

CHAPTER II

ANALYSIS OF THEMES OF HEROISM AND INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN "*SHUTTLECOCK*"

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2.1 INTRODUCTION:

The second chapter discusses how heroism is the main cause of intergenerational conflict between fathers and sons in Graham Swift's *Shuttlecock*. The narrator of this second novel, Prentis becomes obsessed with his father's experiences during the Second World War. Throughout the novel Prentis struggles to establish an identity independent of his father.

2.2 ANALYSIS OF THEMES OF HEROISM AND INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN “SHUTTLECOCK”.

The novel is structured around three key oedipal dramas: Prentis's monologic relationship with his absent father, his attritional struggle for respect and obedience from his son Martin and his projection of fatherly attributes to Quinn.

2.2.1 Intergenerational Conflict between Prentis and His Father.

A hero or heroine should be brave, noble, solemn, firm, strong minded, haughty, calm, positive and reckless. He should be superior to the common man. Having enormous physical strength, he should display prowess in battlefield. He should have the qualities of patriotism, morality, loyalty, goodness, idealism. These are the qualities that are expected from hero or heroine.

A hero should be an event making individual who predetermines the course of history. Prentis is the protagonist of the novel. He compares himself with his father by considering above all qualities. In this novel, the hero Prentis lacks some of the qualities which his father has. Prentis works

as a senior clerk, an archivist in a British civil service department. The department stores the records of crimes which the police have not been able to solve or which they have ceased to investigate. He works there with his boss Quinn and other four assistants, Vic, Eric, Fletcher and O'Brien. Among these four Prentis is senior and Quinn admires him;

“You’ve got a rich imagination, haven’t you, Prentis? A lurid imagination”.¹

He is a family man in his early thirties, with a wife, Marian and two sons, Martin and Peter. Two years prior to the novels action, Prentis’s father suffered a breakdown which left him speechless and confined to mental institution, where his son pays him regular visits.

Prentis’s home and working lives intersect around the figure of his father. He is retired businessman who during the Second World War operated as a spy in northern France. Eventually captured and tortured by the Gestapo, Prentis’s father effected a daring and heroic escape from the Chateau Martine. He recorded this escapade in his bestselling memoir *Shuttlecock: The Story of a Secret Agent*. In his fifties and for a few years his name was well known. *Shuttlecock* was his code-name during his final operations in France. A shuttlecock means:

“thing you take swipes at and knock about, like a golf ball”.²

Prentis idolizes the resourceful hero of *Shuttlecock*. He admires his father,

“he was one of the war- heroes”.³

He has heroic physical stature. Prentis describes him.

“He is an upright, robust, distinguished-looking man in his late fifties. He has always had a good physique, a strong intelligent, photogenic face-like the face of some seasoned explorer or mountaineer”.⁴

Like a true hero, he is hard worker. He works late at night making notes and rough drafts and finally he completes his book.

Prentis have read the book a dozen times but he does not get familiar with it.

“The primary focus of Prentis’s investigation and his father’s memoir is the Second World War and one individual’s conduct in it”.⁵

Throughout the reading of *Shuttlecock: The Story of the Secret Agent*, Prentis gets acquainted with his father’s heroic qualities. How like a true hero, he was working in the Caen. How he killed the sentry with cunningness and precaution, then how he worked in a France with devotion is really amazing. Like a strong and patient hero he faces the Germans. Like a brave soldier he suffers a lot in the hands of German. His capture, interrogation, and beating by Germans impress Prentis. According to Melissa Bushman:

“Hero or Heroine is one who performs a legal or ethical act that is of benefit to another entity without first considering any personal gain or harm”.⁶

This definition of hero suits to Prentis’s father. He is a true patriot who fights for his nation. He shows his wisdom, prudence, consciousness, and strong will in his plan to escape from Chateau. While escaping from Chateau he, like Odysseus, faces tremendous struggle in his journey. Persistence and capacity to sustain one’s composure under any circumstance is a heroic virtue. Prentis’s father has this heroic virtue. Prentis says:

“my father was a spy; that he knows adventure, danger, did all those heroic things”.⁷

Prentis tests his father’s heroism while reading this book. In this war, Prentis’s father seems to have behaved with outstanding heroism.

“But just like Harry in *Out of This World*, Prentis feels compelled to reassess this heroic past, to probe at it and to uncover a partial hollowness; a partial lie within it”.⁸

While reading his father’s book, Prentis notices that Dad does not openly express his feelings, pains, and suffering at the hands of Germans. So he feels that these adventures are unreal. He discusses these things with his father but he cannot replay. His father cannot speak because of that mental breakdown. Doctor says that there is no physical reason but psychological one. Prentis also doesn’t know whether Dad can understand what is spoken to him or if he can even recognize people around him. One can see in his eyes only a filmy gaze fixed on the distance.

Prentis cannot understand whether it is a true mental breakdown or some sort of seizure of the brain. According to Prentis, his mother’s accidental death simply by collapsing on the kitchen floor is the cause of Dad’s mental breakdown. Prentis admires his parents:

“I have always thought that his command, his confidence and poise, owed much to her, and that she in turn derived her calm, her contentment from his success”.⁹

His father is an ideal husband also. He has a good marital achievement. His professional and domestic life is successful.

Prentis informs about his relationship with his father when he was a child. As a boy he used to trail behind Dad, lugging his bag of clubs on the golf course at Wimbledon. He volunteered to be Dad’s caddy. His Dad used to make a fuss of him in front of his friends in a club and they had teased him in return. Dad was proud of him. This was the period when Prentis had his Sammy, a hamster. Before he got it he was a pretty unruly child. He made his parent’s life hell. Once he even bit his father’s hand and swear his teeth touched the raw bone in his finger. He gave respect only to his teacher Mr. Forster, but after having Sammy, he become a docile, dutiful

even an exemplary son. He started learning sincerely. He also showed a little kindness towards his parents by preparing a tea on Sunday mornings and offering to weed the garden. All that changed again when his hamster, Sammy died.

The relationship between Prentis and his father goes on scattering when the couple boiled Prentis's Sammy. Prentis gave up being his caddy when Dad was starting to teach him how to use his driver. He didn't like to wear an idolatry mask of being a son of a famous spy at certain function and social gatherings. When his book published he didn't like the glory shown upon him at school. He says.

"He ceased to be interested in me as I ceased to be interested in him".¹⁰

Dad didn't like Prentis's leaving school and joining in a present job. Actually he wanted Prentis to become an Engineer and to seek an opening in his firm. He didn't show any interest in Prentis's life, his job, marriage, having his own house, and children. Prentis feels:

"One particular bone of contention: he has never shown any affection for Marian-not even the attentions due to a daughter-in-law; which I've always resented".¹¹

Thus, the relationship between Prentis and his father in Prentis's childhood was not healthy one. In childhood he felt about his Dad,

"But, having a hero for a father-even having a father who isn't a hero but who works in a plush office and plays golf on Sundays with a little retinue of worshippers all this is a bad news if you're an only son".¹²

It means that in childhood, Prentis does not like a heroic father. There is a conflict between father and son because the father wants to impose his own decision on his son and when son neglects his father's decision, father neglects his son. Prentis left being caddy of his father.

Prentis's father does not understand his son's attachment with Sammy. Children are stubborn and they want to fulfill their wish at any cost and parents have to follow it, but Prentis's father neglects this so, there is a conflict between the two.

This conflict ends when Prentis himself becomes a father of two sons. Prentis's relationship with his father becomes the novel's pivotal drama. He is unsatisfied about his suitability as a father. He has developed contrary feelings about his own upbringing. His own upbringing created an apparently reliable heroic role model. It also establishes more expectations of masculinity. But Prentis cannot possibly meet it. The wartime adventures detailed in his father's book faintly indicates standards of conduct that are impossible to achieve. Prentis underestimates himself in his own comparative estimation. He re-reads the book to become like a Dad. He says.

"Why do I need to know these things-to eavesdrop on my Dad's suffering? So as to become like one of his tormentors? To become like Dad? With so much of Dad's book I have to struggle to make it real, to wrest it out of the story-book realm into the realm of fact. Because I know I could not have done half those things Dad did in France".¹³

The book reveals that his father was an active, courageous, decisive and when necessary, brutal, but Prentis is incapable of challenging the monolithic supremacy of his father. This inferiority complex of Prentis gives rise to intergenerational conflict between him and his sons.

2.2.2 Intergenerational Conflict between Prentis and His Sons.

Prentis's domestic life is characterized by psychological cruelty and casual violence. He is embittered by the inferiority of his position both as a father and as an archivist. There are "two promotions" that he wants. On

the one hand he wants to become equal to his father, means to be a hero. He says:

“I wanted to step into Dad’s shoes”.¹⁴

His father having retreated into silence, he turns to his book in the hope of finding an answer to the obsessive question-

“What was it like, what was it really like”?¹⁵

Prentis’s frantic reading of *Shuttlecock* underlies his desire to provide him with knowledge which his father can no longer impart himself. On the other hand he wants to be promoted to head of his department at the office, the position currently occupied by Quinn:

“I wanted his job. I wanted to sit in his leather chair. I wanted to look down like him, through his glass panel, at the underling I had once worked beside”.¹⁶

Prentis is unsatisfied in both his professional as well as domestic life. This is the reason of his abusive behavior with his family.

Children always like freedom. They create their own world and want to live in it. But Prentis gets irritated on small issues of his sons. Therefore, there is an intergenerational conflict between Prentis and his sons, Martin and Peter. Martin is eight year old and Peter is six. Like other children they like to watch T.V. continuously. Prentis complains:

“I know it’s probably my fault-because I’m the one who rents the television-but I don’t like the way those two boys spend all their time stuck in front of it. It’s not right; it’s not the way children should grow up”.¹⁷

Peter and Martin like to watch the serial of Bionic Man. Prentis knows that his sons like the Bionic Man because he performs impossible feats, solve impossible riddles and bear no relation to anything natural. Here Prentis compares himself with the Bionic Man and thinks that he is

incapable to perform the acts which the Bionic Man performs. He is incapable to satisfy his sons as a father. So the main reason of the conflict between sons and father is Prentis's own sense of inadequacy as a father.

Communication gap is also one of the causes of intergenerational conflict between them and lack of heroism is the cause of the communication gap. Prentis's sons neglect him because he is not heroic. Prentis says:

"They can't take their eyes off the screen to say 'Hello' to their own father-that is too much".¹⁸

Prentis is alienated from the world. He thinks that he is in constant dissatisfaction. He clearly finds his own situation deeply problematic. He is alienated even from his wife Marian who before marriage worked as a physiotherapist. She loves him but Prentis feels that,

"My wife is afraid of me. She does not know me".¹⁹

Haunted by a sense of personal inauthenticity, Prentis also feels alienated from himself. He thinks that he is powerless, without heroic qualities. Here:

"Alienation refers to estrangement division or distancing of people from each other or of people from what is important or meaningful to them, or of a person from their own sense of self. The concept has many discipline-specific uses, and can refer both to a personal psychological state (subjectively) and to a type of social relationship (objectively)".²⁰

Prentis's conflict with family is the cause of this alienation. He works out his daily frustrations on his long suffering wife and sons. He forces Martin and Peter to complete pointless physical punishment for the slightest misdemeanor. Prentis has developed master-slave relationship with them. He imposes his decisions on them like master. He says:

"I clap my hands, like an animal trainer".²¹

Though his sons are uninterested for a walk by the river at Richmond, he asks them to go with their mother. Prentis doesn't go with them. He thinks that he is an obstacle in their relationship. When he denies to go with them, his sons show an enthusiasm and relief. So he asks himself,

"What is it that Marian's got that I haven't got? Why do the kids have no axe to grind with Marian?"²²

The intimacy that exists between his wife and sons distresses him, but his only response to the disappointment of his isolation is to restrengthen his patriarchal claim through renewed bouts of temper and physical brutality. When Martin removes his father's inscribed copy of *Shuttlecock* and claims to have thrown it away, he extends a direct challenge to the power base of his father who can resort only to a series of vicious blows to revenge himself. Martin does this because every evening he has been taking the copy of *shuttlecock* and engaged in reading in stubborn indifference to his family. Prentis punishes him.

"You don't get anything to eat until you tell me where that book is".²³

Martin has safely hidden the book but has silently endured his punishment subtly disempowers Prentis. He aligns the wronged son with his brother and mother. Prentis understands the situation.

"I remembered the flavors of childhood punishments: the humiliation, the obscurity of adult motives the vague feeling of outlawdom; the determination to resist".²⁴

The challenge that Martin poses to his father's authority is constructed less in term of an oedipal usurpation and more as a sibling rivalry. Prentis is a parental martinet and a dictatorial inscriber of familial habits. The physical punishment that Prentis inflicts is spiteful in character

but is driven by a jealousy of his son's intimacy with his mother, an intimacy that he contracts not simply as filial but as sexual. He takes every opportunity to humiliate Marian in front of them. Prentis imagines his son as a rival for Marian's attention and in their strenuous and manipulative lovemaking he fantasizes about his own triumphant accession to the mother's body. He claims to dread the thought.

"One day by some mischance, Martin and Peter might stumble upon me and Marian in some posture impossible to explain, even to a boy who has an inkling (and I'm sure Martin has more than that) of what Mummies and Daddies do after bedtime".²⁵

Such thoughts would serve several of Prentis's psychic needs. However, there would not be any thought of revenge against his wife and sons for their exclusive intimacy in Prentis's mind. Prentis thinks that he is unable to have his physical control over his wife. He believes that he is an inauthentic father and son.

Though Prentis has not good relationship with his father in his childhood, he adores him, respects him and loves him but Prentis's sons do not respect him because they do not think him worthy of respect. Prentis expresses his feelings:

"Like: I respect you Dad, I love you Dad. I looked up to you. I always did, though I never showed it. Why it is my own children don't respect me".²⁶

Prentis expects the same treatment from his sons which he gave to his Dad. He confesses.

"My relations with Martin and Peter aren't exactly harmonious".²⁷

Prentis's confessional narrative is an attempt to rationalize and isolate an appropriate mode of fathering. It is based upon a marked

absence of communicated knowledge and his frustration with his family derives in the main from his own uncertainty about what being a father means. He does not regard himself as a competent father.

“In Martin’s case, Prentis endeavors to delineate the parameters of his paternity but his continuously undermined by his own sense of insecurity, by what he sees as Marian’s feminization of his sons and by Martin’s devotion to the exaggerated masculinities of television fantasy”.²⁸

Martin’s most powerful strategy of resistance to his father’s will is the silent. But he starts to keep watch on his father when he returns to home. Watching from a distance he manages to unsettle his father. Prentis feels that someone is following him and that is Martin. Prentis expects that Martin will care for him. He will show the same kind of affection for his father which he shows for his mother. But he hadn’t come to meet him. Prentis feels,

“He had come to observe his father, as one observes some creature under glass”.²⁹

Prentis feels a state of insecurity which is brought by his own uncertainty about the roles he should be playing. Prentis compares Martin with Quinn.

“Martin gaze, like that of Quinn, infantilizes Prentis, stripping him of the carapace of his performative selves and exposing him to discover as inauthentic”.³⁰

Both when returns home pretend not to have seen each other. It is Marian who informs Prentis what Martin is thinking.

“Martin thinks, you’re avoiding him”.³¹

Whenever there is a quarrel between father and son, Marian takes the side of her son. So Prentis feels alienated:

“Then it almost seemed that a cloud passed over my eyes: supposing they’re all in it all together? Quinn and Martin and Marian and Peter”?³²

There is insistent anxiety that as a father he is ineffectual. He observes himself by his own measure. He does not want to be exposed his inadequacies which ironically further destabilize his patriarchal authority. Martin wants to put contact with his father but Prentis does not give response to him. Prentis thinks:

“So, he is nearly eleven years old and finding his strength and I am three times his age and wandering where I mislaid mine; hoping to be propped up by some promotion”.³³

Prentis’s relationship with Martin ultimately disempowers the father because it explicitly mobilizes the oedipal challenge in a way that Prentis cannot control and given his basic coping mechanism, cannot hope to win Martin’s strategies for confronting his father’s supremacy subtly implicate the rest of the family against Prentis. It forces him to examine the very basis of his authority. Prentis, isolated and self-conscious, is reduced to a bullying physicality to repel Martin’s assault, a brutality. It emerges unmediated from the primitive realms of his unconscious. Thus, the struggle for supremacy is inverted with Prentis striving to break free of the implied moral authority of his own son. This inversion emerges from his own unnegotiated oedipal transition.

Prentis wants enlightenment from his father. He visits him every Wednesday and Sunday to share his fears and worries. His father’s never ending silence tortures him. He is eager to share his view with Dad. He wants to become an ideal father and only his father can teach this.

The relationship between Prentis’s father with Marian, Martin, and Peter is not healthy one. Prentis informs:

“They are quite heartless about him”.³⁴

They forget him. Once, Marian has thrown away the book. They don't visit him. They don't even think of him. After Prentis's visit to father, Marian does not ask, how is He? She blames both Prentis and his father. Prentis feels:

"I know what they are all thinking when I go off to see Dad every Wednesday or Sunday; they are thinking I go there just to get away from them".³⁵

It means that Prentis's relationship with his father is an obstacle in the relationship between him and his Children. He has developed an idea of an ideal father. He thinks that his Dad is an ideal father and he lacks the qualities of ideal father. His inferiority complex firmly entrenches. It is impossible to abolish it.

"In these circumstances it is inconceivable that Prentis could negotiate his oedipal desire to topple the patriarch and accede to the position himself".³⁶

He finds that Martin has all the qualities of his grandfather. He says:

"If Martin will take after his grandfather, Peter will take after me. Poor mite".³⁷

Therefore, Prentis wants to be like his father, be like Quinn, and not be a slave but to be a master. He always craves for this. Prentis has a firm belief that he is not, nor ever could be, the father that he should be, gives rise to a complex pathology, of guilt and anxiety. He tries to compete, at least in shape; the exploits of father (for instance by encouraging his sons into athletic activities) are nullified by their indifference. He thinks that they disrespect not just to his paternal skills but also to his sense of natural masculinity. Unable to inspire hero-worship that he craves, he resorts to a gestural interpretation of masculinity that is defined by its extremity: because he cannot match the deeds of his father, he chooses instead to match the exploits of his father's captors-the Nazis. Because of lack of

communication with his father and his incomplete reading of male identity, he is violent towards his family. Prentis expects dialogic relationship with his father but it is monologic.

“Sometimes I wonder what I am more afraid of: of Dad never breaking his silence, or of his suddenly speaking”.³⁸

His father’s language-coma deprives him of an important moderating influence, removing from him the ability to mediate his experience of fathering through a third party. His father is neither absent nor present within the symbolic economy of Prentis’s life. Because he is not dead, Prentis cannot replace him and succeed to the position of undisputed patriarch. Prentis’s desire to possess, dominate and manipulate the members of his family is the result of this situation. So he asks his father:

“If you were such a hero, did you always have good, healthy relations with your wife? Even bed-time ones? Tell me, Dad, Enlighten me”.³⁹

Without any effective dialogue the relationship between the men is reduced to a one-way confession of Prentis’s despairing sense of inadequacy. The gloomy silence of his interlocutor enables Prentis to concede his frustrations about the futility of his work and of his domestic life. His father did not confess his misdemeanors, so he did not get absolution. Prentis’s confessions to his father represent a desperate desire for forgiveness. He struggles to reconcile the silence, but is, initially at least, unable to situate it within any meaningful chain of causal occurrence and therefore unable to interpret it. It is only with the revelation of the secrets of File E that Prentis can explain the complete retreat from communication.

By the end of the novel, Prentis has achieved both promotions, which turn out to be intricately related. The two strands of the plot come

together in "C9", a mysterious case on which Prentis has been set information being missing from the files. Carrying out investigations of his own so as to be able to shed some light on the matter, Prentis comes to suspect that the case bears directly on his father's past. This suspicion only reinforces his feeling that he is being tested in some obscure way by Quinn, an impression which is latter confirmed by his boss. Concerned not to jeopardise his promotion chances, he hesitates for a long time between challenging Quinn about the missing files and keeping silent. When he finally decides to confront Quinn, the latter confesses that he has been deliberately withholding and destroying files, with a view to protecting unknown people from the potentially damaging information held within them.

Prentis is investigating the case C9. He is correlating it with his father. He finds the similarity between his father's life and the person's life involved in it. Quinn has deliberately given this file to Prentis because he has also read Prentis's father's book and he knows reality.

Case C9 involves three protagonists – X, Y, and Z-the first of whom Prentis soon discovers to have been prisoner at the Chateau Martine at same time as his father. X, later dismissed from the civil service for alcoholism and sexual misdemeanors, sent two black mail letters to a colleague , Y, threatening to expose him, and eventually avoided by X's timely death. Prentis quickly comes to connect Y with his father, but it is an assumption impossible to verify because of the absence from the files of vital documents relating to the case. Only then he challenges Quinn about the missing papers, is he able to ascertain the veracity of his conjectures and learn of the disturbing possibility that his father, far from resisting Nazi torture, quickly succumbed and revealed the locations of undercover British agents in France-agents that were subsequently executed. Quinn knows this that C9 could mar the reputation of Prentis's father. The C9 suggests that Dad had made no heroic escape from Nazi imprisonment, as

he asserts in his Memoir. In return for his information Prentis's father may have been allowed to escape by the Germans. A secondary accusation of X's blackmail is that Y initiated an extramarital association with the wife of a colleague and friend, Z, who on discovering the infidelity, committed suicide. In this case, Quinn has been withholding the crucial "File E", whose contents may lead to conclusive proof of Dad's guilt or innocence. However struck by doubts regarding the morals of his "little enterprise for the good of mankind", he could not bring himself to destroy it.

The knowledge of the deception of his father presents Prentis with an ethical dilemma: confront his father with the allegations in the hope that the shock of discovery may be sufficient to break the language paralysis, or protect him from the accusations, thereby resigning himself to the continuation of his silence. Earlier Prentis thinks that his father is an extraordinary being which is false, proved by Quinn.

"If he did betray, he only did what any ordinary natural human being would have done-he saved his own skin".⁴⁰

It establishes Prentis as superior to his father for the first time and as the arbiter of a power that could, depending upon its application, protect or destroy the older man.

In the end, Quinn leaves it to Prentis to decide if file E should be destroyed. In a surprise move, Prentis renounces his desire for enlightenment-which is what file E presumably stands for-and agrees to let Quinn burn the documents in a garden incinerator, having never even read them.

Afterwards, Quinn informs Prentis that he will shortly receive official notification of his promotion. Prentis's does indeed replace Quinn after latter's retirement, and takes over what Quinn calls his little half-baked scheme to save the world.

Not only does Prentis eventually gain the upper hand over Quinn, but he also realizes his ambition of getting even with his father. The demystification of his father affected by the news of his possible breakdown under torture has a liberating effect on Prentis:

“Something had collapsed around me; so I couldn’t help, in the middle of the ruins, this strange feeling of release. I had escaped; I was free”.⁴²

The idea that his father had cracked under torture like an ordinary human being enables Prentis to conceive his relations with Dad as being in a state of “perfect balance”:

“I don’t know, I said, resolutely. It seemed to me as this was the answer I would give, boldly, over and over again for the rest of my life”.⁴³

Adverbs such as “resolutely” and “boldly” are meant to confer on Prentis himself the qualities of bravery and courage on which Dad had always seemed to have a monopoly. Prentis’s identification with his father is further underscored by his fantasy of a reunion with Quinn, whom he has not seen again since taking over from him. Prentis stops reading his father’s book. The novel ends with Prentis forgoing one of his visits to Dad to take his family on an outing to the seaside.

Accepting this reading of the novel’s conclusion, which intimates the peaceful resolution of the oedipal drama through the ultimate pre-eminence of the son as beneficent patriarch, also explains the reconciliation between Prentis and his family. Having accepted the fallibility of his father and assumed the position of dominant male, he no longer needs to engage Martin in a sibling struggle for mother’s attention and can accede to the status of father, husband and in the final scene as a generous lover.

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