

58-Understanding and deciphering the past in Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock*

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Abstract

Like the other influential events in world history, the two world wars of the twentieth century have deeply influenced the following generations and forced them to evaluate their existence and ask epistemological questions about fact and fiction, history and story, and truth and falsity in order to understand and situate themselves in a constructed present world. *Shuttlecock*, Graham Swift's second novel, follows a senior police archivist who inherits a past from his veteran father and attempts to reach a natural flow of life by fully grasping the past. He thinks that he can dissolve the unnaturally constructed reality of the present by digging the past but scrutinizing the past does not provide the necessary answers to settle him down in harmony. In the end, he leaves his epistemological quest and seems to come to terms with the fragmented reality between the past and present. However, as Slavoj Žižek notes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, overseeing the modern alienation is a dangerous fantasy and it is impossible to return to a natural balance. This article aims to discuss the relationship between memory, trauma and modernity in order to come to terms with the impossibility of knowing the past.

Keywords: Memory studies, Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock*, trauma

Graham Swift'in *Shuttlecock* romanında geçmişi anlama ve çözümleme

Öz

Diğer önemli olaylar gibi, yirminci yüzyıldaki iki dünya savaşı takip eden nesilleri derinden etkilemiş ve halihazırda yarattıkları evrenlerindeki durumlarını anlamak ve konumlandırmak için varlıklarını sorgulamaya, gerçek ve kurgu, tarih ve hikaye, doğruluk ve sahtelik konularında epistemolojik sorular sormaya itmiştir. Graham Swift'in ikinci romanı olan *Shuttlecock* savaş gazisi olan babasından miras kalan geçmişi devralan kıdemli bir polis arşivcisinin geçmişi tamamen kavrayabileceğini düşünerek olağan bir hayata kavuşma çabaları üzerine kuruludur. Şimdinin doğal olmayan gerçekliğini geçmişi kazarak yok edebileceğini düşünmektedir fakat geçmiş ahenkli bir hayata ulaşması için gerekli cevapları barındırmamaktadır. Nihayetinde, epistemolojik arayışını bırakır ve geçmişle şimdinin arasında içinde bulunduğu zamandaki gerçekliği kabul eder. Slavoj Žižek'in *İdeolojinin Yüce Nesnesi* adlı eleştirisinde belirttiği üzere modern yalnızlığı gözardı etmek tehlikeli bir fantezidir ve doğal bir dengeye kavuşmak imkansızdır. Bu makale, geçmişi kavramanın imkansızlığıyla uzlaşmak için bellek, travma ve modernite arasındaki bağı incelemektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Bellek çalışmaları, Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock*, travma

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Introduction

Understanding the past in order to evaluate the present conditions is vital for human beings. The interest in the past has gained an increased interest in the 20th century, especially after the world wars. For the recent interest in memory, Tim Woods and Peter Middleton note that "Memory is a means of overcoming the limitations of the human condition as it is understood in contemporary culture, by making the past appear once again in the present, despite its temporal, and possibly spatial, distance." (2000: 2). This nostalgic return to the past is, in fact, an attempt to bring back the order into the chaotic conditions of the present. Linda Hutcheon offers a different perspective about the interest in past and argues that modern novels are "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988: 5). Nicola King in *Memory, Narrative, Identity* voices similar ideas about the past:

The late twentieth century has also seen an increased focus on questions of memory as the generations which experienced the atrocities of the two world wars die out, and as new or revived national movements base their demands on memories of oppression or trauma ... the recent insistence on the role of memory also mark a renewed desire to secure a sense of self in the wake of postmodern theories of the decentered human subject. (2000: 11)

The past provides stable alternatives of life which are forgotten during the wars. Many writers who were born in the aftermath of wars portray the confusion between the stability of the past and the chaotic atmosphere of the present. In his novels, Graham Swift searches reality in the past in order to understand the present. In his second novel, *Shuttlecock*, he narrates the confusion and anxieties of the post-war generation.

Search for reality in the past

In his novel, *Shuttlecock*, Graham Swift portrays an unreachable past which offers promising answers to the compelling dilemmas of the present. It is structured around two narratives of a father and a son relating their stories about the war and the present. The outer plot follows the possible promotion of the main character Prentis and his complex relationship with this boss, Quinn. They work at the crime archives of the police department and Quinn assigns Prentis old files which consist of gaps of information. With such limited input, Prentis tries to come up with meaningful explanations for the motives of crime. The inner plot is about the deeds of Prentis's father who worked as a secret agent during WWII. He gives his codename "Shuttlecock" to his memoir which is about his heroic escape from a Nazi Camp. Years later after the war, he goes through a breakdown and cuts his communication with the world. Through his visits to the hospital and between the inarticulated lines of his father's memoir, Prentis tries to find and understand his father.

While trying to solve the case handed by his boss, Prentis understands that his father stayed at the same prison with one of the suspects of the case and he also had an affair with another veteran's wife. Prentis also finds some blackmail letters in the same file about his father's so-called heroic deeds and his affair which chronologically coincide with his breakdown. This new information about his father's assumed heroism forces Prentis to question the validity of his father's story and throughout the novel, Prentis is lost in his father's book in search of reality. The novel comes to an end when the two plots are settled and everything is solved.

The memory of his pet hamster leads Prentis to start narrating his story. He does not have pleasant memories about the animal. It is a kind of torture he applies to the animal. "They say you only recall

what is pleasant and you only forget what you choose not to remember" (1981: 5). He recalls squeezing his hamster as a pang of past. He wants to understand life, feelings and nature as a young boy. Thus harming is, in fact, a way of searching for love and pity. In the same manner, the writing process is an attempt to understand his conditions "without knowing where the tale will lead him" (Janik, 1989: 79). Prentis confesses his situation as:

I had this urge to set down my feelings and try to account for them. It's strange, I have never really wanted to put them on paper before. And then it seemed, no sooner I had written that first confession than there were lots of other things that had to be examined and written down – and now I'm at it again. I don't know where it's getting me. But I feel I have to go on (1981: 40).

As in Proust's memories of the past, which are ignited by the taste of madeleines, Prentis involuntarily goes back to the past through his pet and memories start to spill out. His new desire of knowing the past lead into an anxiety of not knowing the past. Thus, this situation leads him to torture the people around him. In the same manner, his boss, Quinn, plays with him by presenting files which have some missing information in them. With significant gaps of information, Prentis tries to solve the mysteries of the past. He uses his imagination to fill the gaps. However, Quinn argues that there is no place for imagination in their job. He asserts that they are a kind of "special librarians" (1981: 23) and they have to evaluate things factually like a historian.

In one of the cases he is studying, Prentis comes across a boy who systematically disfigures and mutilates his father's dead body in order to understand what he is made of. In a way, Prentis' situation is similar to this boy. First, he plays with his hamster in order to understand life and nature, then, he scrutinizes his father's novel in order to understand him. He thinks that "there is so much to be said, so much to be explained, understood and resolved" between him and his father (1981: 43). He believes that "Dad is in that book. He's in there somewhere. It's not some other man, in those pages, with a code-name, Shuttlecock" (1981: 52). Like the feathered badminton ball with the same name, his father comes and goes back behind the enemy lines. However, the gaps in his story bring its credibility into question. Furthermore, the ultimate breakdown into silence totally hinders the communication between the two Prentises. As a son, he cannot understand his father's breakdown. Sometimes it seems as a way of punishment for him, at other times it seems as a pretence. He believes that by asking the right questions, he will bring his father out of muteness.

In the meanwhile, the traumas of the war affect people in different ways. Two of the characters who cannot adjust to the normal flow of life choose to cease their lives. However, for Prentis Senior, the trauma of the war manifests itself as a permanent shutdown. His condition reminds Cathy Caruth's definition of trauma:

there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (1995: 4)

Throughout the novel, Prentis tries to understand his father's condition. He is not sure if his father's condition is a delayed trauma. His memoir can be accepted as a kind of testimony to trauma. As Shoshana Felman's notes

To testify before a court of law or before the court of history and of the future; to testify, likewise, before an audience of readers or spectators - is more than simply to report a fact or an event or to relate what has been lived, recorded and remembered. [...] to testify is thus not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others: to take responsibility - in speech - for

history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences. (Felman and Laub qtd. in Yalın, 2014: 20)

Relating the atrocities of the past is a difficult task both for the witness and the audience. However, it is a way of facing and coming to terms with what actually happened. Yet, the motives for writing the memoir are not clear for his father. In an extract from his book, Prentis Senior questions the motivations of the war: "Do civilized instincts persist in war, or does civilized life veil the instincts of the war?" (1981: 60). The vital line between the war and the drive to stay alive force him not to muse much about such existential matters. For this reason, he recounts his achievements bravely but does not give much detail about the tortures he had undergone. This situation attracts Prentis' attention and tries to come up with an explanation. He reads the book again and again in order to find his real father. He wonders how his father felt during his custody.

His anxiety to know the reality leads him to develop a kind of philosophy about personal histories: "Everyone is trying to strip everyone else bare, and everyone, at the same time, is trying not to be stripped bare himself" (1981: 25). His offensive standpoint to learn about the personal histories of individuals echoes itself contradictorily in his self-protective assumption: "We are all looking for a space where we can be free, where we cannot be reached, where we are masters" (1981: 36). In this dilemmatic situation, he holds a vantage point to reach the archived documents as a police archivist but he cannot come up with a solution for his father's case. The reflections of this situation in his personal life are disastrous. He neglects and tortures his family for the search of reality in his father's past. He explains his condition as: "what I wanted was not so much the promotion itself, but to be in a position where I would know; where I would no longer be the victim, the dupe, no longer be in the dark" (1981: 71).

Prentis pursues the gaps in his father's book and questions the power of memory: "The memory not in the least impaired, still vivid-sharp, but the memory of something so terrible that it cannot be repeated, cannot be spoken of or written of" (1981: 106). Is it his father who lost his memory, or is it memory which destructed his father? He cannot understand his father's condition. As Locke notes for the ontological feature of memory, only remembered experiences can be a part of the identity (1997: 275). If they are not remembered, then they do not become a property of the mind. It is probable that Prentis' father chooses such adoption of memories to get rid of the horrific past. Likewise, David Hume asserts that if an image remains strong in the mind, it becomes a memory (2000: 154). If the memory is faint, imagination shapes memory. Thus, people start to believe the memories tailored by imagination. For his case, Prentis Senior chooses to bury the blurred parts and shine out his chivalric deeds. He skips telling his interrogations under custody and remarks that "you only remember what is pleasant. Or perhaps the truth is that certain things defy retelling" (1981: 139). He argues that such torments cannot be explained and asserts that "this can't be described, this is blurred" (1981: 188). At another point, he writes "Memory provides its own, thankful censorship" for the tortures he has witnessed (1981: 145).

The burden of the past is heavy for Prentis Senior. His memoir has a double-sided effect on him. While it protects him and asserts his version of reality, it comes to a point of cracking when threatened by the realities of others. Ultimately, when his version of reality is put to test, he goes into a muteness to cut his contact with the outer world. The asylum provides a haven for people like him. Here, he does not need to fight for his version of the past. By passing through the doors of wards one by one, he moves

away from the realities of the world and after a while, it becomes impossible to turn back to normal life.

On the other hand, Quinn acts as the guardian of knowledge who can easily reach any kind of document related to the past. However, he is aware that too much knowledge is a burden. He puts forward a question to Prentis: "Have you had moments in your life, Prentis, when you've found yourself asking the simple question: Is it better to know things or not to know them? Wouldn't we sometimes be happier not knowing them? Know what I mean?" (1981: 118). He argues that ignorance is bliss but Prentis does not share the same opinion. He replies: "It can be – a torment not knowing things" (1981: 119). This yearning for knowledge ruins Prentis and the people around him. He thinks that his situation will change when he gains knowledge. Quinn offers a solution for this hunger of knowledge: "the best, the securest position to be in is not to know. But once you do know, you can't do anything about it. You can't get rid of knowledge" (1981: 177).

Quinn holds a godly position and has developed a system of keeping off or destructing information which may hurt unwitting people like Prentis. He argues that the truth exists but it cannot harm people when they are not aware of its existence. Thus, he wipes out such harms by erasing the records. For his father's case, Quinn offers the documented realities to Prentis and asks if he really wants to know about it: "All of this perhaps can make no difference, externally; it can matter to no one except you. If nothing happens, the secret, the mystery, if you like – remains only with you, and me. Perhaps uncertainty is always better than either certainty or ignorance" (1981: 197). Thus, he will be aware of different paths of possibilities and will not have to carry the burden of knowledge.

After going through such pains, Prentis as a matured person chooses to be uncertain in the dark: "I don't know. I said resolutely. It seemed to me this was an answer I would give, boldly, over and over again for the rest of my life" (1981: 200). He chooses to be in the shadow because written facts and even personal accounts cannot be true and satisfying. If the truth or the so-called truth is presented to the people, it would disturb their flow of life and, maybe, lead them to undesired options such as suicide. Eventually, the people around him seem to be happy because of their ignorance. He undergoes a change and maturation process and after leaving the burden or the anxiety of knowing the past, he becomes a normal person and stops making inquiries about himself. He accepts his condition and asserts:

Perhaps it is best not to probe too deeply into those invisible regions, but to accept on trust what is there on the page as the best showing the author could make. And the same is true perhaps of *this* book . . . it may be better not to peer too hard beneath the surface of what it says or . . . what it doesn't say (1981: 214).

Throughout the novel, Prentis goes through a transformation and changes from a weak, anxious person into a mature, all-knowing person. In his new office which is situated between a cherry tree which reflects the continuous flow of life outside, and the artificially illuminated basement level office which symbolizes the memories of the past, Prentis finds himself in a god-like position. He starts to delete unnecessary files like his former boss Quinn who once said to him:

"I started to take files from the shelves. . . . I started to destroy information. I used to think: here is such and such an individual - just a name in a file - who will now never have to know some ruinous piece of information. He'll never even know his benefactor. I used to think I was actually ridding the world of trouble. Good God. And the motive behind all this-was nothing but the desire for power" (1981: 199).

Conclusion

Nietzsche evaluates human being as a “remembering animal” who “braces himself against the great and even greater pressure of what is past: it pushes him down or bends him sideways, it encumbers his steps as a dark, invisible burden” (1997: 61). The past is a heavy burden for the human beings unlike animals for which “every moment really dies, sinks back into night and fog and is extinguished for ever” (1997: 61). There is no such option for human beings to escape from the past. Nor is there a way to totally grasp it. In Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock*, the protagonist understands the impossibility of grasping the whole truth of the past. He learns that such attempts will end in vain and anxiety. Instead, he chooses to be on the fence; neither carrying the burden of the past nor living the sheer joy of ignorance. He grasps the multiplicity of possibilities and tries to fuse them in his present condition. As Jan Assmann asserts, the past and the present have a mutually interdependent relationship: “The present is 'haunted' by the past and the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present” (1997: 9). Thus, the attempts of the protagonist of the novel to understand and decipher the past end in vain but throughout his journey towards maturation, he learns to live with the ambiguities of the past.

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