

# Testimonial Narratives from Soviet Russia : Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time*

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## Abstract

The contemporary world can no longer be holistically understood in terms of any singular specific 'the history'. The hegemony of a single axis constricted account of history is either being progressively augmented or being dismantled. History is now a compilation of individuated, subjective histories stretched upon time and place. We cannot afford to be concerned only with factual aspects, the human element; the experiencing self is the new epicentre and not just the narrating self. These two are strategically intertwined in *Second-Hand Time*. Nobel Prize awardees Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time* is a compilation of first hand experiences of the participants and the witnesses of the significant and turbulent events in the annals of USSR. It is structured like a collective memoir recording the 'history of soul'. The paper is an attempt to study how the writer moves beyond the facts and probes into the emotions, blurring the lines between history and literature, memoir and ethnography, personal and public. The paper seeks to explore if this hybrid genre is more relevant for understanding of the past and the present as its consequence.

**Keywords-** Collective Memory; History; Testimonial Narrative.

Literature conveys irrefutable condensed experience in yet another invaluable direction; namely, from generation to generation. In this way literature becomes the living memory of a nation. Thus it preserves and kindles within itself the flame of her spent history, in a form which is safe from deformation and slander. In this way literature, together with language, protects the soul of the nation.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

## Introduction

The contemporary world can no longer be holistically understood in terms

of any singular specific 'the history'. The hegemony of a single axis constricted account of history is either being progressively augmented or being dismantled. History needs to be read again as an assemblage of individuated, subjective histories stretched upon time and place. We cannot afford to be concerned only with factual aspects, the human element; the experiencing self is the new epicenter of the narratives. The accounts of the victims and witnesses, of the shared history of tortures and brutal sufferings present a singular perspective into the past and thereby provide a newer understanding of a nation's identity. Belarusian Nobel Prize award-ee Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time* is a compilation of first hand experiences of the participants and the witnesses of the significant and turbulent events in the annals of Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, particularly the years after its dissolution (1991-2012). It is structured like a collective memoir and unlike a regular historical account it is as Sara Danius, Permanent Secretary of Swedish Academy said, "a history of emotions- a history of soul". The following pages are an attempt to study how the writer moves beyond the facts and probes into the emotions, blurring the lines between history and literature, memoir and ethnography, personal and public? How memory impacts the construction of not only the past but in the process present as well?

### **Memory and History**

The historical interpretations of a nation arise out of a continuous significant dialogue between collective memory and individual memory. The word interpretation suggests the vulnerability of history to power and presentations and how it is repetitively constructed. As Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Dawn of Day* says, "All things are subject to interpretation whichever interpretation prevails at a given time is a function of power and not truth". The existing milieu of the world, on the threshold of violence at various hierarchical levels, necessitates the need for humanized perspectives of the past. There is an urgent and incessant probing into the abysses of memories to reconstruct the past. Memory is an important source of history, both collective and individual. By and large, it is the former which transforms into an established version, while the latter is mostly passed on as an oral history from generation to generation or cherished in form of letters, diaries or journals. Nevertheless, both are important in a holistic understanding of the past as memory is a major factor in framing our responses to the identity question, Who am I?

Collective Memory as coined by Maurice Halbwachs refers to a shared set of assorted and associated knowledge and information in the memories

of a group connected with some common filament, while, personal memory is an individual's retention of the experience of being part of the actual event. Collective memories are substantiated by *lieux de memoire* that is sites of memories which historian Pierre Nora defines as,

significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.

Memory can be positioned in a place, an object or idea, for instance by erecting memorials, celebrating days, building museums. The localization of memory is necessitated by the fact that memory is subject to external variables and thus tends to turn unreliable. Like these sites of memories, human body can also be recognized as a *lieux de memoire*, as it embodies the memory of its lived realities. But then it is not always easy to impart, transmit or express the experiences into words as the social positioning and creativity of the subject becomes the decisive factor. This justifies the foray of journalism into literature and also the vogue of hybrid genres that take into account testimonial narratives, history, ethnography among others.

### **History and Literature**

Collective or the communal memory constitutes the popularly known and accepted history while individuated memories forms the crux of literature. The understanding of the association between the two may be traced back to Aristotle, who asserted in the ninth chapter of his *Poetics* that both history and poetry basically are concerned with human lives, the difference being one is written in prose and other in the verse form. Moreover, a historian refers to things that have happened, analyzing and commenting while a poet tends to look at the prospective, idealized world, "but such as might have happened, and such things as are possible according to probability, or which would necessarily have happened." (Aristotle). Indeed, the journey of a nation across time and space is postulated by history but it is literature that attaches meaning to an experience creating a living memory via narratives. History records the past, representing it in plurality and thus mostly leaves the singularity of experiences unexplored, in contrast literature recreates the matrix of an era or event by focusing on individual's lived, shared realities. Literature is essential for a holistic understanding of past as mere distanced historical records are not sufficient, like author Amy Harmon says, "literature makes history come to life". Irrespective of the cadences that literature provides to history, it

cannot be denied that if every individual creates his own version of history through his memories and perceptions, we will have a variegated chaotic compilation in form of chronicles of past. Thus it becomes imperative to have central points of reference located in tempo-spatial intersection of past in order to avoid sham digression from the recorded annals. The association between history and literature is profound and needs to be explored through various narrative strategies, to provide an enhanced understanding of the past.

### **Testimonial Narratives**

Whether its history or narrative, "writing the past is never a neutral act, writing always asks the past to justify itself" (Aciman, Andre). The process of writing invariably suggests the presence of an agency, of a subject whose negotiable positioning makes the process selective and the conclusion subjective. The writer writes from a hegemonic position pervading culture, nation, education, religion, law and literature [i.e. power positions permeates the act of writing the present as history for the progeny and in the same way effects the treatment of history in present). This was significantly articulated by Michel Foucault, as he explored the rheostatic relation between Power and Knowledge, *pouvoir-savoir*, asserting that one cannot be understood without the other as dissemination and understanding of knowledge is within the structures of power and vice versa. This complicates and challenges the established or popular acceptance of history and thus proposes the presence of parallel histories denying any single axis record of history. The proliferation of analogous approach towards history explains the contemporary need to restructure the past with the singular experiences as the central point of perspective. The aim is to create a mosaic of history with individuated experience, a larger picture with small pieces, promoting a consistent dialogue between past and present at the juncture of contradictory discourses.

Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time* can be positioned at the intersection of literature and anthropology, memoir and oral history, past and present. The writer has created retrospective prose narratives through the intrusive memory of the victims, disrupting linearity both temporal and spatial. *Second-Hand Time* can be perceived as a collection of distinct minuscule biographies of soviets, conjoined together by single common link which is rooted in their identity, their shared history of filiations and affiliations with communism. As a collection of narratives of sufferings and predicaments of the victims and witnesses it can be categorized as testimonial literature where the victims relate their personal experienc-

es to a narrator, who gives them a voice transcribing their experience into first person narratives.

Testimonial literature stands independent of the historiography which depends on records of data and evidence. It consists of the overlooked individual incidences that give a whole new dimension to the prevalent account of the past. In this way the narrative of a testimony and history can be distinguished as incidental and evidential, respectively. The complexities of one (evidential history) is solved in the other (incidental testimonial), whether in form of ethnographic collection of variegated narratives or a single biography or autobiography emerging out of the peripheries. In any form, a testimonial narrative functions like a supplementary history, which moderates the reader's perceptions. The compassionate narrative is written as if being shared with and revealed to an accomplice and with an aim to tap the human element amidst the larger tragedies. The concurrent need to read other person's grief is not just a need to know the past rather it reflects the basic urge to listen/read about the tragic fate of others and this is fearfully intriguing. But on the same hand the process has a significant cathartic effect on the psyche of the listener/reader.

The word testimony is taken from the Latin word *testis* which means 'a witness', derivatively testimonial narratives are accounts of the witnesses be they of self or others. It is a key genre in Latin American literature and was popularized by biographical accounts of slaves. Writer John Beverly defines *testimonio* as:

A novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet [that is printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or significant life experience (12-13).

*Second-Hand Time* is a collection of such significant life experiences that had drastic effect on the identity construction of individuals and through them of the whole nation, here, Russia. As the author confesses in the preface titled 'Remarks from an Accomplice', "In writing, I'm piecing together the history... As it existed in a person's soul." (24). The title *Second-Hand Time* implies a version of time which departs from the accepted norm, it can refer to used time, or the time that is denoted by the second hand of a clock, moving swiftly or perhaps that the time is repeating itself. These notions of time reflect the history of Soviet Russia wherein

the citizens were juggled from one system of belief to another resulting in an unending plight.

Alexievich's work is an assemblage of testimonies that reiterates the experiences of the cheated, the oppressed, and the displaced soviets who were "fidgeted" from one ideology to another leaving them perplexed about identity and deeply wounded both psychologically and physically. The violence at various levels incapacitates the sufferer to form any narrative of the agonies, "the destruction of the self at the root of violence makes the narrative nearly impossible by definition" (Culbertson, 191). It is aptly said once a victim always a victim, the torture is retained forever and inscribed in the memories. It is not easy to move away from the past and its repercussions, as the experienced self is constantly being transported to bear the witness of what it was a victim. The course of retelling of a lived reality has prospective healing qualities. In the testimonies, the narrators do not impart their story for the sake of personalization or to seek distinct stature rather the distressing episodes of their past are entwined with the collective history and are essentially emblematic of their nation's ordeal; thereby the process of retelling connects them to their counterparts and simultaneously has the power of easing the terrible pain.

The narratives in the book are personal little histories of submissions and resistances which are like "the backstairs of Soviet Russian History". These testimonies imply a remarkable relationship with the historical records and functions as proofs of truth in spite of the fact that they are incomplete (though not incoherent or inconsistent) and essentially subjective. The two accounts of the past basically run parallel and are necessary for a "totalizable" chronicle of those events. The book responds to one prevalent truth through many personal truths reiterating Russian version of accommodating different kinds of truth: *istina* and *pravda* i.e. abstract truth and literal facts. The two truths finally add up to create a holistic picture of the past beyond what is already understood.

Testimonial literature is written from the margins and challenges the dominant discourse that permeates the other form of life writing that is autobiography. The shifting of the margins promotes the oral narratives as parallel approach of written and documented history. The orality suggests importance of the narrator as he/she not only conveys the story but also has to become a sympathetic ear that will store all that has been relived. These narratives entail the significance and responsibility of the listener and the relation between the speaker and the listener. It becomes imperative for the listener (here, Alexievich) to not only listen

to the tale/ experience but also realize the speaker's traumatic departure from the past. The listener here has an ethical accountability to reconstruct the victim's experience with compassion and dignity else the work runs the risk of integrating into Journalism. In a chapter titled 'On a Time When Anyone Who Kills Believes That They Are Serving God', story of a 24 year old surveyor, Olga V. feels grateful towards Alexievich she says,

Thank You...Thank you for not being afraid of me. For not turning away like the others. For listening. I don't have any girlfriends here, no boys pursuing me. I talk and I talk...about how they lay their so young and handsome...[ *She has a crazy smile.*] Their eyes open... with their eyes wide open...

*Six months later, I got a letter from her: 'I'm joining a monastery. I want to live. I will pray for everyone.'* (Alexievich, 310)

(The italics are writer's notes). Svetlana Alexievich has honestly carried her human responsibility of bearing witness to and rendering the sensitive accounts of the Soviet sufferers. There are cases when the sufferers, bereaved of faith try to cancel appointment with the writer. The scheduled interview of a mother and daughter duo, (the victims of the terrifying day 6 February 2004, when there was a terrorist attack on Moscow metro), is discouraged by the latter, she says, "Mama, who needs us? They only want our words and feelings, they don't care about us- they haven't been through what we've been through. ..." (429). In this dialogue when the reluctant mother finally started talking, there was no stopping her for the next two hours. In this form of literature it becomes difficult for the narrator to not take sides or feel equally victimized with the incessant flow of variegated emotions, pain, anger, frustration, larger than life faith, betrayal and helplessness. The devolution of distress, transforms the narrator into a character in the narrative, fading the threshold of distinction between the extradiegetic and the metadiegetic narrators. The transference of pain makes the deliverance of the stories questionable and that precisely is the tragedy of the Russian nation where the "Victims and the executioner are equally ignoble" and this helps the writer, retain a balance and realize the psycho-social distance, as in these narratives there is compassion yet a deep gulf, as Alexievich writes,

*I pace and pace the circles of pain, I can't break out of them. Pain has everything: darkness, triumph. Sometimes I think that pain is a bridge between people, a secret connection; other times it seems like an abyss.* (429)

*Second-Hand Time* is situated in the Russian literary tradition of testimonial literature documented via interview and transformed into first person narrative. It is termed as 'novel of voices' by the author herself as it is a polyphony of voices searching for meaning in their past and revealing how the political and ideological upheaval in Russia disrupted and swept away the very core of their existence leaving them drenched in horrible memories or rather nightmares of violence and bloodshed, surrounded by a plethora of questions and with a realization of sheer absurdity of their existence. As a victim tells Alexievich, "everyone else transferred from the train that was hurtling toward Socialism onto the train racing to capitalism. I'm late..." (131)

Through these *istoriya* Alexievich replicates the story of Perestroika, Glasnost, the hopes and illusions of the post - Soviet 1990s, and also presents a few counter narratives which suggest a complex ideological shift wherein the belief and the action does not seem to match, as a witness shares, "They accuse us of fighting for Capitalism. That's not true, I was defending socialism, but not the Soviet Kind". Another witness believes that history written by victors is erroneous about the Soviet Project and is sure that Alexievich will represent the tangible events. In addition to the terrible accounts of the witnesses there is also sarcastic cynicism like the 'Snatch From Street Conversation'. The text is not just about accounts of atrocities, there are also tales of courage, survival, and love, like in 'On the Sweetness of Suffering', 'On Romeo and Juliet...Except Their Names were Margarita and Abulfaz'. The work concludes with an interesting piece, 'Notes From An Everywoman', which talks about the futility of revisiting the past,

what's there to remember? I live the same way as everyone else... the best thing I can remember is Getting Married. We were in love. ... The lilacs in bloom. ...Whether it is socialism or capitalism -it makes no difference. The important thing is to make it to spring. Plant potatoes. (569).

With this narrative, Alexievich seems to present the final statement that as long as the world has hope, love, and compassion, the brutality of the power will be transitory.

Any major ideological shift and the resultant conflicts leave innumerable scars on the psyche of both the nation and its individuals, wherein one is reflective of the other, but the annals of a nation fails to record the traumatic effect on its denizens. *Second-Hand Time* narrates the trau-



matic past of the individuals, it is an inscription of their memories which are though figurative, stays circumferential, as Caruth says, "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess." (18). The contemporary world is enmeshed in a flux of prejudiced and irrelevant information that are often considered authentic. Testimonial narratives have become increasingly significant as they are contextualized and relates to the traumas of modern historical events like the Second World War, the Holocaust, the Russian upheaval whose entirety and drastic corollaries are beyond the human capacity of assimilation and comprehension. These events have changed the course of history forever, they have perpetually impinged upon the thought processes and actions of the human society and have showcased the terrifying potential of individuals to become perpetrators and their immense ability or patience to suffer. Each account of history, personal or public is a mean to caution the human beings to not to repeat the past and to learn from it, as Linda Anderson says,

History is never definitive or finally known, therefore, but is capable of constant alteration as more is remembered or released into consciousness, causing the subject to think both the past and the present differently (Anderson 61).

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