

SVETLANA ALEKSIEVICI: JOURNALISM METAMORPHOSED IN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Svetlana Aleksievici, the 2015 literature Nobel Prize winner, goes through an original formation from journalism to non-fictional literature, attracting numerous discussions on the topic and method of her writings. The books of this author have a well-defined subject, approached by numerous respondents, who have different viewpoints regarding the communist and post-communist history of the Russian/soviet and post-soviet space. Beyond the panoramic events and mentality of the era, the explanations of those interviewed offer a synthesis which is presented from a number of perspectives, especially emphasizing the ideal for freedom and the diagnosis for hopes and lack of fulfilments. The new perspective of Svetlana Aleksievici's works is that of a journalism included in a literary model, explained and applied in her fascinating, profound and topical books.

Keywords: *Svetlana Aleksievici, literature Noble Prize winner, journalism, non-fictional literature, Second-hand Times.*

Svetlana Aleksievici, the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature from the post-soviet space, is a Belarusian author of Russian language, *the lingua franca* of the Soviet Empire, following the footsteps of Ivan Bounin (1933), Boris Pasternak (1958), Mihail Șolohov (1965), Aleksandr Soljenițin (1970) and Iosif Brodsky (1987), who also came from the same Russian-speaking space.

Svetlana Aleksievici was born 1948 in Sveatoslav (Ivano-Frankivsk today) in the West of Ukraine (part of the Soviet Union at that time). Her father was Belarusian and her mother Ukrainian and they were both teachers. Svetlana studies journalism in Belarus. Extremely critical of the dictatorship of Alexandru Lukașenko, who has been in charge of the country for more than twenty years, she was persecuted by the Minsk administration and she left the country in 2000, as a sign of protest towards Lukașenko's regime and also in order to fully dedicate herself

to writing. She self-exiled herself in the following decade in Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany, Spain and Sweden. "After that I came back home, because I never ran out of the country" said the writer who returned to Minsk in 2011, after her exile in Europe, hoping that the Nobel Prize will offer her some sort of protection and freedom of expression at home as well.

Svetlana Aleksievici started with a career in journalism, being specialized in investigation interviews with witnesses of World War II, the Afghanistan War, and the fall of the Soviet Union or the Chernobyl disaster. These catastrophic events of the Soviet era became the main topics of her books. Her first book "The War does not have the face of a woman" (1985), which encompasses the memories of the Soviet army in World War II, goes beyond the Soviet mythological framework of the time, and it is blamed by the local power as "antipatriotic, naturalist and degrading." Breaking with the heroic epos of the war, the book presents the truth about the war's lack of human face and due to M. S. Gorbaciov's support (who used the title of the book in one of his official speeches) it is sold in millions of copies and subsequently appears on the big screens. Over 1 million women aged 15-30 took part in the war, from all the military professions. In their memories they do not refer to the front of heroic deeds. Unlike men, they speak about how difficult it is to kill or to walk on a field full of dead bodies. And after the war women had to forget about their military cards and wounds, they had to learn to smile once again, wear high heels and to get married. On the other hand, men forgot about their companions on the front, betrayed them, mastered the victory and never shared it with them.

“The war trilogy” which also includes “The last witnesses” evokes the war from the point of view of those who during the war were only children aged 7-12. “The zinc boys” (1990, the last part of the trilogy) represents a series of testimonials from the Soviet soldiers who fought in Afghanistan (a place where Svetlana Aleksievici also came as a journalist), is a book about a war hidden from its own people, which was confessed only by the zinc coffins brought from an unknown war. The author presents the images of a different kind of war, which we will later see in Yugoslavia, Chechnya and the Nagorno-Karabakh. The book triggers a new scandal followed by a law-suit and recognition at European level. Svetlana Aleksievici was often asked why she has so many books about war. It is because, as she herself claims, Russia has never had another history, the entire Soviet history being a military one: heroes, ideals, life representations – all are related to the war. Her subsequent books also triggered passionate debates, being regarded as “high treason” by the authorities.

In her country, Svetlana Aleksievici has only published two books until she was awarded the Nobel Prize: “The Chernobyl disaster. Testimonials from the survivors” in 1999 and “Second-hand Time” in 2013. As a result, the author was better known and appreciated in other countries than in her own country.

Her work is translated in a number of languages and published all over the world, the writer being awarded important literary prizes throughout the last two decades: The Herder Prize in 1999, The Erich-Maria Remarque Prize in 2001, The Ryszard Kapuscinski Prize in 2011, The Central Europe “Angelus” literary Prize in 2011, The Peace Prize of the German Booksellers at the book salon in Frankfurt in 2013, The Medicis Prize in 2013, and others (Crăciun, 2016).

The 2015 Nobel Prize for literature was awarded for her “polyphonic, memorial of suffering and courage in our age” work, according to the arguments of the Nobel Committee. The Swedish Academy has therefore rewarded an author who possesses “the passion of the real” (as she herself claims) and whose mission is to fight for the truth.

However, awarding her the Nobel Prize was disputed, the author being a journalist whose

work is considered a non-fictional one. Indeed, her work is composed of a few thousands testimonials patiently collected: “I wandered over the country a lot, I asked people a bunch of questions and I thought of using a different kind of journalism, without turning their answers into reportages, but by gathering them on a given topic, so that it turns into a book.” (Tronaru, 2016). We notice that she is not the only Nobel Prize winner who isn’t a writer. Philosophers have also been awarded the Nobel Prize (Henri Bergson in 1927 and Bertrand Russel in 1950), politicians (Winston Churchill in 1953) or even the lyricist Bob Dylan (in 2016). Here we will expressly rely on the Basic Regulations for The Noble Foundation, which were established by His Majesty the King in 1900 and who present the concept of literature better: it includes “not only works of fiction, but also other writings, who by means of form and way of exposure possess literary value” (Espmark, 2003).

Refusing to manage the propaganda – activity which was a duty of the Soviet journalist, Svetlana Aleksievici recognises that she was influenced and owes a great deal to the Belarusian Alesi Adamovici, who says that the best way to describe the horrors of the 20th century is not to create fiction, but to record the stories of the witnesses. Alesi Adamovici, whom Svetlana Aleksievici cites with gratitude in her speech when she was awarded the Nobel Prize, considers that writing prose about the nightmares of the 20th century represents a sacrilege: “Here we do not have the right to invent. We have to present the truth exactly as it is. We need a literature that goes beyond literature. The one who has to talk is the witness.” Therefore, Svetlana Aleksievici also cites Theodor Adorno, who immediately after the war, completely confused, said: “Writing a poem after Auschwitz is barbarian.” Svetlana also explains her position: “In our era, in which the evil is omnipotent and seems to make the law in the world – if we didn’t have to talk about terrorism, wars, fratricide, millions of people who are driven away – writers are somehow powerless, their truth is more pale than the one that can be presented by the journalism” (Tronaru, 2016). Her books are, without any doubt, some of those where life beats literature. When asked, at the Nobel Prize awarding

ceremony, why does she always write about tragic topics, Svetlana Aleksievici said that "this is the reality in which we live." The voices transcribed in her books establish a choir made of Svetlana's investigations and it transfigures her, as Philip Gourevitch said, into a dramatic chronicle of epic structure of the Greek tragedies.

Svetlana Aleksievici confesses even on her blog that she has searched the right genre for a long time, in order to correspond to her vision. The author claims that she examines and hears her books in the street. She chose "the genre of the human voices," in her books real people present events that happened right before their eyes – the war, the fall of the socialist empire, the last controversial decades. And, taken together, through the history of individual destinies, they will represent the history of the country (Aleksievici, n.d.). Svetlana Aleksievici explores the great disasters of the soviet century and she reveals the conflicts, violence and the lies which the old soviet empire was founded on and its dramatic consequences. The dramas of the memorial history are presented using a rigorous documentary treatment, which became the focus of her objective and troubling interview staken from those who witnessed or were the main actors of these processes: "From the very beginning, I was interested in those left aside by the history. Those people who move around in the darkness without leaving any traces and without asking anything from anybody" (from an interview given to the French publication "Figaro," in 2013).

The incredible polyphony of a voice choir from men and women who tell the stories of the ordeals they had to go through represents the hard core of the method and composition of Svetlana Aleksievici's books, presented right at the beginning of her speech, when she was awarded the Noble Prize: "I do not stand alone at this podium ... There are voices around me, hundreds of voices. They have always been with me... (...) The road to this podium has been long – almost forty years, going from person to person, from voice to voice." (Alexievitch, 2015a)

The testimonials represent specific materials, which placed in the "frame" of a more ample construction receives new significance: "I have searched for a literary method that can allow me

to approximate real life, as precisely as possible. Reality has always attracted me like a magnet, tortured me and hypnotised me, I wanted to fix it on the paper. Therefore, I managed to assimilate this genre of human voices and testimonials, tests and real documents. This is how I hear and see the world – as a choir of individual voices and as a collage of daily events... Therefore, I can be a writer, reporter, sociologist, psychologist and priest, all at the same time," explains Svetlana Aleksievici her work method for the newspaper „Adevărul." (Tronaru, 2016)

"There is a great writer who has found new paths in literature," said Sara Danius, permanent secretary for the Swedish Academy, at the SVT public television channel. The press and French critics have debated the specificity of Svetlana Aleksievici's method. Tiphaine Samoyault, a specialist in comparative literature considers the Svetlana represents a new trend in literature, one that can be named "documentary literature."

In fact, what we can name "**the temptation of the document**" is related to a mutation identified by Tudor Vianu, referring to "the dissociation of the old connection between beauty and perfection," which appeared starting from Kant (Micu, 1992). "The long and laborious established work" is confronted with "the unexpected revelation of the sketch, of improvisation:" of the preparatory fragments, of the notebooks, journals, memoirs, interviews, biographies. The finding is that "we are crushed by the document". This "suggestive art" was more efficiently qualified that the flawless artistic wording. Imperfection is appreciated for its searching and continual aspiration spirit and it is particular to the modern evolution of all arts.

Today, when the world has become so diverse and polyphonic, Svetlana Aleksievici considers that the document in art becomes even more interesting and without it is impossible to imagine a complete picture of the world. It brings us closer to reality; it fixes the authenticity of the past and of the present (Aleksievici, n.d.). We quickly forget the past, explains Svetlana Aleksievici, as it was ten, twenty or fifty years ago. She explains in her numerous interviews how she meets, discusses and records between 500-700 people for each of her books. On the whole, her chronicle includes dozens of

generations. She begins with the stories of the people who remember the 1917 revolution, both world wars, the Stalinist concentration camps and the events from the recent history, which represents 100 years, a century of recalled history. The history of the Russian soul, or, better yet, of the Russian-soviet soul. "The history of a great and horrible Utopia – the communism, idea which has not died neither in Russia, nor elsewhere in the world. (...) My continual chronicle. I follow my heroes in time" (Aleksievici, n.d.).

Sabine Audrerie notes for "*La Croix*" that Svetlana Aleksievici borrows from the journalism (through listening) and from the literary story (through reimbursement) and Bruno Corty from "*Le Figaro*" notices that the prose of the author is not related neither to fiction, or journalism, or to the history of the work, but to a mixture of all three and has the effect of a dynamite. Marie-Laure Delorme synthesizes the qualities of the writer for *Le Journal du Dimanche*: "Her courage as a fighter should not shadow her incredible talent as a writer. Her passion towards the real, her mounting work, poetic intelligence and the rejection of Manichaeism – all speak about a universal beauty." The American *The Nation* emphasizes the fact that Svetlana's writing mixes the strengths of facts with fiction in order to create the new, a vital literary element.

In her speech when she was awarded the Nobel Prize, Svetlana Aleksievici comes back to her understanding regarding literature: "I am often told, even now, that what I write isn't literature, it's a document. What is literature today? Who can answer that question? We live faster than ever before. Content ruptures form. Breaks and changes it. Everything overflows its banks: music, painting – even words in documents escape the boundaries of the document. There are no borders between fact and fabrication, one flows into the other."

Svetlana Alexievici presents her method in numerous interviews, such as the one for *Philosophie Magazine* which is very representative and in which she expresses the particularities of her own vision and method: "I use journalism to find materials, but I do literature ... I always guess in all conversations, public or private, that moment in which life turns into literature, I am waiting for the moment in which people who tell different

stories reach a state of shock, when they evoke death or love. <...> Therefore, I am not a journalist. I don't remain at the level of information, but I explore the life of the people, how they understand existence. I don't do the work of an historian, because everything begins for me when the job of the historian ends: what goes through people's minds after the battle of Stalingrad or after the explosion from Chernobyl? I don't write about the history of facts, but that of souls." In the introduction to the volume *Second-hand Times*, Svetlana Aleksievici predicts: "History is interpreted only on facts, whereas emotions are left outside. They are usually not included in history. However, they look at the world with the eyes of the humanist and not of the historian."

The columnists from *The New York Times* say that Svetlana Aleksievici uses a vision taken from Tolstoy which states that history is made not only by the great players, but also by ordinary people. Due to the social panoramic and the exploitations of the human conditions, as it happens in the great writings of fiction, the volume "Second-hand Times" is compared by some critics with "War and peace" (Ichim, 2016).

Svetlana's reconstruction of the collective narrative history from the individual histories as a support element (*Library Journal*) makes history "a profound significant of literature" (v. *Kirkus Reviews*), "a respect to the great collective text called History who we all carry to a certain extent" (Julie Clariniet Benoît Vitkine). J. M. Coetze, another Nobel Prize winner, considers that Svetlana Aleksievici's work represents the orchestrating of a Russian symphony, which tries to give meaning to the 20th century, which was so tragic for its country.

In the Nobel speech as well as on other various occasions, Svetlana Aleksievici states the fact that she doesn't try to produce a document, but she is preoccupied with carving the image of an era, with presenting the spasms and convulsions not of history on the whole, but "the history of emotions, of the spirit, of the human." She deals with that part of history which is usually left in the shadow – the space of the human being, as Svetlana Aleksievici considers that, in reality, everything takes place there. The author rebuilds the history of "the internal domestic socialism." Here is where her unusual approach appears: "I ask questions not

about socialism, but about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. Music, dances, hairdos. Thousands of details of an extinct life. This is the only way in which one can include the catastrophe in a family environment and try to narrate something. To guess something." In the name of an unmistakable artistic ideal, that of reaching the unknown land of the being, she explores the unknown side of the existing. Therefore, we come to the so-called "profound emotional understanding," which made the author's writing extremely appreciated (Alexievitch, 2015b).

Summarizing the series "The Voices of Utopia," Svetlana Aleksievici states that all these books speak about people who killed and who were killed, about building and faith in the Great Utopia, about how life used to be measured all the time with the idea, state and future. People used to live in trenches, on barricades and on the working place of socialism (Aleksievici, n.d.).

Reflecting on this quite dramatic picture, Svetlana Aleksievici also write a less expected book in terms of the vision that she proposes – "The divine stag of the eternal hunting" (one hundred tales about Russian love). It speaks about the fact that the Russian citizen wants to be happy, he dreams about it, but doesn't quite manage to do it. Why? the author asks herself. How does the Russian citizen imagine happiness and love? What is the meaning of life for him? In fact, this transition towards the intimate elements of life was also present in other books written by Svetlana Aleksievici.

"In the last 30-40 years, Svetlana Aleksievici has created the portrait of the Soviet and Post-soviet individual. Her books don't only present a history of the events, but also a history of emotions – a history of the human soul," said Sara Danius, permanent secretary at the Swedish Academy. Here, a very important moment is very well presented – the soul is a category, an essential dimension not just for the human being, but for the entire Russian community. In her speech when she was awarded the Nobel Prize, Svetlana Aleksievici confessed that she goes towards the human being to meet its soul, because everything happens there.

From book to book, the writer explores this limitrophe oral history with the document, being

convinced that the conversations represent a part of live which is not enough appreciated and which can be explored by literature: "When I walk down the street and catch words, phrases, and exclamations, I always think – how many novels disappear without a trace! Disappear into darkness. We haven't been able to capture the conversational side of human life for literature." (except from the Nobel Prize speech). As the author notices, the art of conversation comes from a Russian tradition, who have developed a specific logocentric culture (Alexievitch, 2015a).

Beyond the disturbing destinies of the stories, comes the same question: Why does this people have such an ingrate destiny? This eternal question comes from the Russian intelligence who have developed their preoccupations as questions which become the titles of some famous works: *Who's to blame?* (Herzen), *What's to be done?* (Cernâșevschii), *What is to be done?* (Lenin). Svetlana Aleksievici tries to answer these accursed questions. The author adds new questions to the classical list: *How do we assume our past? How do we assume our present?*

Svetlana Aleksievici builds her book from the perspective of the Russian intellectual whose "main profession is that of a reader." This intellectual critically perceive "the mysterious Russian soul" and the Russian sentiment "that they are special, exceptional, although they didn't have any foundation for this," which "hinders us from changing our lives and, on the other hand, gives us the feeling of a certain value" (Aleksievici, 2016).

But, in the '90s the atmosphere was changing, in the kitchens of the intellectuals people were still talking about Pasternak, but Lenin's works became wastepaper. The books had disappointed them, because their lives had changed too much, and all these things were not included in books. The Russian novels did not teach you how to be successful in life. Among the Russian archetypes, Oblomov always stays on the coach, and Cehov's heroes drink tea all the time and complain about their lives, notice the people who Svetlana Aleksievici has surveyed.

The power of the author can be found in her persuasion strengths, to create a universe of the characters – voices that recall the past. "Living in history is, by no means, a fiction. To recall it,

to narrate it requires certainty and fiction" (Andor, 2001). Svetlana Aleksievici makes us familiar, using stories, with the dramatic history of the Soviet/Russian Empire.

Beyond the catastrophes that she describes, writes *Le Monde*, Svetlana Aleksievici makes us feel how people live, accept, get used to, survive, influencing us deeply; A Nobel Prize fully deserved. Her nomination also proves that the Swedish Academy appreciates the literary works connected to the present, it is a typical choice for the Nobel committee, which wants to preserve itself the image of a referee in the global geopolitical situation, considers Tiphaine Samoyault. Overlapping the confessions with the documentary allows her to offer a literary answer in order to illustrate a world which she does no longer accept. This is why, T. Samoyault characterizes Svetlana Aleksievici's work as committed literature.

The element that unites all of Svetlana Aleksievici's books is the remembering of communism. Her books make us understand what, both on an individual and on a collective scale, the stages of the "multilaterally developed" absurd really meant and the implementation of the communist utopia. Among all the books, "Second-hand Times" is maybe the most precious one today, because it is, as Andrei Crăciun notices, "written with care for those who will live tomorrow. Will they know what communism really meant?" The danger that we are warned about right from the title of the book refers to the fact that two decades after the fall of the Soviet Empire, Russia still preserves a soviet-communist spirit, which continues to pollute the political atmosphere and it seems that the country tends to go back to the time of the Cold War.

The Christian Science Monitor regards this book as the most ambitious book of the century, stating that Russian literature hasn't come up with a more disturbing work after the "Gulag Archipelagos" belonging to Soljenitân (another Nobel Prize winner coming from the Soviet space, 1970), nothing so necessary and long awaited. While Soljenitân is the writer of the Soviet evil, Svetlana Aleksievici also reflects the post-Soviet evil. Olivier Rollin considers that this tradition comes from Dostoievski and Varlam Șalamov, whom Svetlana Aleksievici cites in her Nobel Prize speech and regards them as the best writers

of the 20th century and wrote that he participated in a great lost battle in order to effectively repair life. In her commentary, the author says that she has reconstructed the history of this battle – the win and the loss. It is to be noticed that this idea can be found in the title of the Nobel Conference – "On the Battle Lost" (Samoyault, 2015).

Appreciating that she was awarded the Nobel Prize, Svetlana Aleksievici, faithful to her beliefs and principles, said that she will never make any concession when faced with a totalitarian power. It is a reward not just for me, completed the writer during her press conference held in Minsk and cited by *Le Monde*, "but also for our entire culture, for our small country who has always lived among-presses."

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