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THE IMPLANTATION OF NIHILISM AS AN AFTERMATH OF CHERNOBYL NUCLEAR POWER-PLANT EXPLOSION – A STUDY OF *CHERNOBYL PRAYER: A CHRONICLE OF THE FUTURE* BY SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH

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Chernobyl, the name itself subsumes within it a host of memories, traumas, sufferings, anxieties and the very collapse of a culture and tradition that a population held onto very dearly. On April 26, 1986 during a simulated power outage safety test, the core of reactor no. 4 at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant exploded leading to a gigantic radioactive contamination that lasted for about nine days, but the release of the isotopes didn't halt till much later. As John M. LaForge writes:

> Once a thriving community of 45,000, Pripyat was the only city near Chernobyl's
>
> Unit 4 when the reactor exploded on April 26, 1986. It burned until October, spewing dangerous isotopes around the Earth (28).

The establishment of an exclusion zone, the mass evacuation of people, the plummeting of diseases caused by exposure to radiation, the countless deaths, and the loss of faith in the revered USSR injected a sense of misery and gloom among the victims of Chernobyl. "The greatest technological catastrophe in world history" as Izvestia calls Chernobyl which brought with it a shattering of all beliefs and ideals (qtd. in LaForge 28). John M. LaForge notes "The 90 million people living downwind – Belarus, Ukraine and Russia – are learning the hard way that damage done by ionizing radiation is unrelenting, cumulative and irreversible" (28). In the history of world, the twentieth century is one such century that saw major catastrophic events threatening the very existence of man, thus plunging him into an existential crisis which made recourse towards some meaningful ground problematic. From embarking into the age of the anthropocene to the unprecedented World Wars to a massive technological accident like Chernobyl to the shuddering holocaust, the modern world saw

itself on the verge of collapsing. The century, hence witnessed consequently a rise in the penetration of conditions of existential crisis and nihilistic tendencies. Nihilism as a philosophy pronounces a refutation of meaning, existence, human values and knowledge that man counts on for providing some organizational structure to life. A rebuttal of all these values makes life pointless and all knowledge baseless. "The term is sometimes used in association with *anomie* to explain the general mood of despair at a perceived pointlessness of existence or arbitrariness of human principles and social institutions" ("Nihilism"). Friedrich Nietzsche was a prominent philosopher of Nihilism who detected nihilism as an ailment afflicting Western Culture and maintained that Christian morality could not provide any foundation for the existence of man. He defines Nihilism in the *Will for Power* as "the feeling of valuelessness" which is reached "with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of 'aim,' the concept of 'unity,' or the concept of truth" (13). The origin of the word 'nihilism' is the Latin word 'nihil' which itself means 'nothing.' Manschreck sums up what Nihilism stood for especially in the twentieth century by pointing out that Nihilism has "also come to suggest a mood of despair, a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness, a loss of transcendence, a feeling that life finally ends in the nothingness of death . . ." (86).

Svetlana Alexievich's work *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* documents the experiences of the victims of Chernobyl as narrated by them. Belonging to the genre of 'testimonial literature', Alexievich's work weaves the voices of the survivors – fire-fighters, residents, clean-up workers, widows, resettlers into a lattice of painful memories, fear, devastation and distress. Apart from the mental and physical agony that Alexievich's work reflects, the embeddedness of nihilism evident in the testimonies provided by the victims of Chernobyl is hard to escape. Alexievich remarks that after the night of April 26, 1896, they shifted to some other place, a place completely unknown and unintelligible to them, the world they had previously inhabited became false and the world they had come to inhabit post Chernobyl was unfathomable and muddled:

> We took a leap into a new reality, and that reality proved beyond not only our knowledge but also our imagination. Time was out of joint. The past suddenly became impotent, it had nothing for us to draw on; in the all encompassing . . . archive of humanity, we couldn't find a key to open this door (25-26).

Who could have thought that a scientific incident could become the cause of utter nihilism bearing with it "extreme pessimism" with its "apocalyptic tenor spawning a mood of gloom and a good deal

of anxiety, anger and terror" over the victims of the accident where their fond values stood disabled in assisting them to endure the unmatched catastrophic upshots of the explosion (Pratt). The past became powerless and they were stranded in the land where their life had become meaningless where "why? [found] no answer" (Nietzsche 9). "The world of our belief and values" was "blown apart" by Chernobyl as Alexievich asserts, the survivors themselves became mere radioactive objects living in perennial dread of meeting their death and a never-ending search for some meaning to their aimless and purposeless existence (32). A diseased life was their future:

> Soyfer points out that because exposure of radiation most frequently results in genetic and reproductive damage - with disorders passing from generation to generation – Chernobyl's enduring legacy will be that of inherited diseases deformities, developmental abnormalities, spontaneous abortion and premature births (qtd. in LaForge 28).

As Helmut Thielicke writes, "Nihilism literally has only one truth to declare, namely, that ultimately Nothingness prevails and the world is meaningless" (qtd. in Pratt). The nothingness entailed by the collapse of culture after the Chernobyl accident was articulated passionately by Lyudmila Dmitrieva Polyanskaya, a village school teacher:

> There is our pre-Chernobyl culture, but we do not have a post-Chernobyl culture. We live surrounded by thoughts of war, the collapse of socialism and an uncertain future. There is a lack of new ideas, of new goals and ideas (225).

USSR, which had always instilled in people a patriotic fervour keeping the state united in nationalistic vigour was looked upon by its very own people at the time of Chernobyl for aid, but they were engrossed in hushing the entire matter up and under-reporting the facts. One of the soldiers who worked at the exclusion zone gave his testimony, "Before going home, we were all called to see a KGB officer, who strongly advised never to speak to anyone about what we'd seen" (83). "The radiation technicians were providing one set of figures," Sergey Gurin, a cameraman told, "while the papers were printing another" (119).

The cherished belief of the people in their state for providing them support in times of difficulty, for acquainting them with the truth was hence shattered in the face of an accident as singular as Chernobyl. "Every belief, every considering something true," Nietzsche posits, "is false because there

is simply no true world" (14). With their belief and faith frazzled, the people were bereft of any agency which could grant some meaning to their existence. As one of the villagers asserted, "We used to have communists instead of God" (57). It was the death of their God. Chernobyl dictated the end of communism which had to taste defeat in affording some explanation, some value to the lives of people. Valentina Apanasevich, wife of a clean-up worker who died an agonizing death testified about the passing away of communism when she said, "In the newspapers, they're writing it's not Chernobyl but Communism that has blown up. The Soviet way of life is finished . . ." (290).

"The realization that" man "lacks the least right to posit a beyond or an in-itself of things" was dawned upon the residents who experienced the aftermath of Chernobyl or who dispensed their duties as soldiers, clean-up workers, etc (Nietzsche 9). It is quite rightly observed by Sergey Gurin that "Man is no hero. We are all peddling the apocalypse" (124). Man's false belief in the absolute autonomy was upended by a technological catastrophe precipitated by man's own fallacies. "The most universal sign of the modern age," Nietzsche believes is that, "man has lost dignity in his own eyes to an incredible extent" (16). Man's weakness is unveiled:

> Death lurked everywhere, in a strange guise. Man had been caught off guard, he wasn't ready. . . .Our eyes, ears and fingers were no longer of any help, they could serve no purpose, because radiation is invisible, with no smell or sound. It was incorporeal (28).

Marat Filippovich Kokhanov, former chief engineer of the Institute of Atomic Energy dwelled on how the staff members of the Institute were utterly afraid of losing their belief that "Man was the measure of all things" and that they were, "living in a fine and just society that put people first." And the collapse of this faith, Kokhanov said, "ended in a heart attack or suicide" (202). The faiths that a person clings to are inherently false, as nihilists suggest.

"Pessimism" is Nietzsche propounds a "preliminary form of nihilism" (11). Death or solely the contemplation of death can indispensably become the occasion of pessimistic feelings taking root in any human. Howsoever, being witness to a seemingly unending chain of deaths can lead to a much enormous pessimism. Lyudmila Ignatenko lost the love of her life, her husband Vasily Ignatenko, a fireman who got exposed to extreme radiation while struggling to douse the fire at the power plant on the very day of the explosion. The firemen who were called upon that day for extinguishing the fire

had no safety gear upon them, baring them to the fatally dangerous nuclear radiation. Lyudmila Ignatenko cried, "I had no desire at all to live" in the wake of enduring a spectre of deaths around her and losing her husband (22). Pessimism had therefore seeped into every cell of her body, something which she could not overcome for the rest of her life. It was a pessimism that squeezed all meaning from her strangely absurd existence. Vladimir Matveyevich Ivanov, former first secretary of a District Party Committee also narrated an incident of extreme pessimism among little children. Once when he was travelling on a trolley bus, a boy who was not giving up his seat for an old man was thus called into question by the old man:

> 'When you're old, you will find nobody stands up for you'
>
> 'I'm never going to be old,' the boy retorts.
>
> 'How so?'
>
> 'We're all going to die soon' (238).

Another child professed:

> I had a lot of friends here: Yulya, Katya . . . and now Andrey. 'We will die and become part of science,' Andrey used to say. 'We will die and everyone will forget us.' That's what Katya thought. 'When I die, don't bury me in a graveyard. I'm afraid of cemeteries. . . .' was what Oxana wanted (280).

Death became the metaphor of life for people, from young to old after the explosion. According to an article published in *Earth Island Journal* in 1991:

> In areas around Chernobyl, childhood tumors are on the rise with the peak still not expected for another two years. Thyroid related diseases have doubled for children living in Southern Byelorussia. Birth defects have increased 200 percent and anaemia cases have risen 700 percent (7).

Death, sickness and the haunting memories of Chernobyl brought pessimism as their obligatory product which made nihilism its corollary. Mercia Eliade writes, "Anguish before Nothingness and Death seems to be a specifically modern phenomenon." She further states that in other cultures, "Death is the Great Initiation. But in the modern world Death is emptied of its religious meaning; that

is why it is assimilated to Nothingness and Death seems to be a specifically modern phenomenon" (qtd. in Manschreck 88).

The inexplicability of the disaster becomes apparent from the metaphor of war that was instantaneously adopted by the people in the strained effort of making some sense of it. One of the victims who got reminded of the war from the incident had the following to say in this regard:

> The soldiers came into the village and evacuated people. The streets were clogged with military vehicles: armoured personnel carriers, trucks covered with green tarpaulins, even tanks. People had to leave their homes with soldiers present. . . .People are always comparing it to war. My father has told me about the war, and I've read books about it. But this? All that is left of our village is three graveyards: one has people lying in it . . . the second has all the cats and dogs . . . the thirds has our homes (182).

Art is a mirroring of the actual socio-cultural conditions of a society or world in general. The sweep of Nihilism was far and wide. Dadaism, an art movement that flourished in the twentieth century developed as a vehement reaction to the destruction and atrocities of World War I. With their disapproval of any logic or reason and exaltation of nonsense and unreasonableness, Dadaism gave an expression to their nihilism. Sickened by the horrors and barbarity of World War I, Nihilistic tendencies overtook Dadaists and they articulated the dearth of reason in the world in their artworks. On a similar note, the victims of Chernobyl who likened the accident with a war for the lack of ability to define it in some other terms, shaken by its enormity and horror were overpowered with feelings of Nihilism, as were the Dadaists. The idea that a cataclysmic disaster be it a War or Nuclear Disaster has a profound potential of giving birth to feelings of Nihilism in the modern world requires almost negligent probing. Svetlana Alexeivich herself stated in the book that horror and dread had always been associated with war and since a disaster like Chernobyl was drawing out similar responses of horror and dread; people were muddling both the concepts (27).

Abert Camus, in his essay "The Myth of Sysiphus", ponders over the absurd condition of man who is doomed to a life rendered meaningless by the continuous, repetitive and fruitless labour that fate allots him. This modern predicament of man is compared by him to the legend of Sisyphus. Sisyphus was punished by the Gods for his earthly passions to roll a stone up a mountain which upon reaching the

top will fall back again to the ground every time and Sisyphus would then have to roll it up again. This exercise would continue for times innumerable, "Sisyphus is the absurd hero . . . His scorn of Gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing." Camus also maintains that this life of nihilism and absurdity becomes tragic only at the moments when one becomes conscious of it, "The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious." Chernobyl can be seen as that moment of consciousness of the sheer nihilism that man's life is composed of. As Camus opines, the consciousness or awareness of the nothingness of life makes it tragic and unbearable, Chernobyl supplied people with that awareness and enveloped their lives in a cloud of nihilism.

Wars, nuclear explosions, and terrorism have wreaked havoc in the modern world, not just for the damage to life and property that they cause but also for the nihilism they foster. As Camus postulates, "There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night," the consciousness of the nothingness of life grants freedom to man which saves him from endeavouring to rummage in any institutions that he has so far reposed his faith in for some ground and meaning, thus making him the "master of his days." The victims of Chernobyl eventually accepted the meaninglessness of life and realized the ineffectiveness of reposing their faith in any other entity, hence offering them with an infinitesimal solace in their otherwise strenuous existence.

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