

# Women's Acumen of War: An Analytical Textual Discourse of Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*

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## Abstract

War is often a portrayal of the intrepid male realm in history; consistently reiterating the eminence of the male populace and overshadowing the contributions of women. Despite demonstration of capabilities in par with men and involvement in various jurisdictions, historical records have bequeathed minimal representation to the participation of bold women. Svetlana Alexievich is one of those few writers who interviewed these unsung heroines and compiled their testimonies in her book titled, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, offering them a platform to share their honest opinions. In the wake of human accomplishment, women have contributed phenomenally in the militia, but their humane and feminine instincts have differed widely when compared to men. In spite of, disparities and disparaging views on women's progress, there are a few authors who continue to acknowledge women's prowess. This paper is an analysis of Alexievich's work which brings forth the dark realities of war and a femino centric perspective of women warriors.

**Keywords:** women in war, textual discourse, female soldiers, psychology and war, untold truth, horrors of War

## 1. Introduction

Gender stereotyping originated millions of years ago when homo sapiens believed that women ought to be confined to procreating and raising their progeny, while men went out hunting and finding resources to protect their families. Physical prowess was most often attributed to men and, frailty to women. Simone de Beauvoir, French author, existential philosopher, political activist, and social theorist, in *The Second Sex* says, "Weakness' is weakness only in light of the aims man sets for himself, the instruments at his disposal and the laws he imposes." (Beauvoir & Parshley, 1997) War, for instance, is often a portrayal of the intrepid male realm in history; consistently reiterating the eminence of the male populace. Homer's *The Iliad* highlights this aspect in a conversation between Hector and his wife Andromache, before he leaves to war. Hector says, "Go home, and attend to your tasks, the loom and spindle, and see the maids work hard. War is a man's concern, the business of every man in Ilium, and mine above all." (A.S., K, 2009). The notion, that war was man's business and not the concern of women, is depicted through Hector's statement.

On the contrary, Homer glorifies the might of the Amazonian women in his work *The Iliad* by referring to them as "*antianerai*" which has multiple translations meaning equal to men a match for men or man-like. Anthropologists have carried out extensive research on the Amazonians that has resulted in distinct interpretations. Lorna Hardwick in her article, "Ancient Amazons – Heroes, Outsiders or Women?", published by Cambridge University Press, elucidates the Greek construction of images and how Amazonian women were criticised for rejecting men and being outside the normal parameters of lifestyle. Amazonian women were portrayed as subversives, unfeminine, lesbians, communists, hippies, etc. Furthermore, Hardwick challenges the historical authenticity of content through formal and structural analysis by suggesting that although, "Amazon legends basically draw on the image of a war-like society of women, living on the borders of the known world, renowned for archery and riding skills" (Hardwick, 1990) there is little-known implication of their existence following a detailed analysis; thus, identifying a possible mythical assumption.

Physical agility and vitality are attributes of the male province; often excluding women for reasons associated with emotional instability. Feminists argue against such philosophies by highlighting child birth and labour pain which

involves physical exertion and intense pain endurance. Although, it is convincing to believe that one sex is physically more agile than the other, power dynamics since ancient times, proves the contrary. Discriminatory notions were challenged by a few women as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, when their dexterity was witnessed in the battlefield. Contributing in various jurisdictions and demonstrating physical abilities in par with men, women disproved the ancient notions and attributes bestowed on them. Artimisia I of Caira, named after the Goddess of the Hunt (Artemis) was the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE queen of Halicarnassus, a kingdom that exists in Turkey. Artimisia was the naval commander and ally of Xerxes, the king of Persia. Her fleet was considered as one of the best among those fighting against the Greeks, making her one of the greatest female warriors in history.

Despite demonstration of capabilities, historical records have bequeathed minimal representation to the participation of bold women. Nevertheless, writers like Svetlana Alexievich attempted to recognise women who exhibited supreme valour. She interviewed some of these unsung heroines and compiled their testimonies in her book entitled, *The Unwomanly Face of War*. Alexievich is a Belarussian investigative journalist who won the Nobel Prize in 2015 for her extensive contributions in Literature through her unique polyphonic writing style. This research paper is an analysis of Alexievich's work which brings forth the dark realities of war and women's perspective of war, as direct partakers. In addition, it aims to analyze the horrendous aspects of war in general, alongside its impact on female combatants.

## 2. Literature Review

Historical books on war are predominantly written with a male perspective; dismissing women's efforts as inconsequential to the greater success achieved in the battleground. Greek historian Herodotus wrote about the heroics of Artemisia I of Caira and her intelligent strategies in the battlefield, but her death was not recorded as an incident in the great battle, but as one that was associated with her blind love for a man who loathed her. After blinding him in sleep, it is believed that she leapt off a cliff to cure herself and break the bond of love, but instead, ended up breaking her neck. Elaboration on the love life of Artemisia rather than her battle skills is an exemplification of how history depicts warfare as a domain of men, in most cultures, despite their roles in the frontline. In her book, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich explains this perception in the following lines where she mentions,

But...it was men writing about men – that much was clear at once. Everything we know about war, we know with “a man's voice.” We are all captives of “men's” notions and “men's” sense of war. “Men's” words. Women are silent... Women's stories are different and about different things. “Women's” war has its own colors, its own smell, its own lighting, and its own range of feelings. (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017)

Reflections on the role of female combatants in literary classics suggests that women did not prevail as warriors for long either because of death or familial bonds. Women who served the militia in diverse roles like medical assistants, snipers, machine gunners, commanders of aircraft guns and sappers, had to choose roles as lab technicians, museum guides or teachers, after returning from war. Discrepancy of roles and gender stereotyping distorted their identities as a result of consistent subjugation and marginalisation. Tristan Hughes, in his article entitled “10 Great Warrior Women of the Ancient World”, writes about Zenobia, Queen of Syria's Palmyrene Empire, who was an erudite polyglot. She was known to behave ‘like a man’, riding, drinking and hunting with her officers (Priyadharshini, Mohan, Hariharasudan & Sangeetha, 2021). Zenobia's fate and death are recorded as conflicting accounts in historical books. Historians like Zosimus claim that she starved herself to death while other sensational chroniclers like Malalas concluded that she was humiliated and later beheaded by Aurelian, who had defeated her regimen.

Hughes mentions about Triệu Thị Trinh in his list, commonly referred to as Lady Triệu, of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Vietnam who had temporarily freed her homeland from the Chinese rule. According to David Marr in his book, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial*, Lady Triệu reacts defiantly to the persuasion from her brother against rebelling. She says, “I only want to ride the wind and walk the waves, slay the big whales of the Eastern sea, clean up frontiers, and save the people from drowning. Why should I imitate others, bow my head, stoop over and be a slave? Why resign myself to menial housework?” (Marr, 1984). Lady Triệu's response highlights the patriarchal expectations and gender stereotyping that existed during 226-248AD. Moreover, Lady Triệu's conquest has not been included in the Chinese history because her deeds were considered barbaric and of no historical interest. Vietnamese historians, on the other hand, have written more about her physical appeal like the size of her gargantuan breasts and her mysterious suicide at a young age, than her intrepidity.

Queen of the British Celtic Icenic tribe, Boudicca led an uprising against the forces of the Roman Empire in Britain in sixty AD. The cause of her death was similarly linked to suicide after being defeated in her final battle. Teuta was the

Queen of the Ardiaei tribe in Illyria during the late third century BC, and is correspondingly listed among these warriors and is believed to have ended her life in grief by throwing herself from Orjen Mountains at Lipci (Pandeewari, Hariharasudan & Kot, 2021). Emotional instability and inability to handle defeat are usually correlated to women who exhibited heroism. Historians have recorded these details in grandeur to reiterate the fact that women are incapable of surviving the repercussions of war. Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great was considered one of the most remarkable women in antiquity; the de facto leader of Macedon during Alexander's conquests. Cynane, daughter of King Philip II of Macedon, and her daughter, Adea Eurydice are also women of valour. In fact, the first battle which was commanded by women on both the sides involved Olympias on one side and Eurydice on the other.

Hughes in his article mentions about a few other women who were known for their gallantry and admired by their contemporaries. He states that,

Tomyris was the Queen of the Massagetae, a confederation of nomadic tribes that lived east of the Caspian Sea. She ruled during the 6th century BC and is most famous for the vengeful war she waged against the Persian king, Cyrus the Great.... Lady Fu Hao was one of the 60 wives of Emperor Wu Ding of ancient China's Shang Dynasty. She broke with tradition by serving as both a high priestess and military general. According to inscriptions on oracle bones from the time, Fu Hao led many military campaigns, commanded 13,000 soldiers and was considered the most powerful military leader of her time. (Hughes, 2018).

Warrior women like those discussed by Hughes had distorted lives because of deviating from assigned traditional roles. Although gender roles are still believed to exist in the purview of male chauvinism, women have not failed to break free from the shackles of patriarchy (Pandeewari, Hariharasudan & Nawaz, 2021). Hamlet's soliloquy, "Frailty thy name is woman", in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* undermines the efficiency of women who have established themselves in all walks of life in recent times. Professor of Economics, Australian National University and Public Policy Fellow, Alison Booth in her article titled, "The Origins of Our Gender Roles", elucidates that the differences between male and female hominid brains are limited and there are negligible sex differences in the "g-factor" underlying IQ test performance (Hariharasudan & Gnanamony, 2017). Therefore, women are equally capable of proving their efficacy even in physically taxing jobs. Truck drivers, pilots, soldiers, wrestlers, martial arts experts, police officials and all the other occupations which were once meant for men are now taken up by women too.

The twentieth century historians and writers are more tolerant towards women's accomplishments. *Warrior Women*, a series of brief vignettes authored by Robin Cross and Rosalind Miles recounts stories of women who led rebellions, fought on the front lines, and participated in some of the biggest wars. *Battle Cries and Lullabies: Women in War from Prehistory to the Present* by Linda Grant De Pauw; *They Fought for the Motherland: Russia's Women Soldiers in World War I and the Revolution* by Laurie S. Stoff; *Women in Nazi Germany* by Jill Stephenson; *Warrior Women: An Archaeologist's Search for History's Hidden Heroines* by Jeannine Davis-Kimball; *Women, Resistance and Revolution: A History of Women and Revolution in the Modern World* by Sheila Rowbotham; *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* by Helen Benedict; *They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the Civil War* by De Anne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook and *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* by Sarah Helm are popular works that share similar themes echoing the struggle of women in war. However, the majority of authors who write on women and war are women themselves; which brings to light that very few men appreciate the role of women in warfare.

### 3. Methodology

Deductive analysis of women's contribution to the militia is used to underscore the aim of the research paper. *The Unwomanly Face of War* by Alexievich is a compilation of interviews taken from hundreds of women out of the millions who fought in the Soviet army. Dr. Mary Walker was, an American abolitionist, prohibitionist, prisoner of war and surgeon. Walker's quote, "Let the generations know that women in uniform also guaranteed their freedom.", is a powerful statement to emphasize the role of women in the armed forces. Over the centuries, women have played many roles in warfare from keeping the home fires burning to supporting the military. Nursing was a field in which they started contributing in World War I. Apart from extending medical support, some women actually fought against enemies in men's disguise. During the Second World War., women's role expanded greatly with millions working to supply the military with aircraft, ships and ammunition. According to an article published by The History Press, entitled "Women and War", more than 640,000 women took up jobs in war work factories and joined military ranks in World War II. In the prologue of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich declares that, "They mastered all military specialties, including the most "masculine" ones. A linguistic problem emerged: no feminine gender had

existed till then for the words “tank driver,” “infantry man,” “machine gunner,” because women had never done that work. The feminine forms were born there, in the war....” (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017) These observations made by the writer fortifies that women were bound to traditional roles, thus, there were no feminine forms for these roles in the past.

While consistent arguments about the misrepresentation of women lingers, it is substantial to consider the acumen of women soldiers and their perspective of war as a perilous strategy embraced by power mongers. A detailed study of the monologues in *The Unwomanly Face of War* provides insight to honest revelations from women who served the militia in various roles. Commonality has been identified in most cases which indicates that, though women wanted to fight and live as equals during the prime of youth, the feminineness in them imposed implicit restrictions as they grew mature. The adrenalin rush stimulated during adolescence invigorated their urge to take part in war, without fathoming the goriness involved. At a later period, a sense of realisation dawned amongst these adept women who decided to curtail their involvement, not because of fear or incapacity, but out of disgust for the unreasonable killing incorporated in the appellation of war.

Femininity is customarily attributed to creation of life, proliferation of progeny, motherhood, and nurturing the family. Similar traits are found in animals; even the wildest beasts in the jungle are bound by motherly instincts. Women who fought in the frontline were expected to kill enemies in order to protect their own country. Those who were responsible for birth and giving life were required to destroy lives without any compassion for fellow beings. Caught between patriotism and femininity, a female soldier from Crimea shares her views with Alexievich in the following lines,

Whatever women talk about, the thought is constantly present in them: war is first of all murder, and then hard work.... In the center there is always this: how unbearable and unthinkable it is to die. And how much more unbearable and unthinkable it is to kill, because a woman gives life. Gives it. Bears it in herself for a long time, nurses it. I understand that it is more difficult for women to kill. (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017)

The anonymous lady adds on to say that she would like to write a book about war that would make war sickening, and the very thought of it repulsive. Maria Ivanovna Morozova, who served as a corporal, sniper, confesses to Alexievich in an interview that, “They taught us to shoot a combat rifle, to throw hand grenades. At first... I’ll confess, I was afraid to hold a rifle, it was unpleasant. I couldn’t imagine that I’d go and kill somebody.” (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017) When the time came for Morozova to shoot in reality, her hands began to tremble at the thought of pointing her weapon at a human being. She says that she still has nightmares of that day when she had to pull the trigger and kill a human. Though it was easier to shoot at plywood targets, it was hard to shoot at a living person. This gut feeling is common among every soldier irrespective of age, creed or gender.

External appearance such as hair, physique and clothes determine the difference in gender. Women soldiers’ braids were cut off, skirts and dresses were replaced by trousers and army shirts. Although, these factors were taken care of, women could not escape the natural course of menstruation (Hariharasudan & Pandeewari, 2020). Some of the young girls attained puberty in the camps or while fighting in the trenches. It is a dreadful memory for these girls who had to lay down hidden under bushes, in ditches, on stumps in the forest where they could hardly tend to their womanliness.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Sexual objectification and harassment by their male counterparts have been prevalent issues for womenfolk ever since evolution; irrespective of the culture, environment or occupation. Women who volunteered to serve the nation were not spared either, under any circumstance. Nurses who cared for wounded soldiers were subjected to humiliation and inappropriate conduct. One of the nurses who participated in the soviet war shares her experience on the first day of duty when she was asked to take care of an injured soldier who was badly wounded and literally dying. Alexievich records her statement as follows, “How are things? Anything I can do for you? I’ll never forget it... He suddenly smiled, such a bright smile on his haggard face: “Unbutton your coat... Show me your breast... I haven’t seen my wife for so long...” (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017) The lady was astounded and felt totally at a loss, because she was so young that she had never even been kissed before. Sofya Mironovna, an underground fighter, tells Alexievich how she was tortured in captivity. Mironovna narrates, “They beat me, and they hung me up. Always completely undressed. They photographed me. I could only cover my breasts with my hands... I saw people go mad.” (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017). Subjecting women to sexual persecution is an offence that is still practised; a challenge for female combatants, who have to fight a dual war, one for the country and the other against perpetrators throughout a lifetime.

Recurrent phrases like “I’ll never forget it” is used by most soldiers who were interviewed by Alexievich. Some warriors, who had fought bravely in the warfront, currently choose to desist from remembering the appalling experience (Hariharasudan, 2020). Yet, caught in a shell-shock, the womenfolk cannot escape the brutal lessons learnt from War. Female participation in war was decrypted under various objectives because, while some eagerly volunteered to join forces; the others had no choice and thus forced to go to war. Labour-front fighter Xenia Klimentyevna tells Alexievich how she was left with no choice but to go,

“The war waited for me... Just as I turned eighteen... They brought me a written notice: present yourself to the district committee, bring three days’ worth of food, a set of underwear, a mug, a spoon. It was called mobilization for the labor front.... We worked for four years without a vacation, without holidays.... We waited and waited for the war to end.” (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017)

On the day when victory was announced, Klimentyevna was paralysed with joy. Strong emotions engulfed her as she narrated her horrifying experience in the labour front. In another instance, Antonina Maximovna Knyazeva, Junior Sergeant, Liaison says, “Our mother had no sons... There were five daughters. The announcement came: “War!” ... we volunteered to go to the front. All together. The whole family: mother and five daughters; my father was already fighting by then....” (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017) Efrosinya Grigoryevna Breus, Captain, Doctor also volunteered to serve the front.

Vengeance was an additional force that drove a few women to take part in war. Liubov Arkadyevna Charnaya, Second Lieutenant and Cryptographer joined the front to avenge her second child’s abortion, which occurred after her husband was forced to join the front. Valentina Pavlovna Chudaeva, Sergeant, Commander of Antiaircraft Artillery from Siberia also joined the front to avenge her family’s death. Several others were forced to join due to the lack of human resource during war. Although numerous motives were associated with women’s participation in war, the longing to lead a peaceful life and to get over the guilt of their deeds were common feelings prevalent in those who survived. Olga Vasilyevna’s revelation highlights the sense of longing for a better life, “We all imagined that after the war, after such oceans of tears, there would be a wonderful life. Beautiful. After the Victory... after that day ... We imagined that all people would be very kind, would only love each other. They would all become brothers and sisters. How we waited for that day...” (Aleksievich, Pevear, & Volokhonsky, 2017)

Homecoming for soldiers, irrespective of gender is an instance of great relief, after surviving the unpleasantness of war. Veterans are often recognized for their efforts in protecting the nation, with accolades for their courage, benefits in employment services and commendable retirement plans. However, these perks were denied to homecoming women who took part in diverse jurisdictions in war. In spite of the agility and adroitness they demonstrated in war, their achievements are considered extraneous. Hence, women end up in menial, gender stereotyped occupational roles again. Alexievich had to convince these unsung heroines to share their experiences about war. Hesitation, inhibition and fear of reliving dismaying moments of the past, posed as challenges in the process of interviewing the women, who were part of a revolution. Mothers, daughters, sisters and wives who once fought in the war were stripped off their power and might and pushed to the dark while the men were celebrated for their gallantry.

## 5. Conclusion

Women have exemplified their faculties in all lifestyles, though; they have not been recognized duly for their exertions. Female combatants impacted the outcome of war effectively with each one excelling in one or more areas of specialisation. Women across the world despite cultural constraints and social taboos have been part of the military since the third century B. C. However, it is noteworthy that the only nation to deploy female combat troops in substantial numbers was Russia. Svetlana Alexievich provides a platform for the fearless Russian female soldiers who had fought in the Second World War, to share their perspective of war. In conclusion, this paper reflects on the achievements and experiences of women soldiers who voice out against the ghastliness of war and its wrecking effects on peace in the world. More than being proud of their accomplishments, their memories drive them to lead guilt ridden and traumatizing lives. Apart from analyzing the role of women in war, this paper portends avenues for further research in the psychological assessment of female combatants and feministic perspective of analyzing gender stereotyping.

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