

## **Life under Radiation: An Eco-Existential Reading of Monologues in Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future***

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### **Abstract**

Svetlana Alexievich gathers interviews with the survivors of the Chernobyl disaster over a span of many years. This prolonged investigative engagement eventually comes into existence as a documentary prose work upon its first publication in Russian in 1997. This work was later translated into English by Anna Gunin in collaboration with Arch Tait under the title *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* in 2016. This English translated edition has been selected as primary source of the present study. At its core, the present study intends to foreground existentialist concern within historical narration as this convergence has rarely been done in the practice of writing history. For this purpose, the paper is structured around the following objectives: firstly, to analyse radiation as an eco-existential condition; secondly, to explore altered nature of life in post-Chernobyl world; thirdly, to study the interconnection between ecological damage and existential crisis; fourthly, to see Alexievich's use of monologue as a narrative form for articulating the inner truth; and lastly, to explore the interrelationship between environmental devastation and individual subjectivity as expressed through survivors' testimonial monologues.

**Keywords:** Documentary Prose, Existence, Monologue, Radiation.

To begin with, J. Robert Oppenheimer<sup>1</sup>'s statement – “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds” – has become one of the most iconic expressions of the nuclear age (Bird 771). He recalls this line from the *Bhagavad Gita* after witnessing the first successful detonation of an atomic bomb during the 1945 Trinity test in New Mexico. The original speaker of this line is lord Krishna who utters it while revealing his cosmic form to the warrior Arjuna. In this revelation, Krishna identifies himself as the eternal cosmic force encompassing creation, preservation and destruction. Therefore, this quote expresses the idea that death or destruction is a cosmic function entirely inseparable from creation. However, by invoking it, Oppenheimer acknowledges that the world has entered the nuclear age where humanity has gained the power to destroy itself. This destructive power had previously belonged only to divine cosmic force. Now, the humankind has attained the capacity of cosmic-level annihilation.

Not to forget, the possession of nuclear energy was grounded in the assumption that such immense force could be directed entirely by human will. However, this assumption of absolute control soon proved illusory as a series of nuclear incidents or accidents occur in the mid-twentieth century. Nuclear catastrophes refer to large-scale disasters caused by the failure, misuse, or uncontrolled release of nuclear energy. These nuclear disasters can be broadly classified as nuclear warfare disaster, nuclear reactor accidents, nuclear testing disaster, radiation leakage and various other contamination accidents. These accidents pose severe threats to life – both human and non-human – due to radioactive contamination that persists for decades.

This radiation-affected existence becomes the central concern of the Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich's journalistic investigation of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster. While reviewing her work, Tosin Edeoti writes how Alexievich “. . . masterfully weaves their voices into an oral history that captures the fear, anger, uncertainty, dark humour, and love that permeated their lives post-disaster (1). She interviews more than five hundred survivor eyewitnesses of the disaster, including fire-fighters, nuclear plant workers, politicians, scientists, soldiers, doctors, journalists, evacuees, widows and ordinary citizens of the state over a span of many years. This prolonged investigative engagement eventually comes into existence as a documentary prose work upon its first publication in Russian in 1997. This work was later

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<sup>1</sup> J. Robert Oppenheimer was an American theoretical physicist who served as the director of the Manhattan Project's Los Alamos Laboratory during World War II. He is often called the “father of the atomic bomb” for his role in overseeing the development of the first nuclear weapons.

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A large number of books “have already been written on the event itself, hundreds of thousands of metres of film devoted to it. What I’m concerned with is what I would call the “missing history”, the invisible imprint of our stay on earth and in time (Alexievich 24). Such an absence leads to a huge divide between the official historical record and lived experience of the disaster. Fortunately, this gap has been realised by Alexievich as she turns her attention to what she identifies as missing history. This term stands for those experiences, voices and stories that are excluded, silenced or erased from official historical discourse. Moreover, it represents a counter-history that challenges dominant historical accounts and restores meaning to experiences absent from historical knowledge. Here, by adopting a documentary narrative structure,

Alexievich’s *Chernobyl Prayer* embarks on a mission to expose the hidden histories of the Chernobyl Disaster (1986) through a series of monologues by the people affected by the Chernobyl accident. As a result, the text transcends its literary framework of a testimonial narrative to function as a political instrument, providing individuality and voice to the unheard and silenced, who frequently challenge governmental narratives. (Saji 80)

Thus, with the purpose of discovering “missing history” of the Chernobyl, Alexievich chooses monologue as her method of narration. In his famous work *Genius and Monologue*, an American literary scholar Ken Frieden defines monologue as “solitary speech,” a form that is not only a dramatic or poetic device but a fundamental way of expressing the inner voice (17). Instead, monologue as a unique way of expression allows subjective experience to emerge in its own way while preserving ambiguity, contradiction and silence as the integral part of meaning.

Alexievich presents each interview as a monologue. As Nicholas Lezard similarly observes, the testimony Alexievich collects is “usually a few pages long, and reads as a monologue” (1). The book is mainly structured into three parts: “Land of the Dead,” “The Crown of Creation” and “Admiring Disaster.” Almost every single chapter within these sections is consistently titled as a monologue, such as “Monologue on a song without words,” “Monologue on a whole life written on a door,” “Monologue without a title: a scream,” “Monologue on a

mute soldier,” etc. All these titles are concise yet highly evocative. Their brevity, originality and layered meanings make them aphoristic in nature while prompting reflection on themes of suffering, memory and human experience. Taken together, they articulate a fractured but deeply human response to the catastrophe.

A famous Georgian philosopher Merab Mamardashvili’s line “We are air, we are not earth” as an epigraph of the text suggests a fundamental shift in how existence is understood in post-Chernobyl time. The negation of existence as “earth” indicates the loss of solidity, rootedness and sense of belonging. By contrast, the metaphor of “air” for existence gestures toward invisibility, intangibility and vulnerability. These features resonate powerfully with radiation, the central yet unseen force shaping Chernobyl-affected existence. From the very beginning, the epigraph signals a condition in which life (both human and non-human) is suspended in uncertainty while displacing from familiar environment. Through the epigraph, Alexievich widens the scope of existence from a human-centred philosophical concept to an eco-existential condition in which air, land, bodies, and time are inseparably entangled. This wide-ranging definition treats being not as individual human life, but as a fragile collective condition shared by humans, nature and the unborn future.

Although the physical landscape – houses, roads, forests and rivers – still exists. But life is forced into radioactive environment. Radiation is invisible, odourless and cannot be detected easily by human senses, which makes it even more difficult for people to recognise its presence. A returnee named Anna Petrovna Badaeva recounts how people of the village compare the presence of radiation to the long-debated question of the existence of God. She observes people asking questions from one another:

Have you seen it? Is it white, what does it look like? What colour? Some say it’s got no colour or smell, but others say it’s black. Like the earth! If it’s no colour, then it’s like God. God is everywhere, but you can’t see Him. (Alexievich 62)

Due to a lack of knowledge about radiation, the villagers do not realise that environment around them – specially, air, water, soil, plants and animals – is not normal as it was before the accident. So, when the officials begin to lock the wells and declare the water polluted or unsafe, the residents feel confused: “The water is ‘dirty’, they tell us. What do they mean, ‘dirty’? It’s as clean as clean can be” (Alexievich 39).

Here, life continues, but it carries the invisible imprint of atomic danger. The villagers are told “to work on the vegetable plots in gauze masks and rubber gloves. And to bury the ashes from the stove in the ground” (Alexievich 38). Along with it, they are instructed to “launder all the bed linen and curtains. But they’re inside the house! In the wardrobes and linen chests. How could radiation get inside the house? Past the doors” (Alexievich 38)? Badaeva in “Monologue on how a happy chicken would be to find a worm. And what is bubbling in the pot is also not forever” describes her observation that insects such as bees and wasps behaved unusually: they stopped flying, disappeared for some time or remained active. She feels “No beetles or worms is the first sign of high radiation” (Alexievich 61). Moreover, the odd behaviour of the bees – remaining inside the hives for several days – indicates that even small creatures have sensed the disturbance in the environment.

In fact, the fruits and vegetables that were the primary source of food for the local population are no longer safe. An interviewee named Zinaida Yevdokimovna Kovalenka recounts: “We’d been living on our potatoes, our spuds, forever, and here they were saying we couldn’t eat them! And they wouldn’t let us have onions or carrots, either” (Alexievich 38). Most of the food used in daily life has become contaminated with radiation as a villager observes: “All the hens’ combs were black, not red: that was the radiation. And we couldn’t make cheese. We went a month without soft cheese or hard. The milk wouldn’t sour, it curdled into lumps, these white lumps. It was the radiation” (Alexievich 50). Thus, this nuclear pollution has transformed the earth, as the title of the first section suggests, into a land of the dead.

Subsequently, in the second section entitled “The Crown of Creation,” the post-Chernobyl world produces new forms of existence – children, bodies and identities shaped by radiation. A cameraman named Sergey Gurin captures the unsettling contrast between visible beauty and invisible danger as he observes an apple tree. The apple tree is in full blossom as “. . . the bumble bees buzzing, the bridal white colour. And there were people working, the orchards were blossoming” (Alexievich 120). However, this form of new life is deeply deceptive. The narrator feels that “something was wrong” despite the picture – as he clicked the photo of apple tree – being visually flawless (120). The realisation comes through the absence of smell – a sensory void that signals a deeper disturbance. This absence reveals that the environment, thought visually intact, has been fundamentally altered by radiation. The human body blocks

certain senses – under high radiation exposure – as it adds a disturbing physiological dimension as the body becomes unreliable.

Most notably, it transforms the thought of giving birth into a site of fear rather than hope. A midwife recalls in “The Folk Choir” how it’s a long time since she saw a woman happy to be pregnant, or a happy mother. She says:

A mother has just given birth. She comes to, and calls, ‘Doctor, show me it! Bring it! She touches the little head, the forehead, the little body. She counts the fingers and toes, checking. She wants to be quite sure: ‘Doctor, have I had a normal baby? Is everything all right?’ They bring him for her to feed. She is afraid. ‘I live quite near Chernobyl. I was out in the black rain when it fell . . .’ (Alexievich 180)

The bodies are no longer natural. Instead, they are contaminated with radiation. This defect in creation at biological level aligns closely with the idea of “hibakusha” where the consequences of nuclear catastrophe are inscribed onto human bodies across generations. A renowned scholar in nuclear studies named Robert A. Jacobs defines and expands the use of this term beyond Japan to include all those affected by nuclear testing, accidents and radiation worldwide. He writes as it is mentioned below:

Millions of people around the world have suffered harm from radiation since the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Their bodies form part of the fabric of ecosystems where nuclear fallout deposited radioactive particles—whether from nuclear weapon testing, nuclear power plant accidents, or the production of materials used in both technologies. These exposures have led to deaths, illnesses, forced evacuations from homes and communities, continued habitation in radiologically contaminated landscapes, tainted food sources, and endless anxieties and emotional distress. (9)

In a similar context, an interviewee named Katya P. in her monologue uses the term “Chernobyl *hibakusha*” for the victims of the Chernobyl tragedy (Alexievich 117). She asks a question,

Ever heard anything about the Hiroshima *hibakusha*? The people who survived Hiroshima? They can only count on marrying each other. It doesn’t get written about or discussed here, but we exist. The Chernobyl *hibakusha*. (Alexievich 117)

By calling herself a *hibakusha*, the narrator aligns her experiences with the survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombing. She emphasises that radiation has shaped the body, life and identity of the people of Chernobyl in a lasting way. In the above-mentioned quotation, she also indicates how the “Chernobyl *hibakusha*” or Chernobyl affected individuals remain unheard in dominant historical narratives, lacking recognition compared to other well-documented nuclear survivors. An interviewee named Yevgeny Alexandrovich Brovkin, in his monologue expresses his surprise and suspicion over this ignorance in the formation historical knowledge, as he rightly says:

I began wondering why so little has been written on Chernobyl. Our writers keep on writing about the war, about Stalin’s camps, but they’re silent on Chernobyl. There are almost no books on it. Do you think that’s just a coincidence? It’s an episode still outside our culture. (98)

The survivors of the Hiroshima atomic bombing became central to international discourse on nuclear warfare, symbolising the human cost of atomic weapons. Their testimonies were widely recorded, translated and circulated, especially within peace movements and anti-nuclear activism. In contrast, the victims of the Chernobyl disaster were shaped by a different context – one of state secrecy and delayed acknowledgement under Soviet authority. Moreover, while Hiroshima fits into a clear narrative of wartime violence, Chernobyl represents a peacetime technological failure, which is harder to say in already existing moral and political terms. As a result, Chernobyl *hibakusha* lacks the same global recognition and their lived experiences – marked by invisible radiation, long-term illness and social stigma – remain marginalised and less audible in global memory. However, in *Chernobyl Prayer*, the monologues particularly collected in the present part become crucial in giving voice to the marginalised *hibakusha* of the Chernobyl tragedy.

In continuation with the above mentioned argument, radiation not only harms individuals directly exposed but also alters the natural process of creation, producing what may be seen as “defective” or vulnerable forms of life shaped by invisible nuclear particles. For example, the testimonial narrative of a mother named Larisa Z. who describes the malformed physical appearance of her daughter born immediately after the Chernobyl accident. She describes her body:

When she was born . . . It wasn't a child, but a little living sack stitched up on all sides, without a single slit, only the eyes were open. Her medical record said: 'Girl born with complex multiple pathologies: anal aplasia, vaginal aplasia and left renal aplasia.' That's what they call it in scientific language, but in plain words: she has no private parts, no bum, and just one kidney. (94)

She remembers that her daughter is the only child in Belarus to survive with such complex pathologies. She was completely unknown to the home life because she was living a hospital life. The hospital becomes her entire world.

In literary and cultural symbolism, the earth is often imagined as a nurturing mother because it sustains, nourishes and gives birth to life. Just as a mother provides care and protection, the earth offers fertility as it allows seeds to grow into plants and supporting all living beings. This association is deeply rooted in many cultural and mythological traditions where the earth is personified as a maternal figure – such as “mother earth” or the Greek goddess Gaia. For example, the line “Pavan Guru, Pani Pita, Mata Dharat Mahat” from the Guru Granth Sahib, composed by Guru Nanak Dev, presents a profound philosophical vision of nature as a nurturing and guiding force. The earth is revered as the great mother because it provides food, shelter and the foundation for all living beings. In short, the earth as mother becomes a powerful symbol of fertility, continuity and the interconnectedness of all life.

The explosion at nuclear reactor released radioactive materials that contaminated soil, water, air and living beings, rendering large areas uninhabitable and disrupting natural life cycles. In this sense, the earth – the mother – who once nurtured life becomes wounded and poisoned. It becomes unable to fully sustain life. The narrator of “Monologue on a moonscape” describes a landscape stripped of its natural vitality – silent, empty, and eerie – where familiar elements of life such as birds, animals and human activity has disappeared. He writes:

On both sides of the road there was a genuine moonscape: fields covered in white dolomite, stretching out to the horizon. The top layer of contaminated soil had been removed and buried, with this dolomite sand poured in its place. As if it wasn't earth; like we weren't on earth. (98)

Moreover, the speaker imagines a world a hundred years later where life has been grotesquely transformed by radiation. The “creature” described by him is possibly human representing

mutation and the breakdown of natural evolution. Its distorted body, “. . . hopping on four legs, jerking its long hind legs back with its knees, who sees by night with its third eye, and with its one year on the top of its head it can hear even an ant running (Alexievich 98). It reflects how radiated earth can alter not just the environment but the very process of creation itself.

The title of third section as “Admiring Disaster” though appears paradoxical, yet it reveals a deep human tendency to be fascinated by what is visually striking even when it dangerous. In “Monologue on something we did not know: death can look so pretty,” the narrator named Nadezhda Petrovna Vygovskaya describes the beauty of burning radiation:

To this day, I can see the bright, raspberry red glow. The reactor seemed lit up from inside. It was an incredible colour. Not an ordinary fire, but a kind of shining. Very pretty. If you forget all the rest, it was very pretty. (191)

The people stand on their balconies and watch the burning reactor as if it were a spectacle, fascinated by its glowing and colourful light. The disaster appears visually stunning even though it is releasing deadly radiation into the environment.

Furthermore, in “Monologue on the observation that a Russian always wants to believe in something,” a historian named Alexander Revalsky declares “Chernobyl was a disaster of the Russian mentality” (Alexievich 210). This statement is a sharp critique of a deeply ingrained way of thinking shaped by the Soviet system. On a broader historical level, the disaster has been seen as a turning point that contributed to the weakening of the Soviet Union itself. It exposed systemic inefficiencies, moral contradictions and the limits of centralised control.

To conclude, the present chapter not only reveals how the Chernobyl disaster reshapes not only the physical environment but also the very conditions of human existence. Through fragmented monologues, Alexievich constructs a landscape where nature is no longer a passive backdrop but an active, altered force that destabilizes identity, memory and belonging. Radiation as invisible yet pervasive presence, produces a crisis of meaning: it dissolves the boundaries between life and death, human and non-human, and safety and danger. In this altered world, individuals are compelled to confront existence in its most fragile and uncertain form, echoing existential anxieties about mortality, absurdity and responsibility.

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