



Enroute to Unroot the Root: An Archival Study in Graham Swift's Shuttlecock

J. Sai Anantha¹ & Dr. K. Sathyapriya²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Sri G.V.G Visalakshi College for Women, Udumalpet

Affiliated to Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

²Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri G.V.G Visalakshi College for Women, Udumalpet

Affiliated to Bharathiar University, Coimbatore



Open Access

Manuscript ID:

BIJ-2025-J-101

Subject: English

Received : 04.06.2025

Accepted : 13.06.2025

Published : 28.07.2025

Copy Right:



This work is licensed under
a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Abstract

Graham Swift is the twentieth century British novelist and a short-story writer. *Shuttlecock* (1981) is the second novel by Swift. The themes of the novel include regret, guilt, love, and identity. The plot relates both the personal and professional life of the protagonist named Prentis. He is an archivist by profession. The research paper emphasis a connection between Prentis's personal and professional life, under the lends of 'archival' memory. The novel carries two archives, first, the book written by Prentis's father entitled, 'Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent', and next the files related to the case C9 in Prentis's office. The researcher elucidates that, the first archive acts a raising action where Prentis raises question regarding his father's sudden uncharacteristic silence, and the second archive acts as a falling action where Prentis finds an answer for his father's muteness. Meanwhile, these archives arouse tension in the minds of other characters too, because it deals with valiant and secretive traits of certain Home Office officials during the war. As these archives deals with war and war heroes it is greatly associated with the interest of public opinion. The function of any archive is to preserve the sensitive information away from the masses, thus it has great affinity with the term 'silence'. The archives in the novel plays a dual role, that is by both causing and solving problems. To authenticate the above arguments, and to argue the impact of an archive in the private lives of the characters' in *Shuttlecock*, the researcher chooses the theory titled, *The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion* by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann.

Keywords: archives, public opinion, isolation, silence

"Perhaps uncertainty is always better than either certainty or ignorance" (Swift, 223).

Graham Swift occupies a predominant space in contemporary writings of British literature. Swift is both a novelist and a short-story writer. Swift is the author of nine novels, one novella, and two collections of short-stories. He is a recipient of several awards that include Memorial Price, Booker Prize, Geoffrey Faber Price, etc. The general themes of Swift's novels include, alienation, guilt, relationship, memory, and love.

Shuttlecock is the second novel of Graham Swift. It is written and published in the year 1981. The novel is written in simple, clear, and in direct

manner. Similar to his debut novel, Swift's second novel too explores the complexities of a nuclear family unit. The novel revolves around the life of the protagonist named Prentis. The behavior and conduct of Prentis and other characters were the primary focus of the narrative. Generally, Swift's novels explore the intersection between historical context and its contemporary relevance. The novel *Shuttlecock* too continues to follow the same tradition by interweaving the elements between the past and the present. In the present research, the researcher engages with this intersection of the past and present under the lens of 'archival' memory.



In *Shuttlecock*, the protagonist Prentis is an archivist, who works in a British Civil Servant Department. Prentis took an interest to be an archivist both in his personal and professional life. In general, an archivist is a professional who is responsible for the acquisition, organization, preservation, and maintenance of historical records and documents. "In our vaults you will find the memorials of century-old murders, arsons, thefts and frauds – the delight of professional criminologists who, admitted only by the strictest permit, sit sometimes all day, at little lamp-lit reading desks, working through sheaves of yellowed documents" (Swift, 12). Additionally, an archivist works with other wide range of materials that include papers, diaries, photographs, films, and digital files. Thus, by endowing the possession of these supporting elements, an archivist plays a significant role in preserving and managing the shared 'recollection' of events, experiences, and cultural heritage.

Once the awakening of 'recollection' precipitates, the emergence of 'memory' activates. By means of acquiring all the collective representation of records from the past, the archival memory becomes obtainable. Archival memory is embedded within the collective memory because, it fosters inclusivity, multiplicity, and self-reflexivity of an individual and a group. The archives in general, are generated and organized by material collections and not by subjective themes.

The archival memory serves as a foundational framework for the novel *Shuttlecock*. In the novel, the protagonist Prentis pays close attention to the archival records that is part of both his personal and professional life. The two key components that trigger the archival memory in the novel is one, the book written by Prentis's father titled, '*Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent*', and the other one relies upon the case C9 in his office which holds the cryptic documents. The article details the relationship between these two components within the framework of archival memory. "And once in our department, in the great majority of cases, there it stays, never to be touched again. But should some investigation yet-to-be discover a new link, should the material in our files prove relevant to some other case, it is instantly unearthed" (12). In first archive, Prentis

raises a question about the reason for his father's unbreakable silence, and in the second archive, he finds the answer for his question.

First archive is the book titled, '*Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent*' written by Prentis's father during the war between France and Germany. Throughout the narrative, Prentis refers to his father affectionately as 'Dad'. Dad is a former soldier, a spy and a war-hero. He is a secret agent working for France. As being a spy, he got captured by Gestapo, Germanies and subjected to imprisonment for a period of eight days under Chateau Martine cell. Once after freeing himself away from the Germans, he wrote the book titled, '*Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent*'. The title '*Shuttlecock*' is Dad's code name during his final operations in France. The book is an autobiographical note of Dad about the after-effects of the war. A numerous number of war books and war films are emerged during mid 1950's. Dad's '*Shuttlecock*' is one of such books that fits into this category. The book details the intimate revelations of bitter memories of loss, pain, sufferings and turbulences during his internment in a Holocaust camp named 'Chateau Martine'.

Dad's book '*Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent*' highlights the exploitation of mankind during the political war. In the book, Dad details; internal graphic sensibility of the holocaust camp, collection of a root map of the prison, effects of crossing limits of the racial lines, depiction of complete distortion of a place during the war, notice of new directories and their catastrophic events, and lastly the state's technical policy. Dad describes in his book that, "This was a period of burning villages, of corpses lining the streets and dangling from trees, of atrocities of all kinds. Whole areas of countryside which up till this time had seemed for us inviolable and friendly landmarks suddenly became ravaged, contaminated. Everywhere was a smell of blood, carnage, singed and rotting flesh . . ." (117).

Admits all the details mentioned above in the book '*Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent*', Prentis's most favorite part is, Dad's description of his 'brilliant escape' during his capture in the Chateau Martine cell. Within the concise narrative of the chapters, Dad describes his code of conduct both inside and outside the prison. Dad expresses his



bravery in the act of freeing himself from among the blood descendants of prisoners. As a Holocaust camp, the prison follows politics of disregard. Thus, the prisoners in Chateau camp including Dad, undergoes a brutal treatment. As the days roll by, the prisoners are habituated for such abusive handling. Thus, inside the prison, Dad's treatment was like; "Yes, I am no better than some borrowing animal . . ." (119).

During his capture, Dad states that he is blindfolded and imprisoned in a cell that has windowless enclosure with three adjacent walls. He is subjected to a violent beating by four jailors and by a young German boy. After such harsh and oppressive mistreatment, Dad is left unclothed. Regardless of undergoing a brutal treatment, Dad parallelly spent several days painstakingly to hollow out a hole in the wall, and ultimately on a single night, he made his escape from Chateau, unclothed and unencumbered.

After escaping from Chateau Maritime, Dad finds significant challenges in finding a secure location to treat his wounds and conceal his identity to avoid dejection as an escaped prisoner. Dad received shelter, food, clothing, and compassionate care for his injuries from a generous lady in a nearby village. In his book, Dad expressed heartfelt gratitude to the lady for the kindness he received. The following day, Dad successfully escaped from German territory. This is where Dad wraps up his story.

Each time Prentis finished reading the book, he was beset by the mystery of Dad's unexplained silence now at present even after thirty years of war. Dad, following the escape from the prison, thirty years later, unexpectedly became withdrawn and uncommunicative from everyone. Prentis strongly suspects that Dad's silence stems from the traumatic experiences he had faced in the camp. Prentis felt that, "But then, on the other hand, there is so much to be said, so much to be explained, understood and resolved between us" (44).

In an effort to uncover the cause of his father's silence, Prentis diligently reads the book every day. By reading the book frequently, Prentis aims to discover a loop whole that unravels his father's mystery of silence. Thus, every time after reading the book, Prentis ends with the question mark that, what would have been the reason for his father's

inexplicable silence after thirty years of war? "There are thousand questions I want to ask, about things that aren't actually stated in the book. About how Dad felt at the time, about what was going on inside him. Because Dad doesn't write about his feelings; he describes events...." (53).

The second archival record 'C9' reveals the answer for Prentis's question regarding his father's silence. C9 is the case that Prentis is currently working upon in his office. The case C9 inter-relates both Prentis's professional and personal life. C9 parallelly helps to upgrade both personal and professional life of Prentis. The complete investigation of C9 leads Prentis to a new vision of life. The research paper outlooks how archival records of C9 paves way for Prentis's new phase of life.

C9 compiles archival records of files titled file B, C, D, and E. All of these files share personal details of certain Home Office officials include, X, Y, and Z. File B shares information related to X named Ronald Francis, who is a Home Officer and a former Civil Servant. He got arrested for a number of petty frauds and sexual offences. After being diseased under alcoholic incompetence, X is died of heart attack while undergoing a trial. During a trial, X made allegations on another Home Officer Y. After investigation, X's allegations on Y were found to be false.

In the series, file C contains no reference to X or Y. It was a report on the third Home Office official Z, named Arthur Leonard. He is purely un connect with X or Y personally but professionally he is superior to X. The Home Officer Z commits suicide by stepping in front of a subway train shortly after the secret investigation on Y. After Z's death, Z's investigation details are clearly mentioned by his wife in file C. In the line, file D is even remoter to X and Y, and to the worst, file E is not on the shelves but it is in this file E, Dad's reason for silence is sealed upon that even Prentis doesn't know.

Quinn, by knowing that Prentis is in search for the reason for his father's silence, he deliberately hides the file E away from him. Prentis doesn't put a stop for it. He takes up the case personally and starts investigation in certain Home Office gatherings such as Golf course, Club house, etc. Prentis begins to suspect that something is wrong in the office, "Do I



begin to give the impression that something is wrong in our department?" (16).

Quinn, at last reveals all the gaps in C9. Quinn opens up that, the file E is with him, he deliberately hides it. "For many of our files are sealed. Only Quinn can unseal and reseal them. And many are not sealed but kept in safes and locked boxes which only Quinn can unlock" (13). Quinn starts describing what is in file E. File E contains documents related to X. He says in file E there is three letters written by X. One letter is addressed to Dad, next to Z, and the last long letter is copied and about to be circulated to newspapers, Dad's publishers, and to other officers who are under special operations during the war. Prentis comprehends that, "Quinn was up to something" (73).

The three archival letters in file E written by X reveals all the secrets left in the novel that include, Dad's unbreakable silence, Z's suicide, Z's wife Yvette's false allegations on his death, and Z's son Richard's hostile behavior towards his mother after Z's death. It is the archival letter by X that changes Prentis's entire notion of life. X targets Dad and Z (Leonard) because they both are successful Home Officers, who have huge reputations unlike X. Thus, to spoil their reputation, X reveals the personal secrets of Dad and Z by knowing that it shatters them personally.

In those letters, X reveals two secrets one, Dad is not a soldier but a traitor, Quinn details that, "They say your father was a coward and a traitor . . ." (209), and the other one is about Z's wife Yvette. Yvette is said to be having an affair with Dad. Betrayal of his nation as being a traitor and betrayal of loyalty towards his dear friend Z haunts Dad every day. Thus, now Prentis comprehends through the archival records that, out of guilt and regret Dad shuts his mouth permanently.

Quinn, through the archive, breaks Prentis's whole notion of life. Quinn rescues Prentis, from the complexities of his personal archive with the assistance of professional archive. The Archival record shows what Prentis wants to know. The file E in C9 archive exhibits that both Prentis and Z's son are in same situation, that is to preserve both their father's reputation. As being an archivist, Prentis 'silenced' the file E by burning it, to avoid

the damage of reputation to both Dad and Z. The characters include Dad, Prentis, Z (Leonard) and his family collectively become silenced regarding the matter in the archival record, by making the novel deeply inter-wined with the term 'silence'. The significance of 'silence' in Shuttlecock is thus represented along with theoretical interpretation in the subsequent parts.

Generally, an archival record on one hand, reveals information from the concealed files and on the other hand, it conceals information without revealing the files. As the archives work under beyond the masses, it has a strong affinity with 'silence' and the theoretical frameworks surrounding it. In Shuttlecock, as the major characters inextricably linked in hiding the truth in the archival record because of the fear of public opinion, it fosters the theme 'silence'. The motivation behind their silence and the fear of public opinion are elucidated through the theoretical framework titled, *The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion* by Elisabeth Noelle Neumann.

The theory *The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion* by Neumann studies that, silence occurs out of the fear of public opinion "... public opinion is a matter of speaking and of silence" (44). The characters Dad, Prentis, Z and his family maintains 'silence' by wrapping up their sensitive family secret. They keep their lips sealed to preserve the information, image, identity, and reputation of themselves and of their loved ones. The threat of social exclusion and reputational damage silences them. The argument of 'silence' is thus authenticated in the novel Shuttlecock in accordance with the theory entitled *The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion* by Elisabeth Noelle Neumann.

Neumann, before stating about his theory, he describes the classical statements on the concept of public opinion. First, Neumann states the definition of Tocqueville's view that "More frightened of isolation than of committing an error, they joined the masses even though they did not agree with them" (43).

To expound upon the previous statement, in Shuttlecock, Quinn and Prentis deliberately destroys the file E to align with public's perception of Dad as a 'soldier', concealing his true identity as a 'traitor'



due to the fear of public backlash. Despite Z's son Richard's urge to punish Dad and his mother for having an illicit affair, he remains silent to avoid tarnishing his father's societal reputation as a Home Officer. Dad, by knowing that he had committed an error of being a traitor during the war, in fear of public opinion and isolation, he could have tried to conceal his true identity of his treasury by cooking up false stories in 'Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent'. "Because he had to justify how he got out of the Chateau. He couldn't just say, they let me go. His war record up till then had been pretty remarkable – the grand finale had to live up to it" (Swift, 213). Thus, Dad, Prentis, Quinn, and Richard remain silent to maintain the public opinion of Dad and Z by concealing the truth in fear of public opinion and isolation.

Next, Neumann states Allport's process of public opinion that, "... social customs, conventions and norms are included along with political questions among the 'situations' and 'process of significance' with large number of people express agreement or disagreement in their public lives" (43). In Shuttlecock, Quinn and Prentis are aware that, Dad's political action as a traitor during the war period is contrary to the nation's well-being and trust in accordance with the societal standards. Thus, Prentis despite disagreeing of Dad's actions, he remained silent to avoid public repercussions. Prentis states that, "It is as if everybody is trying to search out everybody else's secret, and the assumption is that this secret will always be a weakness; it must be something unpleasant and shameful which make it possible for its owner to be humiliated and degraded" (23).

Neumann, gives explanation to "But when does one isolate oneself? ... by observing his social environment, by assessing the distribution of opinions for and against his ideas ... " (44). In Shuttlecock, Dad becomes a recluse after imagining the impact and consequences of his betrayal as a traitor being exposed in the community, he thus disconnects himself from his societal network in advance and chooses to live in solitude. The weight of societal disagreement for his treasury and the shame of being viewed as a traitor led to his withdrawal from the societal connections. Dad, uses

'silence' and 'isolation' as a shield to cover up his deceitful actions which he has committed both in his personal and professional life, Swift states that "The perfect defence: impenetrable silence" (210). Action of betrayal and fear of public's disagreement made Dad to silence and isolate himself.

Neumann exclaims that, "Thus the tendency of the one to speak up and the other to be silent starts off a spiraling process which increasingly establishes one opinion as the prevailing one" (44). In Shuttlecock, when Prentis repeatedly questions to Dad about the reason for his uncharacteristic silence, he constantly remains tight-lipped, "Please, Dad, please. Speak to me. Explain" (45). Later, when Quinn reveals the reason for Dad's muteness (that he is a traitor and a betrayer), Prentis becomes silenced and have no words to say. By revealing the truth about Dad, Prentis fosters that Quinn seems guilty upon himself for disclosing it, "I thought: he is regretting he ever spoke – didn't keep silent too. 'I don't know if it can be answered. I've weighed upon the known facts'" (210). Like the same, when Prentis constantly enquires Quinn about the missing file E, Quinn remains silent. Lastly, when Quinn opens up to contents in file E, Prentis is left with silence. In the Shuttlecock, thus it is evident that when one starts speaking up the other remains silent.

The theory states that, "Voicing the opposite opinion or acting in public accordingly incurs the danger of isolation" (44). In Shuttlecock, being a spy and a soldier, Dad's transition to a traitor is a grave offense against the public trust. Betraying trust whether of a nation or of a dear friend is a deeply uncivilized act and is antithetical to the principles of a civilized society. To Dad's reason for isolation, what Quinn states is that, "Your father never came forward. Of course – forgive me – blackmail victims often don't" (209). Next, Z's wife engaging in an extramarital affair and betraying one's spouse is generally condemned and it goes against societal norms. Z's son, by revealing the truth about his mother's illicit affair could besmirch his father's reputation because of the negative perception of infidelity among the public. Thus, either revealing an unpleased opinion or performing an uncivilized action in society may incurs the danger of isolation, and that's the reason they remain silent.



Neumann in the theory advances certain hypothesis for the process of public opinion formation. He includes that as follows, “The intensity of observation of the environment varies not only according to the degree of interest in a particular question, but also according to how far the individual expects to have to expose himself publicly on a particular subject” (45). In Shuttlecock, Prentis being inquisitive in enquiring about his father’s muteness, he meticulously scrutinized every aspect of his environment, including his home, office, and club house in search of a hint to unravel his father’s puzzling silence. Thus, driven by curiosity and in a quest for the answers, Prentis threw himself to expose the puzzle of his father’s deep quietude. “. . . what opportunities exist for such as I for delving into untold privacies, for obtaining almost unlimited access into the darker byways of other people’s lives” (106).

“Willingness to expose one’s views publicly varies according to the individual’s assessment of the frequency distribution and the trend of opinion in his social environment” (Neumann, 45). The post-war period and its narrative focuses on the accounts of war heroes, that embodies their heroism, bravery, sacrifice, courage, selflessness, and patriotism of soldiers. As the political and societal interest of war is at its peak, the two archival records in Shuttlecock including Dad’s book and files of C9 receives greater attention due to its alignment with dominant social opinion. Dad’s book, Shuttlecock: Story of a Secret Agent reaches a fever pitch because of Dad’s autobiographical note on his brave traits during the war. “You remember in the early and mid-fifties, when the actual after-effects of the war were fading, rationing was ending, there was a whole spate of war books and war films” (Swift, 51). The archival record in the case C9 too receives same consideration because, it reveals confidential details about the covert actions of certain Home Office officials during the wartime.

“. . . the assessment of the current distribution of opinion and the actual distribution are clearly divergent, it is because the opinion whose strength is overestimated is displayed more in public” (Neumann, 45). In the opinion of society and the public, Dad is in high esteem as a renowned soldier

and a war hero but in reality, he is a traitor who betrayed the nation’s trust. Here there is a stark contrast between the public’s perception of Dad and his true character. The public’s incorrect assumption of Dad as a war hero is largely shaped because of Dad’s exaggerated accounts that he mentioned himself as a valiant warrior in his book.

“. . . the assumption that the cause of the differing degrees of willingness is the individual’s fear of isolation and of his self- confidence being shaken if his own view is not confirmed by the majority opinion or by the trend of opinion” (Neumann, 45). Dad, Prentis, Z, and his family are haunted by the prospect of being cast out by their community because of the fear of distinct differences from before and after of their identity. Illustratively, the fear of being exposed as a traitor but not a soldier in the public erodes Dad’s self- confidence. Richard worries that, by disclosing his mother’s illicit affair may harm his father’s reputation in the eyes of the public. Thus, they live in the fear of social ostracism by thinking of the public’s varied reactions regarding the disrupted reputations of their own and of their loved if it gets exposed.

Neumann through the theory entitled *The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion*, offers a detailed glimpse of how significant the influence of public opinion on one’s personal life is and how the fear of public opinion leads to ‘silence’ and ‘isolation’ in one’s life. In Shuttlecock, the primary objectives include public opinion, ‘silence’, and ‘isolation’ are deeply associated with the term ‘archival memory’. The two archives that promotes to shape public opinion in Shuttlecock is one, the book written by Dad titled, ‘Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent’, and the other one is the documents included in the case C9. The characters include Dad, Prentis, Quinn, Z and his family are deeply distressed because of the memories that is unearthed within these archives.

The first archive fosters Prentis to question more and voice out more, while the second archive takes the voice away by imposing on him a deafening silence. In the first archive, Prentis inquiries about his father’s quietude and through the second archive he gains clarity and obtains a solution. In first archive, Dad outspoke a lot about himself, but



alternatively the second expresses the other men's perspective on Dad. In first, both Dad and Prentis raises their voices up to voice out their own ideas, but in second they both fall silent by realising that their idea is contrary to reality. The second archive (especially the three letters by X), mutes the voice of Dad, Prentis, Quinn, Z and his family. In the novel, Prentis initially raised a tension by digging out the hidden questions in the first archive but at the end, by eradicating the File E, he subsides all the hidden problems and makes the mind of himself and others to be free. In the novel, thus the archive serves as

both a source of conflict and solution to the problem. Through the archives thus, the protagonist Prentis enroots to unroot the root of all the hidden problems in the novel *Shuttlecock*.

Works Cited

1. Noelle – Neumann, Elisabeth. “ The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion.”
2. *Journal of Communication*, vol.24, no.2, fall 1974, pp.43-51.
3. <https://vnecas.wordpress.com>
4. Swift, Graham. *Shuttlecock*. Picador, 2010.