

Temporal and Spatial Narrative Labyrinth: A Bakhtinian Chronotopic Exploration of the Non-fiction - Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War

Lt. Dr. Nivant Kambale

Assistant Professor, ES&H Department, Thakur College of Engineering and Technology, Kandivali (East) Mumbai- 400101

Abstract:

The paper delves into the temporal and spatial aspects known as Chronotopes propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) underlaid in the non-fiction '*Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*' (1992) of Svetlana Alexievich (1948). The concept of chronotope has special significance in understanding the text in its historical and cultural context. The Chronotope helps to understand the meaning construed by the author in contemporary settings to discover the connotative meaning of the art form. This paper attempts to study the narrative of time and space relations that shape the non-fiction of Svetlana Alexievich to analyse the interplay of time and space to understand the voices of people who are either the victims of the war or the survivors of the war. The study also tries to interpret the non-fiction in the context of the war that lasted for ten years between the USSR and Afghanistan creating a lasting impact on the people of both nations forever.

Keywords: Chronotope, Non-Fiction, Temporal, Spatial and Narrative.

Introduction:

The Afghanistan War (1979-1989) was one of the deadliest and most gruesome wars as far as its casualties and effects on the world are concerned it was fought by the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR). Hundreds of thousands of Russian soldiers laid down their lives on the foreign land due to the war which in turn proved devastating for the Russians as well. The cruelty and the merciless killings of more than fifty thousand soldiers in the Afghan-Russia war destroyed the dreams and lives of millions of relatives of these dead soldiers. The testimonies of the nurses, soldiers, technicians, mothers, and daughters reveal the gruesome reality of the complexities of the war and its meaninglessness for humanity. The objectives of fighting the war were not clear to the soldiers who were told by the Russian authorities that they were going for the noble cause of establishing humanity on another's land. Even the dead bodies of the young soldiers were not handed over to their relatives instead they were buried without informing the relatives of the death of their dear ones. The media was also kept silent nothing could report the truth of the matter of the war which was fought on a foreign land by Russian soldiers. Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarussian, Ukrainian investigative journalist has written a series of oral histories based on major events in Russia like the Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster (1986), the Dissolution of

the USSR (1989), World War (1914-1918) and the Russian Revolution (1917-1923). Alexievich has travelled extensively to the places where these events had happened and met the victims and survivors of these major events to conduct their interviews and testimonies of their experiences about these events. Her works of oral histories are collectively known as ‘Voices of Utopia’ as these deal with the voices of the people who perceived these historical events from their experiences. The dialogic voices of the nurses, soldiers, doctors, officers, mothers, daughters, and technicians revealed the magnitude, ferocity and brutality of the war and the merciless killings of innocent people due to these major historical tragic events. Svetlana Alexievich visited Afghanistan several times to conduct interviews with the victims and survivors of the Afghanistan war (1979-1989) and interviews of the Russian relatives of victims and survivors of this war. Their experiences reveal the cruelty and complexities of this war and its lasting impact on the whole world.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian philosopher in his essay *‘Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel’* (1937) introduces and elaborates on the concept of Chronotope to show the intrinsic relationship between time and space in the novel. Bakhtin advocates that the time and space relations shape the narrative of the novel influencing the setting and characters of the story. It is this relationship that unfolds the contemporary culture and its impact. The chronotope not only helps to develop the narrative but also unravels the meaning dimensions of the story through different perspectives. Bakhtin establishes the relationship between the story and the culture speculating on the chronotopic analysis. Though Mikhail Bakhtin mainly focuses on the chronotopic analysis of novels it is aptly applicable and analysable in other forms of literature as well like non-fiction. Bakhtin in his essay states, “We will give the name Chronotope (Literally, “time-space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin, 1981, 84). He asserts that the interplay between the time and space relationship is so intrinsic to the novel that it is impossible to separate it from the narrative structure of the novel. To explain this, he writes further in the essay that, “In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole” (Bakhtin, 1981, 84).

The quantitative research based on textual analysis of *‘Zinky Boys’* (1992) explores the time and space relations and their cultural significance reflected in the experiences and testimonies of the people who were either the relatives of the victims or the survivors of the victims of the Afghanistan War (1979-1989) that took place almost ten long years. Though the event (Battlefield) took place in Afghanistan, the repercussions of the war remarkably impacted the USSR. Thousands of young soldiers of the USSR died and were sent back to the USSR in coffins made up of the metal Zinc and hence the title of the testimonial work of Svetlana is named after. The historical time from 1979 to 1989 and the space in the form of Afghanistan and Russia are intrinsic to the narrative of the non-fiction *‘Zinky Boys’* (1992). The chronotopes of the time and space construct the meaning of the narrative of the non-fiction which is mainly in the form of testimonies of soldiers, doctors, mothers, daughters, and all those who were impacted greatly by the war. In addition, the interplay of time and space unravels the structure and cultural context of this major historical event which shook the entire world.

Temporal Chronotopes:

Svetlana Alexievich’s non-fiction *‘Zinky Boys Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War’* (1992) chronicles various aspects of time as far as its events are concerned. It deals with the major event of the War between Afghanistan and Russia which lasted for ten years from 1979 to 1989 and claimed to be 50,000

lives. The sufferings of the people are chronicled by the investigative journalist as she was not interested in knowing the reason for which the war was fought but how the war is perceived by these people. Svetlana interviews thousands of people to collect firsthand information about the war and its impact on the lives of the people and hence her oral narratives open the multiple and polyphonic views of the event. She travelled for over one decade to interview the relatives of the victims and survivors of the war to chronicle their perceptions about the war. The non-fiction includes three parts namely 'The First Day', 'The Second Day', and 'The Third Day' and each part further contains fifteen different testimonies of various people who were either the relatives of the victims or the survivors of the war. Therefore, the non-fiction deals with the time of actual war that happened from 1979 to 1989 and the testimonies of the people after the war.

The testimonies ranging from serving soldiers to nurses in the hospitals unravel the time chronotope of the narrative of the non-fiction. The experiences of these people present the harrowing reality of wartime and bring forth the different shades of personalities of the people. The chronotope as a formally constitutive category determines to a significant degree the image of man in literature as well. The image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic" (Bakhtin, 1981, 85). As Bakhtin stated the images reflected through the oral narratives of the people indicated the ordeals of the time through which these people went. The historical time sheds light on the images of the people that changed their lives forever. The youths of Russia were told that they would be serving humanity in Afghanistan and hence millions of youths came forward voluntarily to serve the nation but when they reached Afghanistan, they realized the ugly face of human geo-political time. It was the worst time in the history of the world which brought to light the sordid reality, meaninglessness, brutality, killings, and futility of the war.

The condition was worse not only for Russian soldiers but also for the Afghans as well. The impact was so massive on the lives of the people of both the USSR and Afghanistan that even to meet the basic things in life people used to struggle to the extent of selling their bodies. The story of Svetka Afoshka reveals the ugly side of the human face during the Afghan war which forced people into human trafficking as well. The soldiers describe her situation, "We never knew her real surname, but apparently when she arrived in Kabul she'd sleep with a soldier for 100 Afghans- or afoshki as we called them- until she realised, she was selling herself cheap" (Svetlana, 1992, 51). The war can't segregate the sordid reality based on women, children and destitute it knows only destruction and devastation of lives of not only the humans but also the natural world as well. The oral testimony of a mother about her son is heart-wrenching as her son was barely a schoolgoer and was picked up to serve in the Army in a foreign land. Svetlana describes that:

"Then they took him off to the army. I prayed he wouldn't be killed. I prayed he wouldn't be beaten up and humiliated by the bigger, senior ones- he was so small. He told us how they could force you to clean out the toilets with a toothbrush and wash out other people's underpants. That's what I was afraid of. He wrote and told us he was being posted and to send him photos of his mum and dad and sister..." (Svetlana, 1992, 53)

The interviews not only narrate the testimonies of the wartime, but it deals with the psychological time of the people due to the trauma and anxiety of the war memories and experiences. The testimony of the Army doctor shows that the thought of the war proved to be tormenting for them as they considered themselves one or the other way responsible for killing humanity in general. The Army doctor says "No one who was over there wants to fight another war. We won't be fooled again. All of us, whether we were naïve or cruel. Good or rotten, fathers, husbands, and sons, we were all killers" (Svetlana, 1992,

61). The chronotope of time thus, helps to unravel the historical, psychological, and natural time of the war and that sheds light on various aspects of the war. The fifteen testimonies in each three sections of the non-fiction deal with these different aspects of time that unfold the narratives of the non-fiction.

The post-war chronotope of time indicated through the various testimonies of the people also underlies the labyrinth of the time chronotropic narrative. Svetlana has successfully depicted and chronicled the post-war trauma of the people in the form of their interviews for which they were never ready easily. She convinces people to reveal the truth of the event and the sordid reality of the war after their loved one's death. There was a darkness about their future because they were completely dependent on her husband. The loss of the person and the worry of the future made their lives like hell. She describes her situation,

“We have a small, one-room flat, so the coffin was placed in the clubhouse. I threw myself over it, ‘Why? Why? What harm did you ever do anyone?’ I cried and passed out. When I came to again I looked at that box and remembered the crazy woman's words: ‘They'll send him back in a zinky...’” (Svetlana, 1992, 105).

Thus, the non-fiction chronicles the chronotopes of time of the war, the pre-war and the post-war experiences and memories of the people who could be either the relatives of the victims or the survivors of the Afghanistan War that lasted for ten long years destroying the different phases of the lives of the people of USSR and Afghanistan. The interplay of time and space forms the major crux of the analysis and thereby helps to decipher the different aspects of the non-fiction. It also helps to unravel the multiple voices of the people and their perspectives on the war.

Spatial Chronotopes:

The testimonies of the soldiers, nurses, doctors, and technicians reveal the blurring reality of the war in terms of its present, past, and future consequences on the lives of the people of the USSR and Afghanistan. The Afghanistan battlefield acts as one of the important spatial chronotopes in the non-fiction. The trauma of the people who witnessed the war in the land of Afghanistan played a key role in the lives of the USSR soldiers as far as adversities are concerned. They were informed that war was fought to bring socialism to Afghanistan like the USSR to make it a noble land. The cause of the war was not even known to the youth who voluntarily became ready to serve their country in a foreign land. The chaos of the battlefield in Afghanistan and the soldiers' pathetic condition bring forth the ugly face of the war where there was starvation and, a lack of basic human requirements including food and enough shelter. Though the interplay of actual historical time and space may seem erratic, they are intrinsically inseparable from each other.

“The process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature has a complicated and erratic history, as does the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space. Isolated aspects of time and space, however -- those available in each historical stage of human development -- have been assimilated, and corresponding generic techniques have been assimilated, and corresponding generic techniques have been devised for reflecting and artistically processing such appropriated aspects of reality” (Bakhtin, 1981, 8).

The social space in the non-fiction reflected is equally crucial to understanding the imperative meanings of the interviews of the people chronicled by Svetlana. The different structures of the society from the USSR to Afghanistan enrich the narrative of the non-fiction and thereby help to understand the settings like various places mentioned in the non-fiction during the war and after the war. The mother in her

interviews reveals her agony of the war even after the death of her son, the system has nothing to do with the emotions and plight of the people. She says, “Our coffin had to wait outside for an hour. Our son was six foot six tall; he was a para. It was like a sarcophagus, a wooden coffin inside a zinc one. It took six men to get it up the stairs...” (Svetlana, 1992, 105).

Alienation and fragmentation are the prime characteristics seen to be experienced by each person who happens to return from the war. It was the biggest issue for them to get settled after returning from the trauma of the war. The women who participated in the war as nurses and even soldiers found it very difficult to survive with the label of the war veteran. The thought of women sleeping with several other people during the war made their lives hell as they could not find a groom for themselves. People who returned could consider themselves fortunate enough that they could return home safely. There was not a single household in Russia which did not have to experience the mourning of a closed one. A widow's testimony reveals the truth of the matter of the war, she expresses that, “In the last war everyone was in mourning, there wasn't a family in the land that hadn't lost some loved one” (Svetlana, 1992, 168).

Most of the people whom Svetlana interviewed found to be disillusioned about their post-war lives as they didn't know exactly what was going to happen to them. The interviews of these people reveal the multiple voices paving the way for several issues that underlie the problems of the war and its impact on the people of both Russia as well as Afghanistan. A 1st Lieutenant i/c Mortar Platoon, twenty-two years young boy's thought validates the fragmentation and disillusionment of the people who participated in the war. He expresses his feelings in the following words:

“I dreamt of home, of nights I lay
Listening to the Rowans sigh.
“Cuckoo, cuckoo, tell me pray
How many years before I die...?” (Svetlana, 1992, 95).

Conclusion:

Thus, the present paper attempted the chronotopic analysis of time and space in the non-fiction work of Svetlana Alexievich who chronicled the interviews or the testimonies of the people from Russia and Afghanistan about their experiences and memories of Russia's ten-year war in Afghanistan. The analysis further threw light upon the interplay of time and space in the narrative which unravels various sheds of connotative meanings of the war. It also highlights the importance of the chronotope of time and space which are not only the narrative devices of the novel as propounded by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), but it is equally the narrative device of non-fiction as well.

References

1. Alexievich, Svetlana. *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*. Translated by Julia and Robin Whitby, introduction by Larry Heinemann. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992. Translation of Cinkovyemal'čiki.
2. Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Holquist Michael. Translated by Holquist Michael and Emerson Caryl. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
3. Bemong, Nele. Borghart, Pieter. Demoen, Kristoffel. *Bakhtin's Theory of the Literary Chronotope: Reflections, Applications, Perspectives*. USA: Gent, Academia Press, 2010.