

Thematic Analysis of Non-Violence in the Select Excerpts of Svetlana Alexievich and Thiruvalluvar

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Abstract

The universal prominence attained by English language has paved way for translation and thereby, offers access to world literature and comparative studies. India has witnessed a growth in the field of comparative studies since it received an impetus from Rabindranath Tagore's lecture delivered on the subject when he was invited by National Council of Education in 1907. Tamil Literature has endorsed stalwarts like Thiruvalluvar whose couplets focus on valuable topics that have not only stood the test of time but also has its influence across cultural, political, ethical and topographical diversity. His magnum opus titled *Thirukkural* is a masterpiece of human thought, equivalent to the Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and works of Plato. Svetlana Alexievich is a Belarusian writer who writes in Russian language. Her works have been translated into 35 languages and more than 20 documentary films have been produced based on her testimonies collected from victims, survivors, and firsthand witnesses of war and disaster. Alexievich received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, for her polyphonic writing skill which fetched her veneration in the 21st century. This research article aims to compare and contrast how two literary stalwarts belonging to two different centuries and completely dissimilar ethnicities have unified thoughts on human existence. Thiruvalluvar's views about 'war' and 'killing' and Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich's perception of the futility of war are analyzed in a novel attempt to corroborate that peace and harmony are themes validated since the origin of species and will continue to be valued as long as human civilization exists.

Keywords: 1. Comparative literature, 2. Thiruvalluvar, 3. Alexievich, 4. Carnage, 5. Anti-war 6. World peace 7. Harmony

1. Introduction

Comparative Literature became popular in the 19th Century in Europe and gradually developed into a genre which aims at understanding the common thread in thought and expression of different literatures across boundaries. The term 'litterature comparee' (meaning Comparative Literature) was first used by Villemain, a French scholar in 1829. Colonialism and Post-Colonialism have facilitated comparative studies by the introduction of English as part of their regime. The universal status attained by English as a language has paved way for translation and thereby, offers access to world literature. S.S Praver in his book, *Comparative Literary Studies: An Introduction*, defines Comparative Literature "as examination of literary texts (including works of literary theory and criticism) in more than one language, through an investigation of contrast, analogy, provenance or influence, or study of literary relations and communications between two or more groups that speak different languages." (Praver, 1973) Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* reiterates that, "good literature transcends the culture in which it was written; it speaks to people throughout all ages." (Barry, 2017)

India has witnessed a growth in the field of comparative studies since it received an impetus from Rabindranath Tagore's lecture delivered on the subject when he was invited by National Council of Education in 1907. Subsequently, several attempts have been made to compare literatures of various parts of the world. In his foreword written for Dr. Irai Anbu who compared two literary icons: Shakespeare and Thiruvalluvar, in the book titled *Comparing Titans Thiruvalluvar and Shakespeare*, Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam believes that "any ancient literary work depends upon the creativity of the writer to envision the future, based on the civilizational heritage at that time and articulate the thoughts accordingly. Hence, comparing two poets who belonged to different periods and different regions is indeed a Herculean task." (Anbu, 2015)

Dr. Irai Anbu was at an advantage as Shakespeare and Thiruvalluvar are both literary giants who have achieved world-wide recognition. On the other hand, though not unparalleled like Shakespeare, Svetlana Alexievich has created a niche for herself. She is a Russian investigative journalist from Belarus who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, for her polyphonic writing skill which fetched her veneration in the 21st century. As a writer during political turmoil, war, civil unrest and suppression of freedom of expression, Alexievich was faced with innumerable challenges with publishing her literary works. (Alexievich, 2015)

Books she had written were proscribed and her life was in danger before she was forced into exile. Since 1994, Belarus has been governed

by Soviet Army Officer, Alexander Lukashenko and shares a close relationship with Russia. Due to the stringent restrictions on free speech and assembly, Alexievich's books were prohibited from being circulated. However, they were smuggled into Belarus from Russia to be sold on the black market. Currently, her books are back on shelves in Belarusian stores as an attempt to strengthen ties with the West. Nonetheless, her creative abilities and the love for writing have gained universal recognition for the truth and transparency in her works. Her notable works include *The Unwomanly Face of War*, *Chernobyl Prayer*, *Zinky Boys – Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, *Enchanted by Death*, *Second-Hand Time* and *Last Witnesses: An Oral history of the Children of World War II*. Themes such as the impact of war, disaster, civil unrest, dislocation, death, amputations, suicides, trauma and concepts related to cataclysm and demoralization are dominant in the works of the author chosen for this research. Alexievich's subject of interest was not in history, politics or other serious matters but in simple affairs of a common man's life. *The Unwomanly Face of War* is an oral account of the Soviet women who fought in the second world war. The plight of women and the anguish that they endured is highlighted in this book. (Alexievich, 2017) *Chernobyl Prayer* discusses the tragic nuclear mishap that occurred in 1986 which killed 300,000 people due to immediate blast trauma and acute radiation syndrome. (Alexievich, 2016) *Second-Hand Time* is yet another work of the author that presents the reader with the feelings of people who witnessed the end of Soviet Union which resulted in chaos and civil unrest. (Alexievich, 2016) This paper is a novel attempt to compare and contrast Thiruvalluvar's views about 'war' and 'killing' with Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich's perception of the same with excerpts from the book *Zinky Boys – Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*.

2. Method

In the contemporary scenario, civilization is not only synonymous of advancement, progress, enlightenment, edification, culture, cultivation, refinement and sophistication. The advent of nuclear weapons has instigated a power-race among nations with each of them trying to prove their might over the other. Since the evolution of man, the race for power existed, but in a rather fair manner. There were rules framed for war and clearly defined strategies which were stringently adhered. However, ideologies related to kingship and conquest differed in each country according to their cultural dogmas. This article attempts to link the code of war charted in two idiosyncratic countries set during distinctive periods. The aftermath of war with its unsightly blood-shed, gory dismemberments and demoralization obliges one to contemplate more seriously on the concept of 'killing'. The researcher aims to examine the approaches incorporated by two erudite writers from culturally and historically dissimilar backgrounds; reiterating the fact that Thiruvalluvar's noble insights can fit into any period of time and can be used to analyze and interpret literature from any part of the world, in this paradigm, Russian Literature.

Tamil Literature has endorsed stalwarts who have contributed works focusing on valuable topics that have not only stood the test of time but also has its influence across cultural, political, ethical and topographical diversity. George Uglow Pope, an Anglican Christian missionary and Tamil scholar spent 40 years in Tamil Nadu researching Tamil literature despite being born in Canada. His book titled, *Thirukkural: English Translation and Commentary* is a testimony for cross cultural studies. (Pope, 1886) Nearly 2000 years ago, Thiruvalluvar, an acclaimed Tamil poet, gifted the world with his profound wisdom in the form of Thirukkural which comprises 1330 'kurals' (couplets). His work is divided under three major sections 'Arathuppal' (dealing with virtue), 'Porutpal' (dealing with wealth, kingship and polity) and 'Kamatthuppal' (dealing with love). There are 133 'Adhiagarams' or themes which have ten 'kurals' each. In his Arathuppal, there is an adhiagaram in which Thiruvalluvar talks about 'Kollamai', the virtue of not killing. With the rising atrocities around us it is evident that in the name of civilization, barbaric behavior has become prevalent.

Satyananda Somasundaram Bharati, a Tamil patriot who played a pivotal role in the development of Tamil language and literature and the founder of the organization named Tamil Kalagam, has written about the contributions of Thiruvalluvar towards Tamil literature and his extensive knowledge in philosophy. (Bharati, 1929). The translations of W.H. Drew and John Lazarus have also been extensively used by several scholars who have researched Thiruvalluvar. (Drew & Lazarus, 1991) Svetlana Alexievich allows the victims and witnesses of war to voice out their opinions and express their views on the terrible carnages. Nikolai Berdiaev is of the opinion that, "Russian writers have always been more interested in truth than beauty." (Berdiaev, 1992) This is evident in the books of Alexievich which presents the reader with raw truth in its original form without the influence of authorial opinions. Her polyphonic writing style makes her work more authentic and serves as a memoir of repercussion. In fact, it is doubtful if it would have been possible to touch the hearts of millions of readers if she had used any other genre or writing technique.

In her book, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* Alexievich meets war victims and presents their testimonies about the tormenting experience and how they dealt with the aftershock of the terrible, gut-wrenching Afghan War. Whilst there is a lot of philosophical debate and ambiguity about life and the purpose of living, there are a few others fighting for their existence in the literal sense. Alexievich, being a very sensitive writer, reveals in her *Notes from My Diary*, dated 14 June 1986, that she never wanted to write another word about war after she had finished writing *War is not a Woman*, a book about World War II. She was distraught after recording the brutal events of the war. She could not even bear to watch fishermen dragging the fish out of the depths of water or the screech of a cat run over by a car. Even the sight of a squashed worm made her feel miserable. But she felt "that animals, birds, fish, every living thing had a right to a life of its own." (Alexievich, 1986) Nobody in the world can be justified for the act of killing. Thiruvalluvar is of the same opinion when he writes, "What is the work of virtue? 'Not to kill'; For 'killing' leads to every work of ill." (Couplet 321, Chapter 33) The kural literally transliterates as follows: 'Never to destroy life is the sum of all virtuous conduct. The destruction of life leads to every evil'. At one point, though Alexievich decided not to write about war, her encounter with a little girl in Minsk who is informed about her brother Andrei's death in Afghanistan and the sight of a soldier in shell-shock continuously digging a potted plant as a result of hallucination (imagining that he was digging trenches for his fellow mates), compelled her to bring to light the horrifying truth about the

Afghan war.

3. Results

Alexievich also throws light upon the misguided lives of the soldiers who are often caught between conflicting moralities. They were frustrated and could not reason out normally. Dostoevsky described military men as the most unthinking people in the world. In *Zinky Boys*, Alexievich explains this aspect in the following lines,

“I had a long talk with one of them. I was trying to get him to admit the awfulness of the choice: to shoot or not to shoot. But we didn’t get anywhere: the problem didn’t really seem to exist for him. What’s good? What’s bad? Is it good to ‘kill in the name of socialism’? For such young men the limits of morality are defined by the military commands they receive.” (Alexievich, 1992)

Painful moments are captured in the works of Alexievich in which she also records how, there was usually, a letter sent to the families living in peaceful ‘kishlaks’ (villages) about the death of their beloved ones followed by the arrival of a Zinc Coffin in a few days. Furthermore, the women had no choice but to cry over the bodies and then deliver an eloquent speech to the other young men about patriotism to boost their morale and fight for their country. This aspect is reflected in Thiruvalluvar’s “Porutpal” under ‘Padaimaatchi’ when he writes, “That is a ‘host’ that joins its ranks, and mightily withstands, though death with sudden wrath should fall upon its bands.” (Couplet 765). The explanation of the above kural is, ‘That indeed is an army which is capable of offering a united resistance, even if Yama advances against it with fury’. The voices of the bereaved after the loss of their young and mighty ones, resonates with the above mentioned kural, which reinforces the excellence of an army despite the risk of losing their lives.

Through her interview with a Sergeant, Infantry Platoon Leader, Alexievich was able to give an insight of the inevitable circumstances in which the soldiers had to work. Although most religions preach that it is a sin to kill another being, these combatants are left with no choice but to kill in order to survive. This miserable plight of the soldiers is further revealed when the sergeant says, “You kill him and you sense you’re alive! ‘I’M ALIVE!’ But there’s no joy in killing a man. You kill so you can get home safe.” These are mere survival instincts and they cannot be considered as speculated homicides. In his kural 323, Thiruvalluvar states, “Alone, first of good things, is ‘not to slay’; The second is, no untrue word to say.” (Couplet 323, Chapter 33). The meaning of the above kural is, ‘Not to destroy life is an incomparably (great) good next to it in goodness ranks freedom from falsehood.’ Thiruvalluvar reiterates that ‘not killing’ is the greatest virtue and in the contemporary sense, if both the opponents have the same apprehensions about killing and its consequence, there would have been fair chances of both returning alive. Nevertheless, the mounting pressure and psychological trauma, leaves them with no choice but to pull the trigger or somehow, slay the opponent.

In another kural, Thiruvalluvar discusses killing as a vice and how it should be shunned. “Though thine own life for that spared life the price must pay, take not from aught that lives gift of sweet life away.” (Couplet 327, Chapter 33) The explanation of the above kural is, “Let no one do that which would destroy the life of another, although he should by so doing, lose his own life.” Thiruvalluvar insists that killing is destructive and one should protect the other even if his own life is in danger. The testimonial given by an army doctor in Alexievich’s *Zinky Boys* projects a different point of view. The profession of a doctor is to save lives. It is even more challenging for an army doctor, as it requires immense efficiency and resilience. Alexievich meets an army doctor to get him to confess his thoughts about the Afghan war. He admits to have been fascinated initially, by his colleagues who boasted about serving the army. The doctor further describes that a man does not die the way it happens in cinemas, where one drops down dead when shot in the head. It is traumatic and even more painful to see some injured soldiers begging for death and release. Suicides become the only way out for some war victims. Although Thiruvalluvar is justified in his interpretation considering the greater good of not killing, the doctor who served the Afghan war shares his perspective of war when he states,

No one who was 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. I understood what I was really doing – I was part of an invading army, let’s face it – but I don’t regret a thing. Nowadays there’s a lot of talk about guilt-feelings, but I personally don’t feel guilty. Those who sent us there are the guilty ones. I enjoy wearing my army uniform, I feel a real man, and women go crazy over it. (Alexievich, 1992).

It shows the psychological impact left in the minds of survivors. Although some felt that they were forced to kill on several occasions and live with the guilt forever a few others reveled in being a part of a manly feat.

Thiruvalluvar predicts another side of the guilt of murder which, in future, may stop such brutalities, he writes, “Of those who ‘being’ dread, and all renounce, the chief are they, who dreading crime of slaughter, study naught to slay.” (Couplet 325, Chapter 33). The meaning of the above kural is: Of all those who, fearing the permanence of earthly births, have abandoned desire, he is the chief who, fearing (the guilt of) murder, considers how he may avoid the destruction of life. Though Thiruvalluvar mentions destruction can be avoided if one knows about the consequences of killing, it can be interpreted differently in contemporary terms, referring to the guilt that occurs after killing. The guilt-ridden soldiers who return to their homes with bloody hands will best understand the value of life and hence avoid indulging in the destruction of life again.

4. Discussion

Patriotism is almost synonymous with war and is integral for every soldier serving the nation. Their prime duty is to adhere to instructions given from their superiors. If the soldiers receive orders to attack or kill the opponents, they are expected to oblige and carry out their

mission. While it is for the benefit of their own nation, the other side may incur a great loss. This concept is reiterated in the following kural which expresses that killing is wrong irrespective of the cause behind it. “Though great the gain of good should seem, the wise Will any gain by slaughter won despise. (Couplet 328, Chapter 33). It means that, ‘The advantage which might flow from destroying life in sacrifice, is dishonorable to the wise (who renounced the world), even although it should be said to be productive of great good.’ On the second day of Alexievich’s visit to the get the testimonials, she introduces a leading character who is tormented by the way soldiers are looked down upon for taking part in war. Instead of celebrating their glorious victory, they are scorned at by the public. He shares his experience during a bus journey when he overhears a conversation between two women. The narrative is as follows,

‘Fine heroes they were! Murdering women and children over there. They’re sick. And just think, they get invited to speak at schools! They even get special privileges...’ I jumped off at the next stop and stood there crying. We were soldiers obeying orders. In wartime you can be shot for disobedience and we were at war. Obviously, it wasn’t the generals themselves who killed women and children, but they gave the orders – and now they’re blaming us. (Alexievich, 1992)

Another heart-breaking testimonial by Sasha’s mother is recorded in *Zinky Boys*. Sasha was born as the second son into an educated family. His mother, being a librarian, kindled his interest in reading by exposing him to famous Russian authors. Until high school, he wanted to be a university scholar, but his uncle intervened and convinced him to join the army. Captivated by the high ideologies, young Sasha joined the army but unfortunately, he was in for a shock. Nothing around him related to what he had read and learnt. Since he had decided to join the army despite his parents’ advice to join the university, he could neither reveal his pathetic condition nor cope with the mayhem. Sasha’s mother noticed his frustration, the last time he had come home for vacation. She says,

At night he’d jump out of bed and pace up and down his room. Once he woke me up with his shouting. ‘Explosion! Explosion! Mama, they’re firing!’. Another time I was woken up by crying. Who could it be? There were no small children in the house. I opened his door. He was holding his head in his hands and sobbing.

‘Why are you crying my love?’

‘It’s horrible, Mama, horrible.’ He wouldn’t say another word, to me or his father. (Alexievich, 1992)

Sasha was a good boy with a kind disposition and therefore it was beyond his ability to be cruel and mean. He was unable to come to terms with the inhumanness and eventually died in the battlefield. Sasha was clearly not one of those base men as depicted in the following kural, “Whose trade is ‘killing’, always vile they show,

To minds of them who what is vileness know.” (Couplet 329, Chapter 33). In transliteration, it literally means, ‘Men who destroy life are base men, in the estimation of those who know the nature of meanness.’ Since Sasha knew the value of life, he couldn’t accept what was imposed on him. While Thiruvalluvar asserts the virtuousness associated with ‘not killing’ in his ten couplets under the title ‘Kollamai’, Svetlana Alexievich portrays killing as a vice revealing its brutality, savage army bullying, mutilation, the shame and shattered lives of veterans who managed to return alive.

The 21st Century has witnessed some of the deadliest wars like the Second Congo War, Darfur Conflict, Iraq War, Afghanistan War, The War against Boko Haram, Yemeni Civil War, Ukraine Conflict and The Syrian Civil War. Millions of precious lives were swept by the Covid pandemic crisis and in meaningless wars. Displacement, demoralization, PTSD and other permanent impediments are caused by war. The pictures and videos shared on social media, in which innocent civilians irrespective of age, gender or creed are killed, mutilated and disfigured, are disheartening and yet we remain as mute witnesses. Values should be inculcated in the curriculum at the primary level education. The profound thoughts of Thiruvalluvar can be taught in translation across the world to promote human compassion and morality. The true account of victims as compiled by Svetlana Alexievich, have to be discussed with the young minds to change their perspective of contemporary occurrences.

5. Conclusion

In the wake of such wars, a nuclear war may begin at any point of time. Intellectual might and physical prowess can be used in productive ways like technological advancements and sports respectively. The world has already witnessed a great deal of destruction and mass disruption with the depletion of natural resources and global warming. The intriguing fact is that, unminding of these issues, nations still involve in a power-race. Are we going to be victims too in future with bodies strewn around us with no one to lament over them, or are we going to make the world a better place to live in? It is we who must decide the fate of our lineage. In another article titled “Women’s acumen of war: An analytical textual discourse of Svetlana Alexievich’s the unwomanly face of war” that was published in the *World Journal of English Language*, the researcher highlights the insights of women against war. (Johnny & Devi, 2022) This paper is a unique attempt to focus on what Eliot called ‘Unification of Sensibility’ in his essay on ‘The Metaphysical Poets’. According to Eliot, thought should be transformed into feeling to steal its way into the reader’s heart. Thiruvalluvar and Svetlana Alexievich have both mastered this theory in their own style. The universal bard has contributed to the world, *Thirukkural*, which according to French savant, M. Ariel is “one of the highest and purest expressions of human thought.” On the other hand, Svetlana Alexievich has offered a platform for the expression of human suffering through the voices of mothers, nurses, soldiers and civilians who have been directly or indirectly affected by war.

The impact of demoralization and devastation caused by cataclysm and the long-term effects are identified as the research problem. Besides focusing on tracing the origin of problems associated with moral injury, the current research attempts to highlight the

psychological interventions available for emotional wellbeing. Apart from examining the political, economic, social and topographical aspects that are linked to the subject of the study, the research also aims at creating awareness about psychological welfare in the literary realm. Using a multi-disciplinary approach by drawing an inference based on the inter-relation between Literature and Psychology, the researcher is able to justify the selected title and the content. The paper will serve as a stepping stone for researchers who wish to study these two literary icons or to compare and contrast similar literary giants in translation. Cross cultural and linguistic variations in translated literary works can also be within the scope for further research. Besides the above, cataclysm and demoralization caused by war is another area of study that can be explored in detail.

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