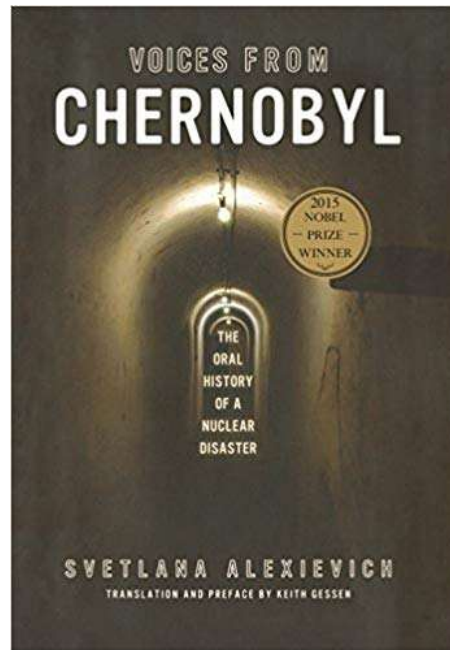


**Social Realism in Svetlana Alexievich's  
*Voices From Chernobyl: The Oral History Of A Nuclear Disaster***

**V. Grace Aganice. Assistant Professor**  
Yuvakshetra Institute of Management Studies  
Palakkad, Kerala  
[eng.yims@gmail.com](mailto:eng.yims@gmail.com), [graceaganicev@gmail.com](mailto:graceaganicev@gmail.com)

---

---



Courtesy: [https://www.amazon.com/Voices-Chernobyl-History-Nuclear-Disaster/dp/1564784010/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?keywords=Voices+from+Chernobyl%3A+the+oral+history+of+a+nuclear+Disaster.&qid=1562984734&s=books&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Voices-Chernobyl-History-Nuclear-Disaster/dp/1564784010/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=Voices+from+Chernobyl%3A+the+oral+history+of+a+nuclear+Disaster.&qid=1562984734&s=books&sr=1-1)

**Abstract**

The paper tries to read *Voices from Chernobyl* as a piece of literary text portraying the real history of the nuclear disaster. It is a powerful work which explores the life of the victims of the disaster. The paper tries to focus on the realistic accounts of the society of the time by incorporating the features of Social Realism. The paper tries to relate the psychological and personal tragedy of the Chernobyl accident and explores the experiences of individuals and how the disaster affected their lives. The voices of the victims are either a short narration of the disaster or 'choruses' with just a paragraph or two from each individual. This allows a broad range of voices to be heard from the wife of a first response fireman who took several weeks to die from radiation poisoning, self-settlers who preferred the risks of radiation, soldiers sent in

to forcibly evacuate people , the liquidators ploughing under crops, trees, topsoil and houses, hunters employed to kill abandoned cats and dogs , helicopter pilots ,children with birth defects and so on. It is a catalogue of trauma.

**Keywords:** Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices From Chernobyl*, nuclear disaster, social realism, radiation, voices of the victims.

The aim of this paper is to analyse social realism as a theoretical perspective and apply it to the work of Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices from Chernobyl: the oral history of a nuclear disaster*. The Industrial Revolution along with the rise of middle class society in the early nineteenth century, traces the interest in the depiction of the social reality in literature. The thematic issues of this literature neither told the romantic or adventurous life nor a utopian one but the naked life of human beings. The term 'Social Realism' is a combination of two terms 'social' and 'realism', which signifies an artistic movement which focuses on the social injustices and the struggles of the working class protagonists.

*Voices from Chernobyl* is a powerful work which narrates the personal details of the Nuclear disaster stories and often touches on the broader themes. Alexievich is the first person to present personal accounts of the tragedy by interviewing about more than five hundred victims including the fire fighters, liquidators (members of the cleanup team), politicians, physicians, physicists and ordinary citizens over a period of ten years. The book relates the psychological and personal tragedy of the Chernobyl accident and explores the experiences of individuals and how the disaster affected their lives.

The work explores the journalistic talent of Alexievich and gives a look back to the disaster. "When a routine test went catastrophically wrong a chain reaction went out of control in No.4 reactor of Chernobyl nuclear power station in Ukraine, creating a fireball that blew off the reactor's 1000 tone steel and concrete lid" (Alexievich 27).

The work recreates the disaster from the recorded testimonies of the victims. Out of the five hundred people being interviewed it was Lyudmilla Ignatenko, the wife of the deceased fireman Vasily Ignatenko who gave a clear picture of her encounter of the Nuclear disaster. "One night I heard a noise. I looked out of the window. He saw me. 'close the window and go back to sleep', there's a fire at the reactor. I'll be back soon" (Alexievich 28). The conversation clearly hints the very time when the No. 4 reactor got fire. Until then people had no idea of what radiation meant, but after the accident the only thing which was heard was 'radiation', 'contamination' and 'radioactive'.

At seven I was told he was in the hospital. I ran over there, but the police had already encircled it, and they weren't letting anyone through. Only Ambulances. The policemen shouted: 'the ambulances are radioactive, stay away!' I started looking for a friend, she was a doctor at the hospital. I grabbed her white coat when she came out of an ambulance. "Get me inside!" "I can't. He is bad. They all are." I held on to her. Just to see him! (Alexievich 28)

The Ukraine city woke up the next morning with calls of ambulances. Just like Lyudmilla ran to the hospital, the real history also traces the images of people running for their dear one's lives.

The Soviet Union announced today that there had been an accident at nuclear power plant in the Ukraine and that 'aid is being given to those affected'. 'A government commission has been set up'. The severity of the accident, which spread discernable radioactive material over Scandinavia was not immediately clear. (The Los Angeles Times April 28, 1986)

The women were running for their men's life. By the time Lyudmilla reached the hospital he was all swollen and puffed up. Doctors yelled at them to move away from the area. They were directed to bring milk for the people who got radiated. Women were running in search of milk: "we got in and drove to the nearest village. We bought a bunch of three- litre bottles, six, so there was enough for everyone. But they started throwing up terribly from the milk" (Alexievich 29). Most of them were transplanted to hospitals specially for radiology at Moscow. The life inside the hospitals were more terrific for the caretakers than the patients. Lyudmilla was already pregnant and only if she hides it she can get in to the hospital. They already had warned her not to go near Vasily: "And listen: if you start crying, I'll kick you out right away. No hugging and kissing. Don't even get near him. You have half an hour" (Alexievich 32).

Lyudmilla seldom cared about her, she always remained close to him. Every day there was change in his body and the burns started to come to the surface, his body changed from blue to red, grey-brown. Radiation effects are different in different bodies. He was producing stool twenty five times a day with blood and mucus in it. Also, his hair started to drop day by day. Lyudmilla took great care of her husband but someone from other bio-chambers said, "you have to understand; this is not your husband anymore, not a beloved person, but a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning. You are not suicidal. Get a hold of yourself" (Alexievich 33).

She was completely blind in her love and thought that her little one was safe inside her. The last days of her husband are really pathetic. "The last two days in the hospital – pieces of his

lungs, of his liver, were coming out of his mouth. He was choking on his internal organs. I would wrap my hand in a bandage and put it in his mouth, take out all that stuff. It's impossible to talk about" (Alexievich 33).

The disaster had not ended, the Emergency Commission met them: "they told everyone the same thing : It's impossible for us to give you the bodies of your husbands, your sons, they are highly radioactive and will be buried in a Moscow cemetery in a special way. In sealed zinc caskets, under cement tiles" (Alexievich 35). They could not even get the bodies of their beloved. This was again not the end, she gave birth to a girl baby alive, but she had cirrhosis of the liver. The child had abnormal heart pumping and it died after four hours. The scientific study records: "a more objective point of view was well expressed by the UN General Secretary Kofi Annan, the exact number of victims may never be known, but 3 million children require treatment, and many will die prematurely" (Lobanov 8).

The work traces the real history of Byelorussia, wherein people still suffer the contamination caused by the radiation from the Nuclear power plant. Lyudmilla Ignatenko is not a solitary voice from Chernobyl, but she is the chorus of the whole Europe. But amid the environmental devastation, the human story of Chernobyl is often lost. Alexievich discovers the human side of the tragedy through her work, *Voices from Chernobyl: the oral history of a Nuclear disaster*. The social reality is very much evident in the work.

---

### Works Cited

Barry, Peter. *Beginning theory – An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. 4th edition, 2008.

Gale, Robert. "Chernobyl could cause 75000 deaths worldwide, Expert says" *Los Angeles Times*. Aug 28, 1986.

Gessen, Keith. translator. *Voices from Chernobyl: the oral history of a Nuclear Disaster*. Svetlana Alexievich, Kindle edition, 2006.

Lobanov, Eugeniy et al. "The difficult truth about the Chernobyl Catastrophe". *The Chernobyl Catastrophe consequences on human health*. Vol. 34, no3, June 2009, p8, [www.hps.org/documents/greenpeace-Chernobyl-health-report](http://www.hps.org/documents/greenpeace-Chernobyl-health-report). Accessed 22 Feb 2019.

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 19:7 July 2019

V. Grace Aganice. Assistant Professor

Social Realism in Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices From Chernobyl: The Oral History of A Nuclear Disaster*

Perez Pena, Richard. "Nuclear explosion at Chernobyl." *HISTORY*, vol 123, no1, Nov 2009, pp 34-35, [www.history.com/this day-in history/nuclear explosion-at-Chernobyl](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/nuclear-explosion-at-Chernobyl). Accessed 22 Feb 2019.