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Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time*: Interpretive, Dialogical Voicing of History

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Abstract

The dominant Western concept of history is a singular, linear collocation of factual reality based on an exclusionary consensus. With the onset of the twentieth century these exclusionary consensual truths were fractured by multiple conflicting and often incompatible narratives. In the twenty-first century, a paradigm shift occurred in the way truth was perceived i.e. 'by what we feel to be true, rather than what we know to be'. In this scenario, writers and artists sought to reconstruct the reality/truth of the multitude in a new language and provide an understanding of what is real. Svetlana Alexievich, the winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature, in Second-Hand Time employs a new literary genre consisting of interviews of ordinary citizens of the former Soviet republic which covers the period 1991 to 2012. This non-fiction volume contains reminiscences of a cross-section of men and women articulating their subjective history which is often lost in the official histories. *Second-Hand Time* provides a powerful critique of the Soviet and post-Soviet socio-political structure and renegotiates the relationship between personal and social history. It proceeds contrapuntally and evokes sound, hearing and simultaneity and new modes of dialogical authority. The objective of the text is the unearthing of individual experiential history and re-memorying of the past by individuals within the critical framework of subjectivity and subject formation, and recreation of history through a dialogical mode. The text, thus, becomes a space for the mingling of voices from the periphery and the official mainstream. It conveys the message that reality or truth needed to be reconstructed from the ground up with a new narrative paradigm. Her text adopts a new literary form, a hybrid form of reportage and oral history, to convey the reality from the ground up. These personal histories, recollected and re-interpreted, are a compelling narration of lived history through multiple and, sometimes, conflicting perspectives which creates a dialogic ecology of knowledge.

Keywords: Dialogical voice; History; Lived experience; Memory.

Introduction

Oral History as a form is dialogic and participatory in nature which makes it a suitable space for the accommodation of multiple points of view. The knowledge of the past is a considerable cultural resource and extracting it from multiple perspectives involving the history of the group and, also, the lives of the profiled individuals have given voice to a substantial group of people who had been silenced or people who do not write. People who do not have the power of the written word, do not leave behind documented history. Beginning in the mid twentieth century, oral historians, anthropologists and folklorists talked to these people who did not write and documented their life stories resulting in an inclusive, dialogical and interpretative shared history.

Michael Frisch in *A Shared Authority* states that oral history is a 'powerful tool for discovering exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory – how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them'. (188) Documentation of oral history as a phenomenon in the 21st century owes its intellectual roots to postmodernism and relativism where everything is relative. Jean Francois Lyotard in his famous definition of postmodernism states that it is simply 'incredulity towards metanarratives'(Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv.intro) In other words, 'metanarratives' are really illusions, fostered in order to smother difference, opposition and plurality. Postmodernism, in the words of Peter Barry, can best be simplified as 'a series of "mininarratives" which are provisional, contingent, temporary and relative and which provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances.'(87) It deconstructs the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject.

According to the French postmodernists, there was no such thing as truth and objectivity, only power and interests. One's version of truth is only a slice of the larger discourse dependant on one's ideology, identity, and positionality in the societal structure. In contemporary times when duplicitous notion of the truth seems to be shared by many powerful leaders, truth itself seems to be everywhere under attack. When faced with such compelling circumstances the onus lay with the writers, thinkers and artists to rebuild the public's belief in argument from factual evidence, to construct between them and the public an understanding about what is real. The winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature, Svetlana Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time* is one text which attempts, in this time of radical

disagreement, at articulating reality through a new perspective. It conveys the message that reality or truth needed to be reconstructed from the ground up with a new narrative paradigm. Alexievich gives us subjective accounts of lives of ordinary Russians and former Soviets during the time of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 to its aftermath till 2012. The text is a patchwork of personal interviews of a cross-section of Russians who were witness to the Stalin-era legacy, the collapse of the USSR and the chaos of the aftermath. Her text adopts a new literary form, a hybrid form of reportage and oral history, to convey the reality from the ground up. Alexievich's narrative captures the voice of the bypassed subalterns who are usually omitted from the historical discourse and, thus, shifts the focus to individualistic experiential history.

Dialogical Voicing of Experiential History

Second-Hand Time begins with a chapter titled **Chronology** which chronicles the linear unfolding of historical events from 1953, starting with the death of Josef Stalin on 5th March 1953, to a day on February 2015 when Boris Nemtsov, a leading figure in the democratic movement since the 1990s, is shot dead in Moscow near the Kremlin. Section I contains a chapter titled 'The Consolation of Apocalypse, Snatches of Street Noise and Kitchen Conversations (1991-2001)' which captures the socio-political life of the Soviets before the fall of the USSR in 1991 to 2001 through brief snippets of private conversations between ordinary citizens. Then, the chapter titled 'Ten Stories in a Red Interior' contains the personal histories of people, living or dead, narrated by themselves or their nearest kin. Section II contains a chapter titled 'The Charms of Emptiness, Snatches of Street Noise and Kitchen Conversations (2002 – 2012)' which depicts the post-Soviet Russian society from 2002 to 2012 through a first person narratorial point of view of multiple narrators as subjective witness. The chapter titled 'Ten Stories in the Absence of an Interior' is a documentation of the orally rendered personal histories of individuals from 2002 to 2012. These personal histories are a compelling narration of lived history through multiple and, sometimes, conflicting perspectives which creates a dialogic ecology of knowledge.

In the Chapter titled 'On the Beauty of Dictatorship and the Mystery of Butterflies Crushed Against the Pavement' of Section I, Alexievich's narratorial voice introduces Elena Yurievna S., third secretary of the district Party committee and Anna Ilyinichna M., both childhood friends but on opposite poles of the political divide:

> …Their stories had nothing in common except for the significant proper nouns: Gorbachev, Yelstin. But each of them had her own Gorbachev and her own Yelstin. And her own version of the nineties.
>
> (Alexievich, 65)

Documenting the lives of those invisible subjects who have been overlooked in historical discourse of the past has led to the unearthing of buried experiential narratives and has renewed focus on experiences from the periphery usually considered as inessential in mainstream histories. It has reinforced the position that histories are written from ideologically inflected standpoints of which no one is completely "true". Its challenge to mainstream history rests on its claim to "real" and "true" subjective experience – anecdotal experience of 'Others' – and also the experience of the documenting agent/ historian who learns to see and portray the lives of these 'Others' in her text. Elena Yurievna S., third secretary of the district Party committee recounts her 'experience' during the Soviet period and after the collapse of USSR, and her life narration depicts the naïve idealism of the common people including junior Party officials:

> Is it already time to tell the story of socialism? To whom? Everyone around is still a witness…
>
> (Alexievich, 65)
>
> The plants and factories were divvied up without them. Along with the oil and the natural gas – everything that came to us, as they say, from God. But they have only just understood. Back in 1991, everyone was joining the revolution. Going off to the barricades. They wanted freedom, and what did they get? Yelstin's gangster revolution… My friend's son was almost killed for his socialist views. 'Communist' has become an insult…
>
> (Alexievich, 66)
>
> …Bite your tongue! The Soviet was a very good person, capable of travelling beyond the Urals, into the furthest deserts, all for the sake of ideals, not dollars…
>
> I was born Soviet…My grandmother did not believe in God, but she did believe in communism. Until his dying day, my father waited for socialism to return. The Berlin Wall had fallen, the So-

> viet Union was crumbling, but he clung to his hope. He stopped talking to his best friend because he had called the flag a red flag. Our red flag!...
>
> (Alexievich, 67)

In between snippets of her recollection appears disruptive memory of her father's exile to Vorkuta, situated just north of the Arctic Circle. Her father fought in the Russo-Finnish War which was called the 'Finnish campaign' by the Soviet government. Her father was taken as a prisoner of war by the Finns and was alive because he had outstretched his hand to the enemy to be rescued which was against Soviet army training. 'Many of them wouldn't accept any help from the enemy. That is how they had been trained.' (Alexievich, 68) When the Finnish campaign ended in 1940 her father, Ivan, was among the Soviet war prisoners exchanged for the Finn prisoners. Her father told them that the returning Finns were greeted with hugs and handshakes by their compatriots but the Soviet soldiers were immediately rounded up by their fellow soldiers with German Shepherds and sent to interrogation camps,

> The interrogations began…'How were you taken prisoner?' the interrogator asked my father. 'The Finns pulled me out of a lake.' 'You traitor! You were saving your own skin instead of the Motherland.' My father also considered himself guilty. That's how they had been trained… There was no trial. They marched everyone out on the squad and read the entire division their sentence: six years in the camps for betraying the Motherland. Then they shipped them off to Vorkuta to build a railway over the permafr ost…
>
> (Alexievich,69)

Elena Yurievna's father was sentenced to six years in a penal colony and his confinement under extreme harsh conditions led him to lose his mental faculties. The bare essentials provided to him were thin gruel three times a day and a loaf of bread to be divided among twenty-five men. In minus freezing temperature they did not have the luxury of even a mattress but a wooden plank as bed and a log as pillow. The facts of history, hereby, are the subjective experiences of individuals – individual experiences which collectively become part of history. Now, when questions arise about the constructed nature of experience or denying experience as uncontestable evidence, then, the thrust of the above premise is weakened. What Alexievich's text does is to step beyond appealing to experience as uncontestable

evidence by examining those assumptions and practices that exclude considerations of marginalization in the first place. In the process of making experience visible Alexievich also critically examines the workings of the mainstream ideological system itself, its categories of representation and its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate and their historicity. For this project, Alexievich encapsulates "experience" as bonded by external influence and subjective feeling, thus, mediating between social structure, social consciousness and individual consciousness. Through Elena Yurievna's life narration, Alexievich emphasises that experience can not only be affective and symbolic but also economic and rational. She narrates that as a young Soviet girl she enrolled herself in the Young Pioneer group voluntarily, nobody coerced her to into joining. It was the socialist idealism of a better and egalitarian world that was the driving force for youngsters to march together to drums and horns and participate in the nation building process. When she was offered the post of the Third Secretary of the District Party Committee she was at first overawed by the enormity of the responsibility but she did not demur. She accepted the challenge as her desire to serve the Party prevailed over everything else. The idealism of the common masses during the Soviet era becomes obvious when she states:

> …My father said, 'None of us will ever come asking you for favours. You need to have a clean conscience before the people.'
>
> (Alexievich, 79)

Elena Yurievna's damning account of surveillance by the state machinery is an admission straight from the horse's mouth. She vividly recounts that during the Soviet era every phone was tapped/ under surveillance by the official machinery. It was common knowledge that if one wanted to share a secret one had to step two or three metres away from the phone. People reported against each other from top to bottom and was, infact, encouraged by the surveillance machinery of the government.

Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time*, thus, explores how silencing is established, how it operates, how, and, in what ways, it constitutes subjects who see and act in a specific mode. Narrating her shocking experiences with reality during her stint as Director of the District Committee on the Rehabilitation of the Victims of Political Repressions during Gorbachev's time Elena Yurievna states, 'At night, I would sit there and read them, going through volumes of these documents. To be perfectly honest… honestly… it made my hair stand on end. Brother informed on brother, neighbour on neigh-

bour… because they had gotten into an argument about their vegetable patch, or over a room in the communal apartment.' (98) Elena narrates one incident where a police van showed up one fine day and arrested a woman who had a five-year-old daughter and who lived in a communal apartment. A communal apartment, during Soviet times, was an apartment where five families had one room each with one sharing kitchen and bathroom. When this mother was taken away by the police she begged her neighbour Anya, a single woman, to take care of her daughter and not let her daughter be sent to an orphanage. The neighbour took care of the woman's daughter. The young girl started calling her neighbour Mama Anya and seventeen years later when the real mother returned, she kissed her neighbour's hands and feet in gratitude for taking care of her daughter. When Gorbachev came to power, the unsealing of the archives of political prisoners happened and when this lady wanted to see her file, she saw that the very first page contained the informant's report. The report had a familiar handwriting, 'it was her neighbour's, Mama Anya's… She'd been the one who'd informed on her… Do you understand any of this? I don't. And that woman couldn't, either. She went home and hanged herself. [*Silence*]' (98)

It so transpires that Mama Anya was the one who had snitched on the single mother with a daughter, and this incident demonstrates how the state machinery preyed on petty jealousies and greed of the citizens to spy on one another and the havoc it created in the lives of so many innocents. Elena's narrative can be interpreted as a disruptive intervention under the guise of a defence of Communism, as she had covertly hinted, before the narration of this case, at snitching for petty jealousies that destroyed lives and which the Soviet administration preyed upon.. It was made possible by the fact that people lived in shared government accommodation called communal apartments whereby each family was allotted a room with a common kitchen and bathroom. Sometimes five families shared the communal apartment whereby twenty-seven people in total lived in the communal apartment. She reveals an incident (hinting at the Mama Anya case) whereby the neighbours were friends with one of them being the mother of a five-year- old daughter and the other one being single. Two members in a household were entitled to a larger room of twenty-five square metres while single people were allotted a ten square metre room. She comments matter-of-factly that it was common for people with a ten square metre room to envy the ones with a twenty-five square metre room. Also, people in communal apartments spied and listened in to the conversations of their neighbour's. The hint here is that Mama Anya despite sharing a cordial relationship with her neighbour envied the larger room allotted to her

as she had a daughter and reported some concocted lies to the Soviet machinery against her. The result is that her neighbour is locked up in prison. She adopts the daughter of her neighbour and, thus, becomes entitled to a larger room or, infact, was allotted the larger room of her neighbour. Elena's narrative encapsulates how people bartered their humanity for petty benefits and the predatorial Soviet administration preyed upon it.

Elena recollects the fate of her party comrades after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and narrates that one of their

> Party instructors killed himself… The Director of the Party bureau had a nervous breakdown and spent a long time in the hospital recovering. Some went into business…The second secretary runs a cinema. One district co-mmittee instructor became a priest. I met up with him recently and we talked for a long time. He's living a second life. It made me jealous. I remembered…I was at an art gallery. One of the paintings had all this light in it and a woman standing on a bridge. Gazing off into the distance… There was so much light… I couldn't look away. I'd leave and come back, I was so drawn to it.
>
> (Alexievich, 102)

The last four lines of Elena Yurievna's recollection metaphorically presents her subjective state as a visual experience which subsequently led to her consciousness acknowledging her inner self and accepting her authentic identity. The light in the painting permits the possible fruition of a dream deferred, a dream that contains the fantastic projections of the unknown and untapped subjectivity in the making.

The discourse of history is ideally multiply inflected imbricated language, the belief that words refracted through the prism of experiential difference connotes multiplicity of meanings. Alexievich's text subtly nudges us to not regard history as simple discernible rendering of "official" facts but rather a complex mesh of intertwining experiential history, subjective memory and politico-social structure, not to confine interpretation of words to single meanings. Her text grants the literary an integral and mandatory status of its own. By granting such a status, she opens up new possibilities for taking apart the edifice of historical construction or official history. One can infer that language and experience are both sides of the same coin and to analyse one apart from the other would result in going only half the way, as subjects are also constituted discursively and mul-

tiple meanings are possible through the deployment of linguistic tropes. Subjects are not only independent individuals with agency but also are created through situations and locations conferred on them. In such prevailing conditions they exercise choices which might not be unlimited.

Challenging Official/ State History

The coming into being of a subject is both a conscious and a coercive process and experience can be both an individual's history and community's history; and language, both oral and written, is the site where this history is played out. When Elena doubts that Alexievich may edit out her narrative and states, 'I'm sure you're going to get rid of everything I'm saying' (104), she is implying such an idea through her past experiential history and demonstrates the psyche of a subject conditioned by repression and erasure of voice in the official discourse. Alexievich paraphrases her own response and inserts it in the text, '*I promise her that there will be two stories. I want to be a cold-blooded historian, not one who is holding a blazing torch. Let time be the judge. Time is just, but only in the long term – not in the short term. The time we won't live to see, which will be free of our prejudices.*' (104)

Thus, an alternate paradigm for understanding history has been articulated through the re-evaluation and insertion of the constituents of "experience" and "evidence" from the margins and a corrective to the overlooking of peripheral historical experiences through an enlargement of the canvas of history. It claims that the validation of these histories will come only after considerable elapse of time and a certain distancing is achieved for its objective appraisal. Its assumption is that the contemporary historicizing paradigm does not have the necessary wherewithal for placing these alternative histories within the framework of the dominant ideological discourse that supports them.

The personal narratives in the first section were also of Russian intellectuals, Red Army Marshal Sergey Fyodorovich Akhromeyev who committed suicide after the failed 1991 coup, a 14 years old school student who committed suicide, a communist party member, army veteran, a musician, a writer, a surveyor and an architect. These individual subjective histories articulate the betrayal of the great soviet ideal of freedom, equality and opportunity. What comes through is the belief of the older generation in the moral superiority behind the foundation of the USSR as Vasily Petrovich, an old Communist Party member still believed that their era was the greatest period of Russian history and the reason was that it was guided by altruism: 'Nobody lived for himself.'(216) He is critical of the younger

generation who presumed that the Soviet era were terrifying years and he assumes that this was due to the fact that they read about it only in books. He states, 'but I lived through them! That's where I come from. I'm a man of my era.'(217) The utopian idealism of the ordinary members of the Communist members is apparent when he states, 'We wanted to create Heaven on Earth. It's a beautiful but impossible dream, man is not ready for it. He is not yet perfect enough…'(217) The naïve idealism of the former Communist party member makes the plot more tragic.

These experiential histories of the common people make visible the affective import of erasure and denial of voice on the psyche of the silenced and gradually lead to an understanding of the fact that it is also constituted relationally. Thus, in attending to the historical process, Alexievich demonstrates that it is not only individuals who have experience but also how subjects are constituted through experience. Her text takes into account the processes of subject formation and examines the relationship between official discourse, subjective experience and the tentative nature of reality. Most importantly, the relevance of the position and location of the subject within the social milieu determines the knowledge they produce and how the specificity of their subject position defines the knowledge that they arrive at.

But despite the bravado of these old communists, the narratives of the others are a testimony to the violent repression that was rampant during the Soviet regime which did not even spare loyal communist followers and army veterans. The narration of the nightmarish ordeals of those exiled to Siberian camps on grounds of mere suspicion, the suicide committed by a young teenage boy and the culture of snitching on family and friends encouraged by the KGB (the Soviet secret service) creates the image of a dystopian world taking over the envisaged Soviet utopia. These personal histories are interventions against the dominant discourse and seem, in this time of radical disagreement, like a choric multitude indicting the oppressive nature of official history. This kind of historicizing implies a critical scrutiny of all knowledge usually taken for granted even including knowledge gained through experience.

Section II depicts post-communist Russia and the chaos created by capitalism and the nationalist movements in the different states of the former USSR. The revolution that brought about the downfall of Soviet Russia also did not live up to its expectations. It was merely one set of exploiters being replaced by a new set with new values. The narrative of Ludmila's daughter narrates the ordeal of being evicted from their three-bedroom

apartment by the property mafia, of being laid off work despite having a Bachelor with honours in technology, having to live on the streets as homeless people, unable to give a burial to their grandmother and sitting at home with her decayed body as they did not have money to pay for her death certificate. The narratives in this section depict a younger generation motivated by materialistic concerns but disillusioned by the poverty and paucity of opportunities. According to Teresa de Lauretis, "Experience is the process by which, for all social beings, subjectivity is constructed. Through that process one places oneself or is placed in social reality and so perceives and comprehends as subjective those relations – material, economic and interpersonal – which are infact social, and, in a larger perspective, historical." (Lauretis, 159)

The Betrayal of the Utopic Dream

Elena's friend Anna Ilinichna was a supporter of Gorbachev and *perestroika* who was a part of the protesters demanding the breakdown of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union. Reliving the moment when the leaders of the Communist Party gave up power in 1991 she recounts, "We won... Gorbachev returned from Foros to an entirely different country. People were walking around the city smiling at one another. We won! That feeling stayed with me for a long time…."(Alexievich,107). This subjective memory elucidates individual historical experience and, also the relationship between past and present, personal memory and collective history, and individual and collective history. It demonstrates a very subjective feeling interconnected with the social context and how the past is used to interpret their lives and their present. It's a matter-of-fact rendition of the exhilaration of having participated towards a utopic ideal in the past and coming to terms with the betrayal of that ideal in the present. Thus, the recollection of a historical experience through subjective memory demonstrates the 'revelatory' power of memory due to temporal distance which allows an individual to gauge things in a fuller perspective as opposed to the present perspective, caught up in living in the present, unaware of what's there before us in the world.

Alexievich's text has accentuated and brought into foci the experiential history of subjects from the periphery and, thus, makes a statement that history does not constitute the bare facts of the official mainstream and exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms in the former Soviet Union and, also, the new Capitalist Russia. Her text makes out a case for history to be dialogic. By writing of the past Communist and present Capitalist Russia, Alexievich seeks to delineate the betrayal of the dreams of the

common Russians by the elites in power and is an attempt to break the coerced public silence. This documentation of subjective experience through a critical retrospective mode dissects and deconstructs the workings of the established ideological system, the lack of mechanism to address subjective experience as a part of history, and the necessity of resisting the status quo.

Conclusion

Alexievich's *Second-Hand Time* is a cooperatively evolved text consisting of multiply inflected individual voices. It is contrapuntal and evocative of living voices and emotions, and employs a novel juxtaposition of journalistic documentary narrative style with subjective historical experiences for context. The objective of the text is the unearthing of silenced voices and re-memorying of the past by individuals embedded within the matrix of politics, history and ideology. It is an attempt to re-write history which is whole with no missing pieces of the puzzle left out and the creation of a narrative that subverts established versions of history. The narrative respects the subjects' past decisions and actions, and illuminate their utopian dreams. *Second-Hand Time* is a significant resource for democratic and peripheral history which enabled subjects to tell their individual stories against the backdrop of epoch making changes in society and in the process wresting agency for their subjective selves and their truths.

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