
Collecting Voices: Literary and Political Engagement in Svetlana Alexievich

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Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian writer and political activist, spent most of her life in the Soviet Union and present-day Belarus, with prolonged periods of exile in the US and Germany. Opposing war and totalitarianism, Alexievich wrote about Soviet and post-Soviet individuals who suffered WWII, the Soviet-Afghan War, and the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. As a writer, she developed a prominent literary genre, “documentary literature,” which offers artistic renderings of real events. Cultivating this new form of literature, Alexievich recorded the recollections of real people and published polyphonic works presenting choruses of voices describing specific historical events. Engaging the voices of people, whose stories have no written records in official documents and are unknown to international societies, Alexievich sought to promote human rights and enable global readers to see the disastrous effects of war and totalitarianism reinforced from Stalin’s time. Recognizing that Alexievich’s polyphonic writings have advantages in advancing human rights, this study tries to solve questions regarding the issue of voice and representation. Why did Alexievich valorize voices exclusively rather than incorporate visual materials, such as photos, into her documentary narratives? How are the voices displayed in her testimonial writings, and what sources influenced her representation of these voices? Illuminating these questions, my presentation articulates the singular qualities of her polyphonic narratives, and unfolds multilayered implications surrounding her composition of the type of novels.

Biography:

Joori Lee is an associate professor of English at Chonnam National University, South Korea. She completed her PhD dissertation at Texas A&M University. The title of her PhD dissertation is “The Making of Beauty: Aesthetic Spaces in the Fiction of D. H. Lawrence, Muriel Spark, and Virginia Woolf” (2013), where she argues that the modernist writers sought to undermine the logic of war and totalitarianism by representing moments of beauty in literary texts. After earning her doctorate, she sought to test the validity of this view in greater depth by studying a range of novels produced in diverse countries and outside the British tradition. Her publications include articles on the works of modern and contemporary US, Canadian, British, and South Korean novelists.