

Original Article

Environmental Memory and Ecological Trauma: An Ecocritical Study Of 'The Memory Keeper' By Masha Gessen

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Abstract

Environmental disasters create complex forms of cultural memory that persist across temporal and spatial boundaries. However, limited scholarship examines how testimonial literature functions as a vehicle for environmental witnessing and the formation of what might be termed "radioactive memory." This study addresses the gap in ecocritical analysis of environmental trauma transmission through oral history practices, focusing specifically on how nuclear disasters embed themselves in collective consciousness through collaborative testimonial relationships. The research holds significance for understanding how environmental disasters exceed their immediate impacts through narrative practices that resist official minimisation of ecological trauma. This qualitative study employs an ecocritical theoretical framework combining Lawrence Buell's environmental imagination, Stacy Alaimo's material ecocriticism, and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, utilizing close reading and thematic analysis of Masha Gessen's "The Memory Keeper" (2015) as the primary source, supplemented by scholarly literature on ecocriticism, memory studies, and oral history theory. Analysis reveals that Svetlana Alexievich's methodology represents pioneering "environmental witnessing" that captures embodied ecological trauma through collaborative testimonial practices, creating radioactive memory that persists through both narrative transmission and ongoing material contamination. Findings demonstrate how environmental witnessing disrupts conventional narrative structures while revealing the temporal complexity and political dimensions of ecological trauma. The study recommends developing theoretical frameworks for environmental memory and expanding ecocritical analysis of testimonial literature to enhance understanding of how ecological disasters shape collective experience across extended temporal horizons.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecological trauma, Environmental memory, Environmental witnessing, Radioactive memory

INTRODUCTION

The advent of ecocriticism as a relevant theoretical construct in literary studies has changed the perception with which literary critics used to view a text that deals with environmental crisis and human-nature relations. Lawrence Buell (2025) defines ecocriticism as a term that refers to the study of the correlation between the environment and literature that is developed in the spirit of environmentalist practice. The field of nature writing continues to thrive in new directions, advancing and changing with what is called by the researchers as numerous waves of enquiries, starting with mere analysis of nature writing to much more elaborate studies of environmental justice, postcolonial ecology, and material ecocriticism (Berghaller et al., 2014). In this field, environmental catastrophe

and testimonial writing offer a pressing scope of investigation as the writers living in the era of ecological crisis attempt to record and process the psychological and cultural consequences of ecological disaster.

Masha Gessen, in her short story *The Memory Keeper* provides an interesting example of an ecocritical case study, in which she describes Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, whose pioneering oral history has transformed our conceptualisation of environmental trauma and memory. The approach developed by Alexievich and closely tracked by the Gessen is what can be loosely described as the environmental witnessing (perhaps the most accurate description was the one proposed by David Cohen, who termed such testimony as an ecological witnessing of loss) that is attentive

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to not only human suffering, but the complex knot of ecological and somatic tragedy (Gessen, 2015). The terrible Chernobyl testimonies that Gessen brings to light show the way nuclear contamination works as both environmental and bodily violence that spawn what novel scholarship names as radioactive memory, narratives that fight with the prevailing discourses seeking to contain or mitigate the continuing effects of the nuclear, or rather nuclear disaster (Hall, 2020). This idea of the radioactive memory is the part of the force that would take the individual centre about how the environmental disasters are not only represented in soiled landscapes but also are reflected in the modes of testimony, which do not allow the manifestations of the disasters to rest in the collective memory.

Ecological trauma as the theoretical framework has an important context in explaining the work of Alexievich, as shown in Gessen's profile. Ecological trauma can be defined as psychological as well as the general interruption of the ecological systems and the human-environmental associations, and includes the psychological effect that environmental disasters have on human populations (Harvey, 1996; Knittel, 2023). In the Chernobyl disaster, this trauma takes on a multi-dimensional form: the short-term physical radiation of bodies and landscapes, the long-term psychological consequences on the survivors and the communities they live in, and the psychological traumas that are experienced by their descendants (Bromet, 2014). Recent studies have documented how proximity to nuclear disasters correlates with increased rates of depression, anxiety, and trauma-related distress, while environmental contamination as a migration factor compounds these psychological effects (Science.gov, 2024). Gessen's portrayal of Alexievich's interview subjects reveals how environmental disasters become embedded in personal and collective memory, creating what scholars term "ecological grief", mourning for lost environments and ways of life.

The significance of oral history and testimonial literature in documenting ecological trauma cannot be overstated. As oral history scholars emphasise, testimonial narratives serve as "a history built around people" that "thrusts life into history itself" (Thompson, cited in Anderson, 2021). In environmental contexts, oral testimony becomes particularly valuable because it captures experiential knowledge often absent from official records or scientific accounts (Abrams,

2010). Alexievich's methodological approach, as Gessen describes it, exemplifies what oral historians call the collaborative nature of testimony—the co-creation of narrative between interviewer and narrator that produces unique forms of historical knowledge (Grele, 1998). This collaborative aspect has particular importance in the setting of environmental disasters, where the governmental discourse tends to underestimate or repress the whole range of ecological and human consequences.

The *Memory Keeper* by Gessen, therefore, sheds light on the aspect of environmental memory as a testimonial process. Through that process, how ecological trauma endures, or rather extends beyond time and distance, can be assessed. Through analysis of oral testimonies on Chernobyl survivors by Alexievich, Gessen shows that the effects of environmental calamities extend beyond their spatial locales and time frames, such that they result in a constant form of pollution that suffuses memory, identity, and inter-relationship in community patterns. This discussion can be added to the increased body of literature on what can be called trauma memory, or how environmental pollution is internalised into cultural memory and consequently goes on to constitute individual and social experience many years after the original tragedy has occurred. By paying close attention to what Alexievich writes and to the techniques she uses to write it, the present study aims to shed new light on the possibilities of ecocritical interpretations of the testimonial literature to enrich our views on the enduring effects of environmental trauma on human communities and ecological relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Environmental memory, ecological trauma and testimonial literature confluence is one of the fastest-growing fields of study in the humanities, incorporating ecocriticism, memory studies, trauma theory and oral history. The recent trends in all these interconnected spheres open essential theoretical underpinnings to understand how environmental disasters are engraved in the cultural memory through such testimonial practices, after the examples provided in the works, such as that of Masha Gessen on the methodology of environmental witnessing developed by Svetlana Alexievich.

Contemporary Developments in Ecocriticism

Yadav and Sinha (2024) argue about the development trends of ecocriticism between 1994 and 2023. Ecocritical criticism has evolved

immensely in the recent past, with extensive bibliometric studies conducted. Their study shows the “naturally interdisciplinary character” of ecocriticism and its “gradual investment in multiple modes of cultural expression,” which underlines its growing centrality in deciphering the effects on people of the environment. Such growth is consistent with recent publications that document the turn of ecocriticism towards a range of more specialised sub-disciplines such as material, affective, narratological, and empirical (PMC, 2019).

Internationalisation of the field has mainly generated developments of postcolonial ecocriticism. The analysis of African ecocriticisms by Adeniyi and Onanuga (2023) is claimed to question the Western-centred paradigms in favour of promoting the notions of interdependence, interrelatedness and connectedness between man and nature, which is brought about by the indigenous schools of thought of African epistemologies. Likewise, the current research on testifying novels has moved beyond the boundaries of traditional Western approaches, as the example of Gogoi (2024) on the analysis of local environmental discourse illustrates how oral traditions can be used as storehouses of ecological knowledge, which acts against the dominant developmental discourse.

A new revival further within the area of empirical ecocriticism has grown especially innovative. In her breakdown of the topic, Lahtinen (2024) analyses how literature can light environmental empathy, but the researcher looks explicitly at the feelings triggered both by the representation of non-human species as well as the works on climate. This empirical turn is one of the things that scholars call the effort of ecocriticism to quantify the real impact that literature has on the environment beyond the theoretical speculations about the impact that it may be having. However, Lahtinen notes significant limitations in current empirical approaches, particularly their “often-conflicting results” and challenges in addressing what Nixon terms the “slow violence” of environmental crisis.

Environmental Memory and Trauma Studies

The emergence of what scholars term a “fourth wave” of memory studies has fundamentally altered how researchers approach environmental memory. Recent developments recognise environments not merely as backdrops for memory processes but as active participants

in memory transmission itself (Leworthy et al., 2024). This perspective proves particularly relevant for understanding nuclear disasters, where environmental contamination creates lasting forms of what might be termed “toxic memory”, forms of remembrance that persist across temporal and spatial boundaries through material environmental presence.

Modern trauma research has also developed an opportunity to be more holistic. Zoromba et al. (2024) propose the applications of the so-called paradigm shifts that combine the individual and the interpersonal levels and include the socio-cultural facets of the trauma experience. They focus on the subjective aspect of trauma and point out the inefficiency of traditional biomedical paradigms when addressing complex environmental trauma situations through their literature review of 96 peer-reviewed studies on the topic. Such a multi-perspective concept is necessary in the topic of nuclear disasters because the effect of trauma happens on a multiplicity of scales, including physical, psychological, cultural, and even temporal dimensions.

Edelman (2023) proposed the framework of the “Trauma and Resilience Informed research Principles and Practice”, which offers essential information to comprehend how environmental disasters develop a continued traumatic condition. Based on her research, trauma response is highly reliant on specific characteristics of the study and the setting, so that disasters caused by the environment represent unique settings where physical performance may turn into a venue of re-traumatisation or the development of resilience. Such a view throws light on the fact that nuclear contamination produces what can be referred to as the situations of environmental trauma in which the physical surroundings produce what can be described as traumatic memory always.

The intersection of environmental and trauma studies can also be seen in the recent advances in trauma-informed environmental education. As the analysis of Kelly (2023) concerning the topic of trauma-informed environmental education shows, environmental programs must respond to the requirements of assisting students in becoming capable of fostering trust and care about nature on the one hand, corresponding to the provision of environmental destruction education on the other hand. This conflict between environmental affiliation and environmental trauma consciousness is like the issues encountered by environmental testimonial

literature, which needs to capture ecological degradation and keep a hope of environmental affiliation.

Nuclear Literature and Environmental Witnessing

Recent scholarship on nuclear literature and memory has expanded understanding of how nuclear disasters create unique forms of environmental trauma and cultural memory. Contemporary research emphasises nuclear events capacity to create what might be termed as "radioactive memory", forms of cultural memory that persist through both narrative transmission and ongoing material environmental contamination. This concept proves particularly relevant for understanding how testimonial literature functions in nuclear contexts, where witnesses must navigate the invisibility of radiation and its long-term temporal effects.

Current memory studies research demonstrates increasing attention to how traumatic environmental events create complex relationships between individual memory, collective memory, and material environmental conditions. Recent scholarship on environmental memory emphasises the collaborative nature of environmental witnessing, where testimonial practices serve not merely to document individual experience but to create collective forms of environmental memory that can resist official narratives minimising environmental impacts.

Testimonial Literature and Environmental Testimony

The modern study of testimonial literature has come to appreciate its ability to record environmental trauma in a way that typical historical or scientific histories cannot capture. Up-to-date studies focus on collaborative aspects of testimony, through which the witnesses of the environment, along with the interviewer, co-construct testimonies that maintain experiential knowledge, which is rarely captured in official environmental documentation. The collaborative dimension is significant in the context of emergency responses to environmental disasters, when survivors have experiential knowledge of environmental change that can be measured neither in scientific units nor on government rolls.

The existing trauma-informed studies have even started acknowledging the fact that

environmental occurrences, such as disasters, have formed distinct difficulties in gathering testimonies. Recent developments show that the witnesses of environmental trauma encounter unique issues connected to the temporal complexity of environmental harm, where most environmental toxins are invisible, and that of environmental contamination, a constant process. These conditions amount to something that can be called complex environmental testimony, which must negotiate uncertainty, continuous exposure, and conflicting knowledge produced over the environmental effects.

Theoretical Foundations of Ecocriticism

The theoretical foundations of contemporary ecocriticism have evolved to encompass what Johns-Putra et al. (2018) identify as increased engagement with narrative theory, examining the very structures by which narratives represent and construct environments for their readers. This narrative turn has proven particularly relevant for understanding testimonial literature's capacity to convey environmental trauma through formal innovations that mirror environmental disruption itself.

Recent ecocritical theory has also emphasised what scholars term "material ecocriticism," which examines how physical environments actively participate in meaning-making processes rather than serving as passive backdrops for human activity. This theoretical development provides crucial frameworks for understanding how environmental contamination participates in testimonial practices, creating ongoing forms of environmental memory that exceed human narrative control.

Research Gaps

There has been considerable recent work done on ecocriticism, studies of trauma and oral history as disciplines, but little writing that focuses specifically on studying the conjunctions of those three approaches in the context of environmental disasters. Most of the modern literature on nuclear disasters is occupied with the discussion of one of the aspects, psychological effects or environmental ones, but not much is said about the interactions of these two sides through the practice of testimonials. Also, the interactions between memory and environment have lately been noticed in terms of environmental situations, additional investigations are concerning how inevitable environmental catastrophes were inscribed in the cultural memory through the narration

process, in terms of the distinctive issues of invisible environmental pollution, and its long-term temporal impacts.

The new term of witnessing the environment needs more theoretical elaboration, especially in terms of works on how the testimonial literature works in different contexts of environmental trauma and other traumas. The relationship between material environmental contamination and cultural memory transmission is one of the most important directions of further ecocritical research.

Research Methodology

The research methodology followed in this study is qualitative analysis through which environmental memory and ecological trauma are studied in "The Memory Keeper" by Masha Gessen, with the use of ecocritical comparative analysis supported by close reading and tracking of themes. The qualitative method is exceptionally efficient in this study because it enables a profound analysis of textual depictions of environmental testifying and intricate connections between ecological catastrophe, memory, and testimonial literature. The qualitative literary research, as described by Creswell and Poth (2018), is the methodological background of investigating how texts create meaning about environmental trauma and passing on memories that allow the researcher to focus on the complexity of environmental tragedies becoming consistent and learned within a culture through testimonial acts.

The short story of Masha Gessen, "The Memory Keeper", published in *The New Yorker*, October 26, 2015, is the primary source used in the present study, as it describes the oral history of Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich and her chronicle of Chernobyl testimonies. The analysis helps to understand the workings of environmental memory by pursuing testimonial literature and the expressions of ecological trauma in narratives. The secondary sources include works of scholarly literature exploring the issues of ecocriticism, environmental memory, trauma studies, and even oral history theory. The choice of the text created by Gessen as the first source is explained by the unordinary combination of the work both as journalistic report and literary deconstruction of environmental witnessing procedures, providing ground to rich ecocritical analysis, and at the same time showing the connection between the activities of documenting environmental

disasters and specific representation of them in literature.

Close reading techniques complemented with thematic analysis to determine common trends on the issues of environmental memory, ecological trauma, and testimonial practice are used. According to the theory of New Critics and its refinement by present scholars in the sphere of literacy studies, close reading means closer consideration of details in the text, language style, and plotline to achieve several layers of meaning in the text (Best & Marcus, 2009). The method is especially suitable for the analysis of the process of building the image of the methodology displayed by Alexievich and the specifics of environmental trauma through linguistic and discursive measures chosen by Gessen. Thematic analysis based on the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) is intended to be the method of gradual identification and analysis of the repetitive patterns inside the text, as the idea of presenting the concept of radioactive memory, environmental witnessing, and ecological trauma could be examined in the context of how they work across the narrative developed by Gessen. This union of these approaches in analysis allows not only micro-level consideration of the details of the text but also macro-level identification of patterns in the general narrative.

The theoretical background of the proposed work is primarily concentrated in an ecocritical theory that was proposed by pioneering thinkers like Lawrence Buell, with his creation of the notion of environmental imagination (1995), which gives a fundamental basis of association of literature with environmental crisis. Scholars have utilised the Buell and Dobson framework in environmental literary studies, notably more recent work by Adamson (2012) and Nixon (2011), who have applied ecocritical analysis to environmental justice and slow violence, respectively. The paper also resorts to material ecocriticism conceptualised by Alaimo (2010) and her theory of trans-corporeality that studies interaction between human and environmental bodies across the boundary of materiality. Such theoretical orientation has already found its application in the study of environmental trauma used by such scholars as Di Chiro (2008) and Pellow (2017), who revealed the principles of using it to analyse environmental disaster narrations. The structure also incorporates the trauma theory advanced by C. Caruth (1996) and her concept of testimony and witnessing that was adapted by scholars to environmental scenarios

(e.g. Nixon, 2011 in relation to neologism of slow violence, and such studies as Cunsolo and Harper, 2013 in reference to climate trauma).

Data Analysis

This analysis examines how Masha Gessen's "The Memory Keeper" demonstrates environmental witnessing and the formation of radioactive memory through Svetlana Alexievich's testimonial methodology. Through close reading and thematic analysis of specific textual passages, this section reveals how environmental trauma manifests in both content and form within Gessen's narrative, illuminating the complex intersections between ecological disaster, cultural memory, and testimonial literature.

Gessen establishes Alexievich's unique approach to environmental witnessing through her emphasis on capturing embodied experience rather than information. Alexievich's philosophy emerges clearly when she states: "We live in an environment of banality. For most people, that is enough. However, how do you get through? How do you rip off that coating of banality? You have to make people descend into the depths of themselves" (Gessen, 2015, p. 2). This statement reveals how environmental witnessing operates by penetrating beyond surface narratives to access the profound psychological and emotional dimensions of ecological trauma. The metaphor of "ripping off that coating of banality" suggests that environmental disasters become normalised or minimised through official discourse, requiring testimonial practices that actively resist such normalisation. Alexievich's approach recognises that environmental trauma creates a protective veneer of everyday normalcy that must be actively disrupted to access authentic testimonial experience.

The collaborative nature of environmental witnessing becomes evident in Alexievich's description of her recording process: "When people talk, it matters how they place words next to each other" (Gessen, 2015, p. 8). This attention to linguistic placement and verbal rhythm demonstrates how environmental trauma manifests not only in content but in the very structure of testimony itself. Gessen reveals that Alexievich "needed to preserve the subject's every word, including the silences" (Gessen, 2015, p. 8), indicating that environmental witnessing must capture the unspeakable dimensions of ecological trauma, the gaps and hesitations that reveal what cannot be directly

articulated. This methodological precision reflects an understanding that environmental trauma operates beyond conscious narrative control, embedding itself in the unconscious structures of speech, pause, and silence that conventional historical methods typically ignore.

The concept of radioactive memory emerges through Alexievich's approach to nuclear testimony, particularly in her work on Chernobyl. Gessen notes that "Voices from Chernobyl" was Alexievich's "easiest book to write: nothing like those events had happened before, 'so people had no culture to protect them'" (Gessen, 2015, p. 9). This observation reveals how nuclear disasters create unprecedented forms of trauma that exceed existing cultural frameworks for understanding and processing environmental catastrophe. The absence of protective cultural narratives leaves witnesses exposed to the full force of ecological trauma, creating what might be termed "radioactive memory"—forms of remembrance contaminated by ongoing environmental presence. This concept suggests that nuclear trauma creates a unique form of cultural memory that persists through both narrative transmission and material environmental contamination, requiring new theoretical frameworks for understanding how environmental disasters embed themselves in collective consciousness.

The devastating testimony that Gessen excerpts from "Voices from Chernobyl" demonstrates is how radioactive memory operates through visceral, embodied recollection. The widow's account of her husband's death reveals environmental trauma's invasion of intimate spaces: "It was all wounds. The last two days in the hospital, I would lift his arm, and meanwhile, the bone was shaking, just dangling, the body had gone away from it. Pieces of his lungs, of his liver, were coming out of his mouth. He was choking on his internal organs" (Gessen, 2015, p. 2). This description shows how nuclear contamination transforms the human body into a site of environmental violence, creating memories that are simultaneously personal and ecological. The physical dissolution described "the body has gone away from it", represents the breakdown of boundaries between human and environmental systems characteristic of nuclear trauma. The testimony reveals how environmental contamination operates through the most intimate bodily spaces, transforming love and care into encounters with ecological violence.

Gessen's analysis reveals how environmental trauma disrupts conventional narrative structures, requiring new forms of literary representation. Alexievich's rejection of traditional historical methods becomes clear in her critique of her mentor's work: "There is this story of a boy and his mother, who share an apartment with a woman who steals...Moreover, suddenly, there are three pages of ruminations on the nature of the Russian intelligentsia. The thing I always say is, 'Do not put yourself next to the meatball. You'll lose'" (Gessen, 2015, p. 4). This methodological principle—avoiding authorial intrusion into testimonial space—reflects the unique demands of environmental witnessing, which must preserve the immediacy and authenticity of ecological trauma experience. The metaphor of the meatball suggests that environmental trauma operates through concrete, material details that cannot be abstracted into intellectual frameworks without losing their essential experiential dimension.

The temporal complexity of environmental trauma appears in Alexievich's description of her subjects' relationship to pain: "Many of her subjects talk about 'carrying' pain or 'handing over' pain, as if that is how they understand their relationship with the interviewer—as the process of transferring their pain" (Gessen, 2015, p. 10). This conception of testimonial practice as pain transfer reveals how environmental trauma creates ongoing psychological burdens that must be shared through narrative transmission. The metaphors of "carrying" and "handing over" suggest that environmental trauma cannot be simply documented or archived but must be actively transmitted through collaborative testimonial relationships. This understanding positions environmental witnessing as a form of collective labor where trauma survivors and interviewers collaborate to create sustainable forms of ecological memory that can bear the weight of ongoing environmental contamination.

The intersection of environmental contamination and intimate human experience emerges powerfully in the Chernobyl widow's testimony that Gessen presents. The woman's account reveals how nuclear contamination invades the most private dimensions of human relationship: "Even in our last month, he would still call for me at night. He felt desire. He loved me more than he did before. During the day, I'd look at him, and I couldn't believe what had happened at night...Because this wasn't just an ordinary cancer, which everyone is already afraid

of, but Chernobyl cancer, even worse" (Gessen, 2015, p. 12). This testimony demonstrates how environmental trauma operates through the contamination of intimate spaces, transforming love and care into sites of ecological violence. The distinction between "ordinary cancer" and "Chernobyl cancer" reveals how environmental contamination creates new categories of illness and suffering that exceed existing medical and cultural frameworks.

The grotesque physical transformations described in this testimony reveal the full scope of environmental trauma's bodily impacts: "His chin went somewhere, his neck disappeared, his tongue fell out. His veins popped, he began to bleed. From his neck, his cheeks, his ears. To all sides. I'd bring cold water, put wet rags against him, but nothing helped...I'd bring a washbowl from the bathroom, and the streams would hit it, like into a milk pail. That sound, it was so peaceful and rural. Even now I hear it at night" (Gessen, 2015, p. 12). These descriptions reveal how radioactive memory operates through sensory persistence, embedding environmental trauma in ongoing perceptual experience. The juxtaposition of the "peaceful and rural" sound with the horror of radiation sickness demonstrates how environmental trauma creates complex emotional and sensory associations that persist long after the initial contamination event. The persistence of auditory memory—"Even now I hear it at night"—suggests that environmental trauma operates through unconscious sensory channels that continue to trigger traumatic recollection.

Gessen's analysis reveals the ethical complexities inherent in environmental witnessing, particularly regarding the protection of trauma survivors. Alexievich's approach to testimonial ethics emerges in her response to subjects who wish to remain anonymous: "I didn't want to expose you to god knows what!" But her subject insists: "I suffered so much and he suffered so much that I don't want there to be any untruth" (Gessen, 2015, p. 13). This exchange demonstrates the tension between protecting environmental trauma witnesses and honouring their desire for authentic testimony. The subject's insistence on truth over protection reveals how environmental witnessing can become a form of resistance against the minimization or denial of ecological trauma. This ethical tension illuminates how environmental disasters create complex relationships between individual protection and collective truth-telling

that require careful navigation by environmental witnesses and their collaborators.

The political dimensions of environmental witnessing become evident in Alexievich's observation that "The mob accepts art but tears apart people" (Gessen, 2015, p. 13). This distinction between artistic acceptance and personal persecution illuminates how environmental testimony operates in contested political contexts where ecological truth-telling can be dangerous for witnesses. Gessen's documentation of the hostile Russian response to Alexievich's Nobel Prize—including accusations that she is "not a writer" and criticism for her "opposition to the Kremlin" (Gessen, 2015, p. 7)—demonstrates how environmental witnessing becomes a political act that challenges state narratives about environmental and social conditions. The political backlash against Alexievich reveals how environmental testimony threatens official narratives that minimize or deny ecological trauma, positioning environmental witnesses as political dissidents whose work challenges state authority.

Gessen's portrayal of Alexievich's methodology reveals how environmental witnessing requires innovative literary techniques that can capture the temporal and spatial complexity of ecological trauma. Alexievich's process—"she tapes conversations, has them transcribed, then writes from transcripts, longhand, often rehearsing the monologue out loud" (Gessen, 2015, p. 8-9)—demonstrates the collaborative and iterative nature of environmental testimony. The detail that "A book takes between five and ten years and represents the voices of anywhere from three hundred to five hundred interview subjects" (Gessen, 2015, p. 9) reveals the massive collective dimension of environmental witnessing, which must synthesize multiple perspectives to create comprehensive accounts of ecological trauma. This methodological approach suggests that environmental disasters create forms of collective trauma that exceed individual testimonial capacity, requiring collaborative literary techniques that can accommodate multiple voices and temporal perspectives.

The significance of Alexievich's work for understanding environmental memory becomes clear through Gessen's analysis of her broader literary project. Gessen reveals that Alexievich conceived her books as "a cycle on what she calls the Red man, the Soviet person" that "began with the most mythologized event in the formation of the Red man—the Great Patriotic War—and

ended with the collapse of the Soviet Empire" (Gessen, 2015, p. 9). This cyclical structure positions environmental disaster as integral to larger historical transformations, suggesting that ecological trauma cannot be separated from broader political and cultural processes. The integration of environmental disaster into this historical cycle reveals how environmental memory operates as both an ecological and a political phenomenon that shapes collective identity and historical consciousness.

CONCLUSION

This ecocritical study of Masha Gessen's "The Memory Keeper" reveals how environmental disasters transcend their immediate temporal and spatial boundaries through testimonial practices that create enduring forms of cultural memory. The analysis proves that the methodology deployed by Svetlana Alexievich is rather an innovative manifestation of so-called environmental witnessing as the factor that cannot be caught only by the real-life aspect of the ecological disaster but also by the significant psychological and embodied distress that lasts beyond the very time when the significant contamination took place. By closely analysing the oral history practices that Gessen comes up with in his analysis of Alexievich, this paper presents an enlightenment on how nuclear disasters such as Chernobyl bring about what can be referred to as radioactive memory—these are forms of cultural memory that are still ridden with environmental presence.

Radioactive memory is exciting about the active operation of environmental trauma on a variety of different temporal planes at the same time. In contrast to other traditional types of historical trauma that can dissipate or evolve over the course of time, environmental contamination introduces persistence of situations, which are potentially re-traumatising, and become fixed both in landscape formations and cultural memory activities. The methodology of testimonial approaches to witnessing, as documented by Gessen and Alexievich, offers essential clues to understanding how joint witnessing efforts can offer forms of protection to time-slippery experiential aspects of traumatic ecological events that cannot be measured scientifically or reflected by government apparatus.

This study will add to the emerging field of environmental humanities as it exhibits how eco-critical methods of inquiry can be used to enhance the complicated overlaps among

the ecological disaster, cultural memory, and testimonial writings. The research shows that such an environmental witnessing needs new literary methods that can express both the time-specificity and morality of the ecological trauma, and at the same time retain the authority of the testimony of survivors. Also, the analysis points out how the power of environmental witnessing makes the issue inherently political, which can fight against the official versions minimising or dismissing the current causes of ecological trauma.

The area of future research ought to remain within the continued theoretical formulation of the way to conceive the memory of the environment, specifically the way that the invisibility of environmental contamination generates distinctive complexities in the transfer of the cultural memory. Environmental witnessing appears as one of the most promising directions of ecocritical research unlimited to learning more about the way ecological catastrophes define personal and social experience in the vein of long-range time scales.

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