its characters from the domination of the authorial or narratorial voice. Whilst most literary works impose the author’s perspective, polyphonic authorship aims at countenancing the readers to interpret the outcome based on the multi-dimensional voices of the characters involved in the text or discourse. Bakhtin uses another term called ‘heteroglossia’ which means, “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way”³. According to this statement, each of these voices has its own perspective, its own cogency, and its own narrative influence within a literary work. Furthermore, Bakhtin argues that language is dialogical, intertextual, always incomplete, and refuses cessation, yet polyphony is more than simply creating an “empty juxtaposition of opinions, or a flattening-out of discourse so that all perspectives are equivalent”⁴ In other words, it is not a conglomeration of cacophonous ideologies but rather a harmonious comprehension of an episode seen through diverse people. In Alexievich’s works, hundreds of different monologues that resonate a similar theme are compiled in the

² Lodge, D. *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*. London: Routledge, 1990.

³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, ‘Discourse in the Novel’. In *the Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin: University of Texas Press." *The Discourse Studies Reader* (2014): 324

⁴ Robinson, Andrew, ‘In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia’ *Ceasefire Magazine*, (2011)

<https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/> (accessed November 11, 2022)

most meticulous manner possible to capture the reader's attention towards matters of great concern in contemporary times.

Carl Emerson, an American literary critic, slavist and translator, defines polyphony as "a decentred authorial stance that grants validity to all voices."⁵ She has translated some of Bakhtin's most influential works, including *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. Milan Kundera, the Czech writer who was in exile for satirising the communist system is also known for his polyphonic writing technique. "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" is a notable polyphonic work which he had published in 1984 about a Czech doctor; a philanderer who later encounters a woman who is against polygamy. Kundera believes that polyphony extends the readers' foresight by producing reverberations and interactions among a series of lives that no individual is in a position to capture. His polyphonic novels postulate this mode of visualising, what he calls a 'supra-personal wisdom.' Svetlana Alexievich is one of those writers who believed in creating a platform for the voices of victims and survivors who had witnessed cataclysm at its pinnacle. Her works are not designed with an intent to entertain or amuse but rather aim at persuading the reader to contemplate on worldly knowledge that are of greater trepidation.

Bakhtin's polyphonic insights surface during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a result of his compassion humans and their feelings. He revered individual personality and significance and thus believed that every human is capable of making one's own voice heard. Polyphonic theory of Alexievich, aims at conveying first-hand messages from people who have been a part of the episode, thus enabling a connect that is intense in comparison to the historical books which contradictorily glorify; and at times camouflage the goriness involved in the actual event. Bakhtin describes this genre while analysing Dostoevsky's novels as, "a

⁵ Filosofia: An Encyclopedia of Russian Thought Online, s.v. 'Mikhail Bakhtin' <https://filosofia.dickinson.edu/?s=publisher> (accessed December 4, 2022)

plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices"⁶

Alexievich's works were influenced by Ales Adamovich who is well-known for *The Khatyn Story* and *The Blockade Book*. He earned his reputation for his ascetic yet genuinely humane anti-war stance, fortitude and integrity. Adamovich travelled around Belarus with documentary film makers to record survivors' testimonies. Alexievich also travelled extensively to record the oral testimonies of survivors. On her website titled "Voices of Utopia", Alexievich has posted:

I've been searching for a genre that would be most adequate to my vision of the world to convey how my ear hears and my eyes see life. I tried this and that and finally I chose a genre where human voices speak for themselves.... But I don't just record a dry history of events and facts, I'm writing a history of human feelings. What people thought, understood and remembered during the event.⁷

Valzhyna Mort, Belarusian Poet and Essayist, stated that:

Literature of documents is not new, but in Belarus, where documents either have been burned or remain under lock and key in the state archives, the only available document is the voice of a survivor. This voice is the narrator of a new literary genre that Adamovich will call "super literature": a voice document, a face document.⁸

In her Nobel lecture, Alexievich makes a reference to Flaubert: "Flaubert called himself a human pen; I would say that I am a human ear." Gustave Flaubert, author of *Madame Bovary*, is a French novelist and exponent of realist fiction. He asserts the exclusion of

⁶ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6–7.

⁷ Alexievich, 'S. Svetlana Alexievich – Voices from Big Utopia: Alexievich.info' <http://alexievich.info/en/>.

⁸ Mort, V, 'Read and See: Ales Adamovich and Literature out of Fire' <https://english.cornell.edu/news/read-and-see-ales-adamovich-and-literature-out-fire>.

authorial judgment and didactic moralising for the sake of pure style; thus, being recognised as the master of “Art for Art’s Sake”. Adamovich in a similar strain demotes the writer from his godlike position. Valzhyna Mort adds on to it by declaring that, “After World War II, there cannot be any omnipotent puppet master writing Belarusian war prose. No characters, either: real people, survivors and witnesses, speak for themselves. Their voices move in the chaos and darkness of history. Adamovich’s super-literature has no single author, no single protagonist.”⁹ Alexievich’s works are mostly in the form of Monologues than run to a few pages and is written based on thousands of interviews conducted personally by the author with men, women and children who survived catastrophes of various kinds. At first it was challenging for Alexievich because not all were cooperative when she approached them to discuss her proposal. She was scorned at and verbally abused by several victims who accused her for trying to benefit from their personal grievances. However, Alexievich was determined to bring to light the atrocities of manmade cataclysms that caused widespread demoralization. Artyom Borovik was another contemporary investigative journalist who wrote about war and its perturbing consequences, but his work were more autobiographical as he shared his experience of what he witnessed on the battlefield, whereas, Alexievich’s works are solely based on true accounts of others who had been affected by war and disaster.

The Unwomanly Face of War (1985) is Alexievich’s debut novel about Soviet women who fought on the front lines, on the home front, and in the occupied territories. These women had indeed proved their abilities as nurses, doctors, pilots, tank drivers, machine-guns, and snipers. They battled equally alongside men, and yet, after the victory, their efforts and sacrifices were forgotten. Through this book, the author establishes a bond with her interlocutors, who reveal all their shocking experiences in a realistic manner. Initially, what seems like the banality of the headline begins to sound like an allegation as one reads

⁹ Ibid., note 8

further. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida created the Deconstruction Theory which aims to obliterate such boundaries between binary oppositions like masculine and feminine which Alexievich features in *The Unwomanly Face of War*. Alexievich travelled thousands of miles and visited more than a hundred towns to record these women's stories; and created a symphony of voices that revealed different aspects of the war, focusing on the details often disregarded by the official historians.

Zinky Boys (1989) is another anthology of statements about the Soviet-Afghan war collected by Alexievich over a period of four years. Her passion to give voice to the traumatised populace, made her travel to Afghanistan as an initiative to record testimonies about the fretfulness that skulked in all the families with maturing sons who would often return in coffins made of zinc; and hence the title *Zinky Boys* was chosen by the author. Alexievich brings to light the perpetual fear which disrupted the peace of millions during the Soviet-Afghan War that lasted over nine years, from December 1979 to February 1989. In *Enchanted with Death* (1993) she draws attention towards the suicidal tendency that spiralled in great figures among people who had given up on the quintessence of life after a drastic change in the social order. Communist ideologies developed into almost an obsession that made it impossible for some who could not adopt the new world order after the downfall of the Soviet Union. Similar to Alexievich's other books, this work also features the psyche and trauma of a Soviet people and nation through distinctive recollections. Her attempt to give a voice to an entire Soviet society that has struggled to make sense of the massive disruption it experienced during the 20th century is remarkable.

Chernobyl Prayer (1997) is a series of monologues which highlights the permanent impediment caused in the psyche of people who suffered during the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, in 1986. Human civilization witnessed repercussions of the nuclear spill for generations together irrespective of gender, creed or age. *Chernobyl Prayer* is an honest

revelation of the sad side of the entire mishap narrated by people whose lives were permanently marred and was thus published in several other languages such as Ukrainian, Swedish, German, Japanese and English. The impact of this disaster was not a superficial event of the atomic era but rather a cause for concern in a power-hungry world.

In Alexievich's last published book *Second-hand Time* (2013) she explores the dissolution of the USSR. She gives voice to those who survived the crisis but, have become second-rate people. Despite being written in the genre of investigative journalism, it is a compilation of oral histories about the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new Russia. The book reveals the demise of communism as millions of Russian citizens recount the past thirty years, describing life during the fall of the Soviet Union and what it is like to live in the new Russia left in its wake. Her interviews spanning from 1991 to 2012, takes us behind the propaganda and contrived media accounts, giving us a panoramic portrait of contemporary Russia and Russians who still carry memories of coercion, trepidation, famine, genocides and at the same time are trying to build a Utopian environment for the forthcoming generation. However, Russia's recent bombing at Ukraine shook the world and heralded a possibility of World War III. Alexievich projected the adverse effects of war in her works which make more sense in the contemporary era.

Dostoevsky & Gogol: Texts and Criticism, written by Priscilla Meyer and Stephen Rudyi, analyses the significance of dialogism and heteroglossia used by these eminent Russian writers. Dialogism identifies the multiplicity of voices. It is also referred to as 'double-voiced' or 'multi-voiced' This makes dialogical works a lot more objective and realistic, since they do not subordinate reality to the ideology of the author. Much like Gogol and Dostoevsky, Alexievich also allows her readers to exercise judgments and to cull what they perceive from the presented truth. Nothing is imposed by the author in any of her books. The text appears as an interaction of distinct perceptions borne by different characters. Each

character has their own final word, without disintegrating the cohesion with regards to what other characters narrate. The characters are able to speak for themselves and the role of the author is fundamentally changed, because the author can no longer influence the readers to believe in any specific elucidation of the discourse. The sequencing of multiple voices with interrelated emotions enables precise comprehension of Alexievich's writing. Alexievich was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade (2013) and the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (2014) for her *Second-Hand Time* which was conceivably her gateway to be selected for the Nobel Prize; "For her polyphonic writing, a monument to suffering and courage in our time," says the Swedish Academy's official announcement.

Alexievich incorporates the polyphonic narrative technique and takes a passive, yet powerful stance, in her collection of monologues, to depict the reality of unsung heroes and innocent war victims. She relinquishes monologic control over the work and allows the characters to interact in their own terms; which are attributes of polyphonic authorship. Trauma, anxiety, depression, cataclysm and demoralization caused by war and disaster are permanent impediments caused in people who have survived the catastrophe. These are exacerbations which add on to external injuries and mutilations. Every page in her work is a voice of anguish forcing the reader to empathise with those who had witnessed the massacre of an entire community as a result of totalitarianism and autocracy. Super-realism is a key feature implemented in her writing style to describe the ramifications of traumatising historical episodes; allowing the audience to reconsider the futility of war and human made destructive inventions. Her courage, determination and indefatigable spirit to provide an opportunity for the oppressed to voice out their sufferings is implausible. Every author has a purpose to write and Alexievich's purpose was to persuade readers to desist the glorification of war and chemical research which causes more harm than benefit to civilization. Despite patriarchal suppression that expects women to confine their writing to predominant themes

associated with domestic life, romance and personal accords in a lighter vein, a few bold women like Alexievich have volunteered to bring to light the horrors associated with war and disaster. Alexievich's success and recognition as a Nobel laureate is primarily for her polyphonic writing style which is a result of the arduous task of interviewing several hundred victims with a purpose which she explains in her own words:

But I don't just record a dry history of events and facts, I'm writing a history of human feelings. What people thought, understood and remembered during the event. What they believed in or mistrusted, what illusions, hopes and fears they experienced. This is impossible to imagine or invent, at any rate in such multitude of real details. We quickly forget what we were like ten or twenty or fifty years ago. Sometimes we are ashamed of our past and refuse to believe in what happened to us in actual fact. Art may lie but a document never does. Although the document is also a product of someone's will and passion. I compose my books out of thousands of voices, destinies, fragments of our life and being.¹⁰

In an exclusive interview upon publishing her book *Red Encyclopedia* which is about her definition of love and freedom, she was asked about taking an invisible stand to give voice to others in her books. Alexievich makes her intentions clear by stating,

In my books, real people narrate the main events of their times—war, the disintegration of the socialist empire, Chernobyl—all of which taken together is the history that they leave behind in words, the country's general history. Both old and new. Each is a history of one small, human destiny. All of history misses out on the history of the soul. Human passions are so often not included in history.

¹⁰ Alexievich, S. "A Search for Eternal Man: In Lieu of Biography" *Svetlana Alexievich – Voices from Big Utopia*. Alexievich.info. Retrieved 25 November 2022, <http://alexievich.info/en/>.

My task is to hold them back from the darkness of disappearance and, most importantly, not to think up anything but to listen and hear about how people thought at a particular time, in a concrete situation, that is, during my time, the time that I had witnessed.¹¹

Polyphonic authorship is a difficult accomplishment as it requires unbiased and unopinionated observations of the characters involved. Very few authors exhibit such fortitude of refraining from thrusting their views on readers. Alexievich is one such author who has succeeded in mastering this skill of maintaining a neutral stance and doing complete justice to the art of polyphonic writing.

¹¹ Kuruvilla, Elizabeth. "Svetlana Alexievich: A History of the Soul." *Mint*, 11 Nov. 2016, www.livemint.com/Leisure/GznB9e1h8vHmt64iGgolVO/Svetlana-Alexievich-A-history-of-the-soul.html.

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