

CHERNOBYL PRAYER AS LIVED DYSTOPIA: A SIGNIFIER FOR COVID TIMES?

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Abstract

My paper attempts to view Svetlana Alexievich's Chernobyl Prayer as a work that testifies to a dystopian nightmare that was unimaginable, unimagined and yet experienced. The survivors who are interviewed in her work voice the unspeakable and the unanticipated individual aspects of the Chernobyl nuclear explosion disaster of 1986. These experiences range from individual personal tragedy to collective experience which surpassed even the wildest possibilities offered by science fiction or dystopian envisioning. Alexievich's work is an illustration of many familiar features of dystopia, but cannot be said to belong to the genre of dystopian fiction, although it has been argued by scholars that her work reflects the hybrid genre of fictional testimony. Constructed like a Greek tragedy, it contains a series of monologues by individuals who survived Chernobyl to tell their own stories, as well as of those who were rendered voiceless in the immediate aftermath and following years of the catastrophe. Disease, suffering and death being the three most prominent recurring motifs of the lived experience recorded in this work prompt a reading of it that finds parallels within the deeply differentiated experiences of the Covid pandemic. The impulse to refer back to this 'past' catastrophe in order to comprehend the present crisis is not new, and gains significance in terms of there being no closure to the questions that have been raised. The paper attempts to draw out these specifics of comparison, while also contextualising the selected text in the frames of witness literature.

Keywords: catastrophe, pandemic, totalitarianism, testimony, witness literature

It is through the frames of unprecedented catastrophe that the bare facts of the Chernobyl disaster can be revisited at all, in the present times. Chernobyl Prayer begins the work of the reconstruction of this traumatic event with objective factual excerpts from scientific reports, newspapers, magazines and gazettes between 1992 and 2005. Characterised as "the gravest technological catastrophe of the twentieth century" (Alexievich 1), the Chernobyl accident was nevertheless as unexpected when it happened as

it was disastrous. On 26th April 1986, Reactor No 4 of the Chernobyl power plant went out of control, causing a series of blasts which released fifty million curies of radioactivity into the atmosphere, of which 70 percent fell on the small country of Belarus. A primarily agrarian land with a searing World War II history of its own, Belarus lost 485 villages and towns, with 70 remaining buried permanently beneath the earth; 23 percent of its land became contaminated with levels above 1 Ci/km² of caesium-137; 264000 hectares of farmland were withdrawn from cultivation because of the levels of contamination; a quarter of Belarus's forests and more than half of the meadows in the floodplains of the Pripyat, Dnieper and Sozh rivers are located within the radioactive contamination zone. There is an annual increase in the incidence of cancer, child mental retardation, neuropsychiatric disorders and genetic mutations as a result of constant exposure to low-dose radiation. In less than a week after the blasts, high levels of background radiation were reported in Poland, Germany, Austria and Romania on the 29th April; on the 30th in Switzerland and Northern Italy; on 1st and 2nd May in France, Belgium, Netherlands, Great Britain and northern Greece; on 3rd May in Israel, Kuwait and Turkey; gaseous and volatile matter was documented in Japan on 2nd May, on 4th May in China, on 5th May in India and on 5th and 6th May in the US and Canada; in short, it became a global problem (quoted in Alexievich, 1-2). Reactor No 4 still holds in its lead-reinforced concrete centre around 200 tonnes of nuclear material which is partially mixed with graphite and concrete, and nobody really knows what is happening inside the “Shelter Object”(Alexievich 2).

Even more horrific than the actual blasts are the facts of the government action taken at the time to contain the radiation: the sarcophagus that was hastily built over the reactor core using robots and helicopters has, according to current data, 200 square metres of cracks and breaches, with aerosol radioactivity continually leaking through them. Natural phenomena such as the wind, sun and rain if combined with the leaking nuclear material, can set off a chain reaction that will have even more devastating effects than those of 1986 (Alexievich 3). According to Alexievich, many statistics have still not been revealed; some are so outrageous that they are still being kept secret (3). The Soviet government sent 800,000 regular conscripts and reservist clean-up workers to the disaster area, with the average age of the drafted workers being 33, while the conscripts were fresh out of school. According to the Belarussian Ministry of Health, 8553 clean-up workers died between 1990 and 2003 (Alexievich 4). The Soviet government ultimately tried six defendants held guilty of the Chernobyl disaster at the site of the nuclear blasts itself; the maximum sentence levied was ten years of prison, with no outside correspondents present at the trial, and almost no notice taken by local journalists.

The Soviet government's response to the aftermath of the Chernobyl blasts stands as an illustration of Fredric Jameson's comment that Utopia has always been a political issue (Jameson xi). In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, Jameson further observes, “During the Cold War (and in Eastern Europe

immediately after its end) Utopia had become a synonym for Stalinism and had come to designate a program which neglected human frailty and ... betrayed a will to uniformity and “the ideal purity of a perfect system that always had to be imposed by force on its imperfect “and reluctant subjects” (xi). In the specific political context of the 1980s Soviet Union, although Gorbachev had officially announced that the concepts of *glasnost* and *perestroika* would revivify a dying economy, the heavy burden of the Stalinist legacy still dictated the lineaments of State power-structures. This meant a continued and hitherto unquestioned reliance on scientific research and technology which envisioned the Soviet Union as ultimately the foremost superpower in the world. Soviet ideology controlled and manipulated all so-called scientific and technological progress so as to fit into what Jameson has characterised as “the Soviet Utopian imagination” (291). This same imagination which had constructed Chernobyl as one of its prime instruments of future scientific glory, now could not admit its own failure even in the face of the actual disaster. With a denialism that was characteristic of all totalitarian and absolute power regimes, the Soviet government “settled for scapegoats” at a time which called for introspection of a very different kind, when “Modern science itself should have been called to account” (Alexievich 4). The apocalyptic deconstruction of a Soviet Utopia as epitomised by Chernobyl happened through unforeseen catastrophe, even as notions of scientific progress and economic development have been challenged and disrupted by the pandemic in present times. False information as well as the suppression of actual facts was the first line of defence taken up by the Soviet authorities; similar motifs were observable in the early months of the pandemic, when the statistics and news generated at the national and local levels within the country were more part of an alarmist meta-narrative than any move towards containment or public health and safety.

If the Soviet authorities deliberately (even criminally) played down the deadly effects of radiation on the unfortunate clean-up workers, a close parallel lies in the wealth of misinformation, fake news and unreliable echo chambers that proliferated around the diverse experiences of the pandemic. Like the Covid virus, radiation was invisible, with no perceptible smell or taste and yet was everywhere in the lived biosphere; both phenomena have had permanent era-changing effects on the entire world. The dystopic realities of both times, manifested in human suffering and State response alike, reflect the exaggerated visions/tropes produced in the realm of science fiction and fantasy, except that the latter did not have to be invoked/ imagined to comprehend the former in either case.

Even as the pandemic has exposed the fissures and ruptures of governance in our own times, so too did Chernobyl become an outward manifestation of a collapsing Soviet superstructure. There have been many attempts to explain the Chernobyl disaster as a classic instance of scientific ambition overreaching itself in the face of human limitations, just as many origin myths still play around the genesis of the Covid virus. Whatever the actual causal factors, collapsed economies have been part of both disasters. It is the contexts of

State response to catastrophe and the consequent experiences of the citizenry that one can observe certain parallels in both times. In Chernobyl, the surrounding villages were evacuated by Soviet soldiers with no notice to the residents except the false information that it would be only for three days and the business of resettling the population would come in due course. The dislocation, dispossession and suffering caused by unplanned evacuation, together with the challenges of survival in unfamiliar places and government indifference to their suffering, were such that many voluntarily returned to their native villages, with no knowledge of how their homes and land were devastated by radiation.

Many individuals interviewed by Alexievich make it clear that they preferred the risks of a return, to the callousness and frightening denialism of the Soviet government. The migrant worker crises that we have witnessed in recent times were mainly due to officially declared unplanned lockdowns which resulted in mass movement of people (mostly working class) seeking safety and survival in a return to the familiar rural from the always-already inhospitable urban spaces. The pandemic laid bare the extent of urban exploitation of the migrant working classes and rural poor in its garnering of cheap labour regardless of human cost. Resettling has been traumatic in both our times and in the aftermath of Chernobyl; the rural/agrarian (including the impulse to return to it) was commonly constructed as a space/way of life untouched by the machinations of government, be it Tsarist, Communist, totalitarian or majoritarian. The deep schisms of the urban/rural divide were never more evident than during these trying times; in the Chernobyl context, it exposed just how inadequately the Soviet ethos had benefited the remote villages of Belarus, making it possible for the affected villagers to express their misgivings of the system in terms that would be apostatised in urban centres of governmental authority. In other words, the disaster revealed the extent to which the Soviet system of governance had dwindled to an impotent rhetoric largely confined to urban corridors of power.

The quick spread of disease, unmitigated suffering (not confined to disease alone) and large-scale deaths mark both the history of Chernobyl and present pandemic times. In both contexts, the governments' scramble to scapegoat and lay blame deflected attention from the more urgent underlying issues; China was anathematised as the most likely source of the Covid virus, and the few officials of Reactor No 4 were immediately identified as the prime architects of the Chernobyl blast, the explosion itself being constructed by authorities as Western sabotage of the glorious Soviet. Already-existing gender/race/community inequalities were further exacerbated; women, children and marginalised minority groups have suffered the worst consequences in both times. Individual narratives of suffering and survival are lost in the mega-scale of disaster, be it man-made or otherwise. The politics of authoritarian ideology have played themselves out in fearful ways in both contexts then and now; to speak of the Chernobyl explosion and/or the Soviet handling of it as a disaster was immediately put down as betrayal, even as any criticism of government authorities in present times is liable to be constructed as 'anti-national'. As a result of so-called

government action, those not trained in nuclear physics/medical science were immediately deployed to tackle the disaster of the blast/pandemic, as clean-up workers/ health workers. In the case of Chernobyl, Party cards were to be forfeited by those individuals who dared refuse the clean-up assignment; in local municipal handling of pandemic management, show-cause notices cast in the legalese of colonial heritage, were chaotically issued to 'defaulters' and in-harness workers alike.

A rhetoric of war was appropriated in the Chernobyl aftermath as it was in pandemic management; terms like 'Standard Operating Procedure', 'War Room', 'Covid Warriors', 'Sero-survey', 'frontline workers', etc sought to construct images of national heroism and masculinity which did very little to mitigate human suffering, while also undermining and negating any claims to progress toward an egalitarian society. Those who died of disease caused by clean-up work at Chernobyl, and those who died of Covid while on "Covid duty" were loudly hailed as martyrs and heroes of the State and equally quickly forgotten. Never were the instruments of the always-already politicised realms of medical science and technology more easily wielded by those unqualified to do so.

The abuse of bureaucratic power was palpable in many details: in the allotment of protective gear, not necessarily to those actually engaged in the risks of fieldwork (be it door-to-door Covid sero-surveys of contact tracing and data collection, or clean-up work on the roof of the Chernobyl reactor where the radiation was deadliest) but to the authorities overseeing the work from afar; misuse of public funds particularized in the refusal of hospital facilities/treatment to those diseased on duty or thereafter; the dismal 'incentives' offered by both governments as just and adequate compensation for permanent loss of health, life and property (thirty lakhs INR payable to the family of a Government-employed Covid warrior which is able to produce documentation proving a Covid-death while on duty; in the Soviet context, promotions to urban centres of employment and pay incentives which would enable individuals to jump the queue for housing/ vehicles); stigmatizing of the Covid-infected and radiation-affected through public labelling and a social ostracism orchestrated through fear creation, are all examples.

Physical distancing has been identified as an essential practice in both times, since the virus/radiation can be transmitted through proximity/contact. If in the Indian pandemic context, social distancing has carried with it uneasy connotations of caste/race/gender bias, Chernobyl sufferers/survivors were directly up against the huge lie of the Soviet monolith which had promised free and equal medical treatment to all citizens. Medical staff were reluctant to even approach a Chernobyl patient, especially since the sufferers were seen as already doomed. In our own times, more people have died of lack of access to medical facilities and medical neglect/mismanagement than the official statistics reveal. Families in both contexts were advised to stay well away from the individual sufferer because of the risks of contagion/ radiation. Handling the dead and disposal of remains were once again

fraught with stigmatisation and fear, with quick expedited interments being ruthlessly prioritised over any considerations of family feeling or community sentiments.

While large-scale death has silenced many individual narratives of experience (in the Chernobyl aftermath and in the ongoing pandemic), there is, and can be, no sense of closure to the problems of the human condition that both historical periods have thrown up in different ways. Official claims made by government authorities in the Soviet context (it is worth noting that Gorbachev referred to Chernobyl a full nine days after the blasts) projected an image of a perfect, effective and permanent solution to a scientific problem that had apparently posed no challenge to the absolute powers of Soviet ideology; in pandemic times we are witnessing a daily dose of fresh fear creation through a discourse of reinfection, second-wave infection, related co-morbidities, permanent disability, new and imported virus mutations, etc, while already-existing problems which have been exacerbated due to the virus remain largely unaddressed.

Another dimension common to both times is that the narratives of individual and collective experience of catastrophe have not impelled the authorities to translate these into public welfare policies. In either context, if at all any voices from the public have been heard in the corridors of power, the response has been to silence and suppress through official intimidation tactics, while the measures instituted seek only to consolidate near-absolute power-structures. In relation to this, Alexievich's work gains significance as an example of witness literature, which attempts to recover lost narratives in the context of catastrophic suffering. The importance of testimony is especially urgent when contextualised against the monoliths produced by dictatorial and totalitarian regimes. In the words of Laura Sasu, "... testimony emerges as an act of speech, having the capacity of reproducing the experiential circumstances of the real event" (8). The voices recorded in *Chernobyl Prayer* seek to recover a polyphony that is vital to the contestation of the meta-narratives and erasures produced by the-then powers; as such, the work offers us a possible way of negotiating our own present challenges and vexing questions, through the preservation of individual subjectivities in pandemic times.

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