

Women's Acumen of War: An Analysis of Svetlana Alexievich's

The Unwomanly Face of War

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Abstract

Women have served the militia since the fourth century B.C in the Greek Armies of Athens and Sparta. Female contribution in various jurisdictions has demonstrated their capabilities in par with men. Although historical records have failed to record the involvement of such brave women, Svetlana Alexievich interviewed some of these unsung heroines and compiled their testimonies in her book titled, *The Unwomanly Face of War*. 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. Despite, disparities and disparaging views on women's progress, there are few authors who acknowledge women's prowess. This 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.

Keywords: Women in war, Female soldiers, Psychology and War, Untold truth, Horrors of War

Gender stereotyping originated millions of years ago when our ancestors believed that women ought to be confined to procreating and raising their progeny, while men went out hunting and finding means to protect their ladies and offspring. Physical prowess was most often attributed to men as frailty was to women. However, this notion was challenged by a few women since the third century BC when they proved their dexterity in the battlefield. Women have served the military since the fourth century B.C in the Greek Armies of Athens and Sparta. They have contributed in various jurisdictions and demonstrated their abilities equally to men. Although historical records have failed to record the involvement of such brave women, Svetlana Alexievich interviewed some of these unsung heroines and compiled their testimonies in her book entitled, *The Unwomanly Face of War*. This 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. The focus of this paper is not to glorify women's participation in war but to analyze the horrendous aspects of war in general and its impact on female combatants.

Historical books on war are written from a male perspective, therefore, the involvement of the opposite sex is conveniently overlooked or forgotten. History depicts warfare as a domain of men in most cultures despite the contributions of women 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.(pp xiii,xiv)

During the ancient period, it was observed through literary classics that women played a significant role in battles, however, they did not remain as warriors for long either because of death or familial bonds. Women who were in military professions like medical assistants, snipers, machine gunners, commanders of aircraft guns and sappers, after war, were mere lab technicians, museum guides or teachers. Discrepancy of roles and gender stereotyping mangled their identities through subjugation. According to an article written by Tristan Hughes, entitled *10 Great Warrior Women of the Ancient World*, Zenobia, Queen of Syria’s Palmyrene Empire was well educated and multi-lingual. She was known to behave ‘like a man’, riding, drinking and hunting with her officers. TriệuThị Trinh, commonly referred to as Lady Triệu, of 3rd century Vietnam temporarily freed her homeland from Chinese rule. Queen of the British Celtic Icenic tribe, Boudicca led an uprising against the forces of the Roman Empire in Britain in sixty AD. Teuta was the Queen of the Ardiaei tribe in Illyria during the late third century BC, who is also listed among these warriors. Olympias, the mother of Alexander the Great was considered one of the most remarkable women in antiquity. Cynane, daughter of King Philip II of Macedon, and her Adea Eurydice are also women of valor. 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,

The Ancient Greek Queen of Halicarnassus, Artemisia ruled during the late 5th century BC. She was an ally to the King of Persia, Xerxes I, and fought for him during the second Persian invasion of Greece, personally commanding five ships at the Battle of Salamis. Herodotus writes that she was a decisive and intelligent, albeit ruthless strategist. According to Polyaeus, Xerxes praised Artemisia above all other officers in his fleet and rewarded her for her performance in battle....Tomyris was the Queen of the Massaegetae, 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.

Warrior women like those discussed by Hughes also 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. 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 an ANU 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 very small and there are negligible sex differences in the "g-factor" underlying IQ test performance.” 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.

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 relates 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 DeAnne 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 which echo 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 not many men appreciate the strength in the opposite sex.

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. In the prologue, the author mentions 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,” “infantryman,” “machine gunner,” because women had never done that work. The feminine forms were born there, in the war....” (pp. x) These observations made by the writer reiterates that women were bound to traditional roles and thus, there were no feminine forms for the roles.

A detailed study of the monologues in *The Unwomanly Face of War* shows that although some women wanted to fight like men and live a courageous life, the femininity in them levied restrictions. Femininity is attributed to creation of life and motherhood to nurturing young ones. Even the wildest beasts in the jungle are bound by motherly instincts. Women who fought in the frontline were expected to kill the enemies 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. 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. (pp. xxi)

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. She also compares the impact of war on women with a concept in optics called “light gathering power”- the greater or lesser ability of a lens to fix the caught image. So, then, women’s memory of the war is the most “light gathering” in terms of strength of feelings, in terms of pain. I would even say that “women’s” war is more terrible than “men’s”.”(pp. xx) 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.” (pp. 5) 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, physic 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 aspects were taken care of, they were not free from the menstrual cycle. 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. Some were subjected to

sexual harassment by their male counterparts. Nurses who cared for wounded soldiers were not spared. 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...” (pp. xxx) She felt totally at a loss, because she had never even been kissed before.”

Moreover, recurrent phrases like “I’ll never forget it” is used by most soldiers who were interviewed by Alexievich. These warriors who fought a brave battle, did not want to remember the appalling experience, but they were caught in a shell-shock and were unable to get over the trauma. Women’s role in war was deciphered under various intentions because some volunteered and others had no choice. Antonina MaximovnaKnyazeva, 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....” (pp 22) Efrosinya Grigoryevna Breus, Captain, Doctor also volunteered to serve the front. Liubov Arkadyevna Charnaya, Second Lieutenant, Cryptographer joined the front to avenge her second child’s abortion because her husband was forced to join the front. Valentina PavlovnaChudaeva, Seargent, 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. Though there were numerous motives for 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.

Women who took part in diverse jurisdictions during war returned home only to get back to menial roles. In spite of the agility and adroitness they demonstrated in war, their achievements have been overshadowed. These unsung heroines share their experiences about war with Alexievich after a lot of hesitation, in fear of not being believed. Mothers, daughters, sisters and wives who once fought in the war were bound to household chores or gender stereotyped roles after their return. They were stripped out of their power and might and pushed to the dark while all the glory was bestowed on the men.

In conclusion, though women have exemplified their faculties in all walks of life, they have not been recognized duly for their exertions. The role of women impacted the outcome of war effectively with each one excelling in one or more areas of specialization. Women across the world despite cultural constraints and social taboos have been part of the military since the third century BC. Greek women were known for displaying strategic war skills in par with men. However, the only nation to deploy female combat troops in substantial numbers was Russia. Svetlana Alexievich provides a platform for the fearless Russian soldiers who had fought in the Second World War. Even in a traditional country like India, the Indian National Army (Azaad Hind Fauj) established India's first all women regiment to fight for Indian independence under the leadership of Subash Chandra Bose, with Japanese assistance in 1942. 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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