

“Things Fall Apart”: The Moral Revolutions of Svetlana Alexievich

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The title of this presentation incorporates another title: *Things Fall Apart*¹ is an archetypal novel by the Nobel laureate Chinua Achebe. The book deals with the disintegration—falling apart—of African tribal civilization upon encountering the Western civilization represented by white missionaries preaching God’s word. My presentation will focus on the latest book by Svetlana Alexievich, *Time Second-Hand*, which deals with the disintegration of Soviet civilization. As I am writing this paper, however, I would call my presentation somewhat differently: “Suffering, the Meaning of Life and the ‘Moral Revolutions’ of Svetlana Alexievich.”

I will begin with a general overview of the writings of Alexievich and introduce, very briefly, some issues raised by scholars of literature who analyze her work. My own analysis, though, will be focused (mostly) on her latest book and goes beyond literature and into the realm of moral philosophy.

1. An Overview of Svetlana Alexievich’s Works

Svetlana Alexievich (born 1948) is a contemporary Belarusian author, a writer and a journalist whose works straddle the divide between Soviet and post-Soviet time. Writing in Russian and focusing on the issues common to the post-Soviet region in general, she is often perceived (and presented in translations) as a Russian writer.

1 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

Alexievich is famous for her unique literary method: her work focuses on traumatic points in Soviet and post-Soviet history (be it Soviet women in WWII, the war in Afghanistan or the Chernobyl disaster) and is based on interviews with witness-participants or their family members, excerpts from which she interweaves into her texts, sometimes identifying her informants by names and sometimes not. She is the recipient of, most recently, the Peace Prize of the German Book Traders Association and the French Prix Médicis for her latest book “*Time Second-Hand: the End of the Red Man*”² (2013) and multiple other European book awards. She has also been nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature.

Her books, briefly described below, belong, as she maintained in multiple interviews, to a bigger project which she titles the “the chronicles of the Big Utopia” or “the story of the red man.”³ They focus on Soviet and post-Soviet catastrophes, pain and trauma.

War’s Unwomanly Face (У войны не женское лицо, 1985; a revised version in 1998) focuses on Soviet women in WWII and is based on personal narratives of war, loss, humiliation, suffering, heroism, remembering and on other issues, for example, feminine hygiene on the battlefield and the rejection that demobilized female soldiers often faced from prospective spouses or in-laws. That was still a “very Soviet” book in its approach to women’s issues; still, it became a “revelation” (the importance of WWII in Soviet psyche should be taken into account). According to Alexievich, “After that book I decided I would not write about war.” Still, her next book was also about war.

Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War (Цинковые мальчики, 1991, revised twice; the title plays on the fact that the corpses of fallen soldiers were sent home in zinc coffins). The voices in this book are those of surviving soldiers, as well as those of family members, friends and mothers of fallen soldiers, who “speak against two different backgrounds: the ten-year war in Afghanistan, and a great turbulence at

2 Алексиевич С.А. Время секунд хэнд. М.: Время, 2013.

3 Алексиевич С.А. В поисках вечного человека (<http://www.alexievich.info/index.html>).

the heart of Soviet society,”⁴ thus reflecting an internal divide in society. These were not the stories of heroism, as many had expected, but the stories of bitterness of mothers at the condition in which their sons’ corpses were returned to them and their anguish at the personality and behavioral changes in their sons after the war; the stories of women and men going through the trauma of remembering repressed effects of reality,⁵ painful self-analysis, an attempt to find a voice and an identity. With this book, Alexievich became a target of rage on the part of some “patriots” who could not accept the story of the Afghan war that she was telling.

Enchanted by Death (Зачарованные смертью, 1994): focuses on suicide; based on interviews with survivors or families.

Last Witnesses: 100 Unchildish Lullabies (Последние свидетели: сто недетских колыбельных 1996): narratives by children who were six to twelve years of age during WWII.

Chernobyl Prayer (Чернобыльская молитва, 1997): focuses on narratives of the disaster by the survivors, the families of perished firefighters, and displaced persons (evacuated from the Chernobyl zone). If all the books by Alexievich deal with the “indescribable,” Chernobyl is doubly indescribable because it is an environmental disaster without direct comparison. It is the first of its kind, having taken place at a time of peace for the people who lived through it and there was no model in place from past experience to help the victims make sense of their world.

Time Second-hand: the End of the “Red Man” (Время секунд хенд, 2013) is the evolutionary culmination of the project. This book focuses on the Soviet collapse and incorporates confessional stories of “participants” which are alternated with the stories of three suicides, with shorter narratives and interviews and even with phrases or parts of phrases titled “bits of street noises and kitchen talk” («из уличного шума и разговоров на кухне»), all bound together with the author’s own reflexive pieces. My analysis in this presentation will be mostly focused on

4 Irina Novikova, “Lessons on the Anatomy of War: Svetlana Alexievich’s Zinky Boys,” Svetlana Slapsak, ed., *War Discourse, Women’s Discourse. Essays and Case-Studies from Yugoslavia and Russia* (Ljubljana: Topos and ISH, 2000).

5 Ibid.

this last book, which was a hit in Europe and became controversial in the post-Soviet region.

2. Previous Work on Alexievich

Taking into account the status of Alexievich as a writer on the European cultural scene (with multiple awards from Germany, France, Italy, USA, the Netherlands, Poland, and Russia), one is amazed at the scarcity of literary criticism focusing on her work, either in Russian and Belarusian, or English. There are multiple book reviews (praising her human and writer's courage and her sense of responsibility) and interviews: journalists like to talk to her, but mostly ask similar questions focusing on her method (how do you write? How do you find your subjects?), her "subject matter" (how was it in Chernobyl?), the pain that she must have felt while working on every one of her books; her representation of life and the human condition⁶ and the political underpinnings of the events she writes about, but little else. This, I think, is for a reason: Alexievich's writings are moral philosophy rather than literature; they can be seen as a discussion of ethical issues, in particular, the questions of the meaning of life, as it is pondered on by a (post)Soviet man at the moment when the Soviet world is crumbling and falling apart.

Scholars writing about Alexievich have pointed to the following issues:

- a) **Genre:** is this non-fiction? documentary prose? There are multiple definitions of Alexievich's books: they were named a "collective novel," "novel-oratorio," "novel-evidence," "people talking about themselves" and "epic chorus;" collective testimony; documentary monologues-confessions.⁷ Sometimes, Alexievich is seen as a cre-

6 Ушакин С.А. Осколки военной памяти: «Все, что осталось от такого ужаса?» [Рец. на кн.: Алексиевич С. Последние свидетели: соло для детского голоса. М., 2007] // Новое литературное обозрение. 2008. № 93 (<http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo%20/2008/93/ush15.htm>).

7 See: *Пушина И.* Чернобыльская молитва. Мне кажется, я записываю будущее... // Литературная газета. 24.04.1996. *Бек Т.* Светлана Алексиевич. Моя единственная жизнь // Вопросы литературы. 1996 (<http://alexievich.info/artikl/TatjanaBek.pdf>). *Никонова О.* Женщины, война и «фигуры умолча-

ator of a new genre: a “history of feelings,” a “genre” of “actual human voices and confessions” and a genre of “living voices”; “literary reportage” and “literary journalism,” and the collective testimony genre have also been tried. The question of genre is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are many autobiographical forms. Some of these forms are considered literature, others are not, and the debates whether books by Alexievich can be considered *belles lettres*, persist.

- b) **Authorship, anonymity, and voice:** who is the “author” of Alexievich’s books, with their multiplicity of voices? Who is the author of these stories? Who is speaking?—and other related issues one can encounter when thinking of a polyphonic novel. With anonymity, a confessional quality is achieved.
- c) **Truth (as this issue stands with documentary prose):** what is a document? And is it less a history in documents than an aesthetic arrangement of documents? How does Alexievich compare to, say, Solzhenitsyn or Shalamov, whose books were also based on narratives and documents? In what sense does Alexievich tell “the truth”?
- d) **Traumatic experiences; the unsayable (unspeakable); indescribability** (a feature of narratives dealing with extreme and traumatic events). A common motif in the works that comprise Alexievich’s *Chronicle* is the witness’s inability to describe his/her experience, often because the experience is so far removed from normality that the listener has no existing framework for understanding it: “To address the issue of indescribability, she needs a literary method that partially simulates the Chernobyl victim’s experience for the reader. This method must be provoking enough to convince the reader to re-evaluate his assumptions and adopt a humanitarian global worldview” (Scribner).⁸

ния» // Неприкосновенный запас. 2005. № 2–3 (40–41) (<http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2005/2/ni32-pr.html>).

⁸ Doris Scribner, *Recreation of Chernobyl Trauma in Svetlana Alexievich’s “Chernobyl’skaya molitva.”* A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of Missouri-Columbia (2008) (<https://mospace.umsystem.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10355/5713/research.pdf?sequence=3>).

More points could be added to this list (e.g. is this women's literature? What about gender?), and it would be a fascinating project to go deeper into Alexievich's writing. However, there is something in her books that is "beyond literature," which is going to be my focus.

3. Suffering and the (Soviet Man's) Search for Meaning

The books of Alexievich are based in stories that people tell about themselves and their time. But why do people tell stories at all? According to the sociologist Charles Tilly, "stories are crucial for understanding... social life in general,"⁹ for evidence about social processes arrives to us in the form of stories people tell about themselves or others. It is through stories that, looking backwards, we tend to represent social ontology, ascribing meanings and imposing a particular coherence or "teleology" on past events. People's stories in Alexievich's books are the stories of experience and *self*, and their significance lies in bringing together "the personal and the political." Large-scale political changes can be better understood if we pay attention to the stories in which people try to make sense of their situations.

In this connection it is important to mention that Alexievich is one of the very few (or the only one?) post-Soviet authors whose work has been analyzed by scholars outside of the field of "Slavic studies" or even "literature." Her books on Afghanistan and Chernobyl have been noticed by some American philosophers theorizing ethics, morality, and suffering.¹⁰ I am going to take this lead and look at these books as social and cultural evidence and as a way of debating moral issues that became persistent by the end of socialism. In the words of Linda Hogan, art makes unique contributions to creating imaginative spaces in which the established parameters of moral concern can be challenged and expanded.¹¹

9 Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change* (London. Boulder. New York: Oxford, Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), P. viii.

10 See: Joseph Corbi, *Morality, Self-Knowledge, and Human Suffering: An Essay on the Loss of Confidence in the World* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

11 Linda Hogan, "The Ethical Imagination and the Anatomy of Change: A Perspective from Social Ethics," *Proceedings from the Catholic Theological Society of America* 68 (2013), pp. 18–30.

All books by Alexievich deal with transformative experiences and *suffering*: the plight of Soviet women and the ordeals of children in WWII, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Chernobyl disaster, suicide and, now, the Soviet collapse with its ethnic cleansing and local wars, impoverishment, loss of a way of life, and general apathy and lack of meaning amongst people. In the eyes of some contemporary moral philosophers, suffering refers to an affliction of feeling which has relevance for morality.¹² There is also a broader definition which involves physical suffering and which differentiates between pain and suffering.¹³ *Time Second Hand*, which is my main focus in this paper, where physical suffering is sometimes invoked, is still a book about moral suffering, or “maladies of the soul.” Where do they come from, and what is their cause?

Suffering has always been with the mankind, and in many (religious) traditions it has been “justified,” as it was rewarded, deserved or redemptive: it used to come from God or fate. One issue with suffering in modern society (where things do not come from God any more), however, is its “meaning.” Suffering carries a large number of connotations, it may—or may not—“make sense.”

A critical component of suffering is a lack of meaning to it. According to Victor Frankl, a Jewish psychoanalyst turned moral philosopher in Hitler’s death camps and the author of *Man’s Search for Meaning*, suffering is no longer suffering when it finds a meaning.¹⁴ Negative sensations “cease” being true suffering when they serve a person’s greater goal and become meaningful. Analyzed from this perspective, all books by Alexievich have enormous pain and suffering in their focus, while their “storytellers” look for its meaning in some way or another. Or, even more than that: Alexievich gives voice to a *society* (several social and generational cohorts) trying to make sense of itself at the very moment

12 Jamie Mayerfield, *Suffering and Moral Responsibility* (NY, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1–2.

13 Erich Loewy, *Suffering and the Beneficent Community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

14 Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Ultimate Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing, 2000).

when it started falling apart and searching for a meaning that had been, at some point, lost.

War's Unwomanly Face, the first book by Alexievich (and a very "Soviet" one) is her only oeuvre where suffering does have meaning, because its storytellers are active (they are not pawns in someone else's plot) and have a cause. The rationalization for their plight has been provided by the Soviet ideology of patriotic sacrifice: women-narrators pursued a goal and made a conscious choice, as they stood up for their country; the country won the war, they had suffered tremendously and lost their loved ones, but ultimately, that was for a noble cause. In all other books, the "cause" is missing: suffering arises out of a calamity, a disaster, human cruelty, evil chance etc., while narrators try to figure out: why me? Why us? What have we done? And what now? There's no answer: their suffering is "in vain," as it was "absurd"; there is no goal that those people were pursuing as they were struck a terrible blow.

With this said to put Alexievich' latest book into context, I argue that *Time Second-Hand* especially is about the search for meaning by formerly Soviet people who lost their ideological foundation, as well as their honourable status. This is how they express their perception of hazy reality, disappointment and despair, as their world has disappeared:

P. 10. We believed that there was going to be freedom. We thought that freedom was so simple.

P. 11. I am trying to find out the trivia of the way of life gone. This is the only way to frame the catastrophe in a framework of normality and to have a chance to tell the story.

P. 12. All the values crushed, except for the value of life. Life in general. New dreams: to build a house, to buy a new car, and to plant some gooseberries... Freedom became a reincarnation of "meshchanstvo"... The freedom of his majesty the consumption. The greatness of darkness. The darkness of desires, instincts—that secret part of life of which we had a very general idea... Our experience of living at war is not needed any more. It has to be forgotten.

P. 21. It became clear that we have no ideas.

P. 41. Our civilization is in the dump.

P. 43. We were believers, not in God, but in communism

P. 63. We were believers...

P. 81. *People started believing (in God) again, for there's no hope.*

P. 83. *I am tired of living...*

Much of Soviet history and worldview, starting with the works of Maxim Gorky¹⁵ and including the very canon of socialist realism, was about “overcoming difficulties” for a (noble) cause: enormous suffering which many generations underwent in the 20th century, sometimes voluntarily, was justified by a general social goal of building communism, achieving social justice for everyone, winning the war, industrializing the country, etc. Very few (if any) believed in communism in late socialism, of course, but many adhered to the idea of goodness as social justice, and “Soviet virtue” served as an ultimate foundation for societal unity. In the 60s, apparently, many were in doubt with regard to “goodness,” and with Afghanistan and Chernobyl, people started questioning the very “cause” (or its price). With the disintegration of socialism, “the cause” disappeared: *We were building socialism. Now socialism is gone, and we are left (p. 91).*

4. Honour and Moral Revolutions

The “moral suffering” one can see in the quotes above is also evidence of a **moral revolution**. The term belongs to the moral philosopher Kwame Appiah, who defines moral revolutions as historical “occasions” when groups and societies undergo, in a short period of time, a fundamental change in *moral behavior*, i.e. in what they regard as *good and right*. In his book he examines three moral revolutions of the 19th century, namely, the end of dueling, the dissolution of foot-binding in China, and the end of the Atlantic slave trade. He argues that in each of these instances of radical change, there occurred a fundamental alteration in the way each society determined what was to be regarded as *honourable*. The reasons for the change in perceptions of, say, dueling or foot binding, were social (social change in class or international relations etc.), but the revolutions that resulted were “moral.”¹⁶

15 See, for example, Maxim Gorky's *The Heart of Danko*.

16 Kwame Appiah, *The Honour Code. How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

In a similar way, with the disintegration of socialism (i.e. with social change), society underwent a moral transformation of its values (alongside a revolutionary economic and political shift); its sense of what was good or bad, of telling right from wrong was altered, and these categories have foundational importance in all societies. The post-socialist transformation implicated a change in what had been considered honourable (at least overtly): for example, under socialism, it was modesty and honesty; living (or giving) one's life for a cause, "for people and country"; being collectivistic. Quite suddenly, those values were substituted by a different set of beliefs about what was honourable: to be individualistic and autonomous, to stand for oneself; to pursue personal happiness and even gain; to be efficient and, ultimately, rich. The old ideal of "poor, but honest" became a laughing matter; being "modest, but cultured and spiritual" (the way Soviet intelligentsia tended to see itself) was especially a target for mockery. This is how people in *Time Second Hand* perceive and interpret the brave new world:

- P. 14. Today's students know what capitalism is about. It is about poverty and inequality.*
- P. 24. The motherland has been substituted by a supermarket.*
- P. 42. The people have been robbed.*
- P. 48. The country has been sold out.*
- P. 82. Our whole life we believed that we would live better. Live well. What great lies.*
- P. 99. No one can make me believe that one's life is given to eat well and to sleep. And a person who bought something in one place and sold it at another one for three kopecks more is a hero. We are now indoctrinated with this. Can it be that those who gave their lives for other people are just fools? Those who lived for ideals...*
- P. 115. I cannot live when my motherland is perishing and everything that I considered meaningful is being destroyed. My age and the life that I have lived give me the right to commit a suicide. I was ... trying... till the very end.*

The language of honour is crucial for understanding what these people are trying to convey, due to the connection between honour and identity and, ultimately, respect. According to Appiah, honour involves

respect of one’s peers (of people in the same social group; of other nations): one can only have respect when one is worthy of it, and one is worthy when one follows a particular *code* (of honour) and manages one’s reputation. When people have honour, they are entitled to respect. With the disintegration of socialism, the code was no longer working the way it was supposed to: some groups that had been respected for who they were lost this respect (or honour). For example, WWII was one of the high points of honour in Soviet society: the nation and its veterans were proud of what they had achieved (defeating fascism). With the disintegration of socialism that victory over fascism began to be questioned as Stalin was almost equated to Hitler, and WWII veterans began to be treated as the defenders of Stalin’s regime. One example to how that generational cohort reacted to this transformation would be the story of Timeryan Zinatov, one of the defenders of the legendary “Brest Fortress” in June 1941, as told by Alexievich. In 1992 he came to Brest from his native Kazan (on the Volga) and committed suicide. He left a farewell note:

...if I had died then, during the war, I would have known: I died for my country. But now I am dying because of this dog’s life. Do put these words on my tomb stone... I want to die standing, and not on my knees begging for a meager allowance... As you bury me, do not forget to put the papers certifying that I was a defender of the Fortress of Brest into my pocket. We were heroes, and now we are dying in misery! Stay well, and do not cry for the Tatar guy who is protesting on behalf of all others: “I am dying, but I do not surrender. Farewell, my country!”¹⁷ (p. 195)...

As Appiah maintains, a morally engaged group can create an honour world of its own (in which footbinding would be honourable, for example), and that was obviously the case with Zinatov. He could not live when his honour world had disappeared, and his group lost respect and its place in public life.

Honour is not merely personal and is associated with those aspects of identity that derive from membership in groups. In post-socialism,

17 “I am dying, but I do not surrender. Farewell, my country!” is the inscription that was left on the walls of the Fortress of Brest by one of its defenders in June 1941.

many social groupings were going through an existential crisis similar to that described by Zinatov and lost their confidence in the world, which is one of the results of suffering. On the societal level, the search for a new meaning (through faith, a national idea, or democratic ideology) does not seem to have brought any light at the end of the tunnel so far, for too many people. Alexievich ends her book with a life story told by an elderly woman, which can be seen as a kind of “moral imperative,” as there are no others:

What should I recall? I live like everyone else. The perestroika happened... Gorbachev... The mailwoman opened the gate: “I heard that there aren’t communists anymore.” “What do you mean, there aren’t communists anymore?” “The party was shut down. No shooting, nothing.” Now they’re saying that there used to be a great nation, and everything is lost. And what have I lost? I live as I have lived—in a small house without conveniences—without water, without plumbing, without gas. I have worked honestly all my life. I worked and worked and I worked, I got used to working. And I always received pennies. I eat noodles and potatoes as I used to. I continue to wear my Soviet fur coat. Here, there is—snow!

My fondest memory is that of getting married. There was love. I remember that, as we were returning from the registry office, the lilacs were blooming. The lilacs were blooming! And in them—believe me—the nightingales sang. ...I remember it thus...We lived happily for a couple of years, had a girl... and then Vadik started drinking and burned himself out. A young man, forty two years old. So I live alone. My daughter is already grown up, she got married and left.

In the winter, we get covered in snow—the entire village—the houses, and the cars. Sometimes, the buses don’t run for weeks. What’s going on in the capital? It’s a thousand kilometers from us to Moscow. We watch life in Moscow on the television, like the movies. I know Putin and Alla Pugachova... no one else... Meetings, protests... As for us, we live here, as we’ve always lived. Under socialism, and under capitalism. What’s “red” and “white” to us? The same.

We need to wait for the spring. Plant the potatoes... (We’re silent for a long time.) I’m sixty... I don’t go to church, but I need to talk to someone. To talk about something else, something bigger... About the fact that I don’t feel like getting old, that I don’t want to get old at all. And as for dying—that’ll be too bad. Have you seen my lilacs? When I

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go outside at night—they glow. I stand, I look at them. Let me get you a bouquet...