

Silence and Social Isolation in Mike Bartlett's *Artefacts*: A Reading through Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the dynamics of silence and isolation in Mike Bartlett's play *Artefacts* (2008) (Bush Theatre/Nabokov): winner of the Old Vic New Voices Award. This Article aims to consider the workings of silence and isolation in Mike Bartlett's *Artefacts*, with reference to Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory as a main framework of analysis. I intended to analyze how external (socio-political) pressures influence the silencing of characters, the subsequent experience of isolation this brings about, and how the study helps to interpret the play in socio-political contexts. Analysis is applied to key characters and scenes in the play within their respective political contexts (the Iraq war in *Artefacts*), drawing on contemporary communication theories to highlight the methods of silence. The present article will investigate how silence functions as an accommodation to assumed majority opinions which will consequently lead to emotional, social and psychological isolation. This is approached with reference to *Artefacts* with a focus on cultural and familial norms surrounding the Iraq War. The application of Neumann's Theory provides insight into how public opinion may inhibit individuality, leading to social conflict and alienation. The play was chosen due to its apparent political leanings to further understand how silence manifests in different contexts, and how Neumann's theory may be extended to other works by Bartlett, and theater in general. Furthermore, there is an attempt to consider silence in conjunction with the concept of agency and how the characters attempt to conform and resist to these social/political pressures. This methodology allows for a multifaceted understanding of silence not only as a form of conformity, but also as a cause for social conflict, which is relevant to more recent studies of public opinion. In short, it attempts to fulfil the stated aims by using a combination of textual analysis with a more theoretically-based approach in exploring silence and isolation in Bartlett's play, using Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory framework along with others. The overall finding helps explain the social and political dimensions of Bartlett's play which will lead to further research into silence in contemporary theatre.

Keywords: Mike Bartlett, Noelle-Neumann, Spiral of Silence, *Artefacts*, Public Opinion, Isolation

1. Introduction

In contemporary British theatre, silence operates not merely as an absence of speech but as a loaded political and social act one that reveals the anxieties of individuals caught between competing cultural pressures and dominant public narratives. Mike Bartlett's *Artefacts*, which premiered at the Bush Theatre, London, on 25 February 2008, stages precisely this tension through the fraught reunion of Kelly, a sixteen-year-old Londoner, and her absentee Iraqi father Ibrahim, a director of the Baghdad National Museum who returns after years of absence bearing an ancient Mesopotamian vase as a gift weighted with history, obligation, and unspoken grief (Bartlett, *Plays*: 1 121). The play achieves what few political dramas manage: it humanizes a vast political conundrum by grounding it in the intimacy of a father-daughter relationship, using the cultural gulf between Britain and Iraq to interrogate the claims of Western governments regarding the state of post-invasion Iraq. The

ancient vase functions not merely as a dramatic device but as a potent metaphor for a looted nation, a fractured identity, and the burden of a history that cannot be silenced. (Klein 46)

The question of silence in *Artefacts* is inseparable from the question of public opinion and social conformity. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, in her foundational work *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion — Our Social Skin* (1993), argues that individuals who perceive their views to be in the minority tend to suppress their opinions in order to avoid social isolation, generating a self-reinforcing cycle in which dominant voices grow louder while dissenting ones recede. At the core of this theory lies the premise that most people harbor a deep fear of isolation, and that this fear compels them to monitor the social climate continuously, concealing opinions they believe to be unpopular (6). When mapped onto *Artefacts*, this framework illuminates the behavioral logic of its central characters: Kelly's outbursts and Ibrahim's evasions are not simply personal failings but socially conditioned responses to the spiral of silence in which both find themselves entrapped one shaped by post-invasion British public discourse, the other by the political violence of occupied Baghdad.

Despite the critical attention that *Artefacts* has received as a work of political theatre, scholarly engagement with the play has largely focused on its treatment of cultural heritage, postcolonial identity, and the ethics of archaeology, with comparatively little attention paid to the mechanisms of silence and social isolation that structure its dramatic action. Vicky Angelaki's (2017) study of social and political theatre in twenty-first-century Britain situates Bartlett among the leading playwrights whose work responds to conditions of crisis yet the specific intersection of Noelle-Neumann's communication theory with Bartlett's dramatic practice remains largely uncharted territory. This gap in the scholarship is significant, for it is precisely through the lens of the spiral of silence that the play's most compelling dramatic tensions become legible: not as individual psychological conflicts, but as symptoms of a broader social pathology in which silence is enforced, inherited, and ultimately internalized.

This raises a central question: Does *Artefacts* simply portray silence through the mechanisms of Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence theory, and to what extent does the characters' fear of isolation influence their decisions and relationships?

This paper argues that *Artefacts* dramatizes the mechanisms of Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory, revealing how political pressure and societal conformity compel characters to internalize silence as a survival strategy, ultimately transforming voluntary isolation into an involuntary condition that reinforces dominant public opinion at the expense of individual identity and historical memory.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on Noelle Neumann's Spiral of Silence

The academic debate surrounding Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence" theory has spanned more than five decades, beginning with its first formal formulation in 1974, and continues to generate considerable critical discussion in the social sciences and humanities. At its core, the theory posits that public opinion has historically served as a form of social control, deriving its power from society's willingness to threaten individuals with isolation in response to prohibited opinions and behaviors, and from the individual's fear of such isolation. This fundamental premise has been tested, expanded upon, and debated in diverse cultural and political contexts. (Noelle-Neumann, "*Theory of Public Opinion*" 46)

The "spiral of silence" theory is one of the most cited and discussed theories in communication studies during the latter half of the 20th century, although it is often reduced in the literature to the single premise that people who feel their opinion represents a minority tend to remain silent in public an accurate description, but one that covers only one aspect of a broader understanding of how public opinion functions. In their seminal review, Sheffield and Moy (2000) surveyed the theoretical and empirical landscape of twenty-five years of spiral silence research, identifying inconsistencies in how key variables such as fear of isolation and perception of the general climate were conceived and applied across different studies (3-5). Their critique remains essential for any researcher seeking to apply the theory beyond its original communicative context, particularly as it highlights macroeconomic variables including cultural conformity and the political environment those previous studies overlooked. (Ibid 18)

Subsequent studies have expanded the Noelle-Neumann framework to examine how individuals evaluate the majority opinion on an issue and how they are influenced by their perception of that majority, demonstrating the theory's applicability in diverse contexts beyond electoral politics. Of particular relevance is the theory's treatment of silence not as passive isolation but as an active, socially motivated behavior a distinction with significant implications for the literary and dramatic analysis of characters who choose silence. (N-Neumann & Schulz 40)

2.2. Silence and Political Theatre in Britain

The relationship between silence, political conformity, and theatrical representation has received increasing academic attention in the context of post-millennial British drama, particularly in the aftermath of the

2003 invasion of Iraq. Jenny Hughes (2007) has argued that war and terrorism powerfully intervene in social spheres through theatrical works that capture the public imagination, and that those engaged in war have exploited the language and practice of performance including symbolism, prepared public speeches, and awe-inspiring imagery to legitimize their expansionist powers (150). This observation is particularly relevant to the play *Artefacts*, where the performance of silence by its main characters reflects and reproduces the legitimizing narratives of the post-invasion political order.

Studies of British theatrical responses to the Iraq War have shown that theatre can function as a democratic platform, allowing otherwise silenced voices to be heard and offering a popular counter-narrative to the dominant institutional narratives produced by the government and mainstream media. Within this critical framework, Bartlett's play occupies a unique position: rather than directly portraying the repressed voices of the Iraq War, it depicts the social and psychological mechanisms by which silence is produced and maintained in the first-place mechanisms that correspond remarkably closely to Noelle-Neumann's theoretical model (ibid 152). Vicky Angelaki's (2017) study of social and political theatre in 21st-century Britain places Bartlett among the leading playwrights whose work responds to social and political crises, and examines the theatrical strategies through which contemporary British drama has grappled with issues of identity, power, and public discourse. While Angelaki's (2017) analysis focuses on the political dimensions of Bartlett's work, it does not systematically address the communication mechanisms of silence as theorized by Noelle-Neumann a gap this study seeks to fill.

Silence within Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory framework is viewed not simply as a lack of communication, but rather as a 'rational reaction to perceived political and social pressure' when there is a threat of being excluded for expressing dissenting opinions (Neumann & Petersen 57). Political events, whether they are wars, cultural arguments, or policy discussions, are said to 'activate the pressures' in polarized environments of opinion, where opinions of people and their quasi-statistical fear of the majority view are calculated and 'measured against risk of speaking out' (Matthes & Knoll 572). In such conditions, 'silence becomes an effective strategy' to prevent 'unfavorable social sanctions like ridicule and ostracism', if it is perceived that you are the minority (Zerback & Fawzi 519).

The fact that political events meld the Spiral of Silence, and more so in media-dominated worlds, is recently emphasized. Chen and Ng (2022) argue that media coverage of political conflict, such as a war or cultural dispute, amplifies popular opinions, thereby hindering individuals from voice of their alternate opinions (86). This is even more evident in the digital space, where algorithms of online platforms favour popular discourse and discourage minority views, hence silencing dissenters (Kim & Park 113). In such circumstances, silence is observed as a 'protective mechanism to survive a politically charged society' while minimizing the risks of political repercussions and social exclusion (Zerback & Fawzi 520). Such tendencies can be observed in Bartlett's *Artefacts* (2008), where the silence of the characters reflects their response to political events such as the Iraq War. While it is true that political events affect silence, the effect is context-dependent. According to Kim and Park (2023), in contexts like militarized or culturally specific society where the society is hierarchical or collectivist, pressure for silence is stronger due to norms that 'dictate one's thoughts' (113). This is in conjunction with E. N-Neumann's thesis that silence is an 'active reaction to a fear of isolation', hence one prioritizes social connection over personal expression (Neumann & Petersen 58). It is in this regard that political events are catalysts that influence the silence within Bartlett's play and society as a whole.

In *Artefacts* silence is present as a political response to characters' response to Iraq War and debates surrounding cultural heritage. When Kelly is confronted by her father over keeping an Iraqi artifact, she falls silent as it reflects the general discourse of western rights over cultural possessions (Boles 78). This supports Neumann's theory, as Kelly believes her view is a minority view and she fears repercussions from family and society alike (Matthes & Knoll 573). Kelly's silence is a political decision to avoid dispute as the political context, in the form of the portrayal of the Iraq War in the media, reflects the western biased view and therefore silence on cultural heritage matters are perceived as going against the norm (Chen & Ng 79).

In *Artefacts* Kelly is, as stated earlier, incapable of critiquing societal discourse due to the political circumstances of the Iraq war, this confirms that the political and social norms require the characters' silence on political and personal issues (Klein 48). These two cases also reflect modern arguments which state that politics triggers the Spiral of Silence Theory and enforces the dominant cultural codes through a number of media and social contexts (Zerback & Fawzi 321).

In conclusion, this article has provided a number of examples which explain why silence, among characters in the play, functions as a political reaction. As demonstrated by the play examined, these political reactions correspond with Neumann's concept of Spiral of Silence and how political events create enabling environments for the discouragement of dissent among people.

3. Theoretical Framework: Neumann's Spiral of Silence

3.1. Public Opinion

Within Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory, public opinion is not seen as simply an aggregate of individual opinion but rather as a powerful social force to control behavior and set norms of appropriate public expression (Neumann & Petersen 61). E. N-Neumann characterizes public opinion as 'opinions on controversial issues that one can express in public without isolating oneself' (Ibid. 64). This definition implies that public opinion can be understood as a mechanism of social control that can pressure individuals to either conform to assumed dominant opinion or stay quiet lest they alienate themselves from society. The context that frames public opinion can vary and the dynamic nature of public opinion can be influenced by the environment an individual is situated in-their social interactions, mass media, and their cultural norms are constantly shaping their quasi-statistical sense of acceptable opinion (Bodor 45).

The functioning of public opinion relies on what Neumann and Petersen call the quasi-statistical sense-an automatic process through which individuals assess their current climate of opinion based on a few signals from their social environment (Neumann & Petersen 68). This process is a dynamic and malleable one and external factors-in particular, the media-which magnify certain views and silence others can dramatically influence what the public thinks it can and cannot say. Indeed, as Matthes and Arendt point out in their 2019 article *Media Effects and Public Opinion, Framing can skew individuals' perceptions of public opinion...thus strengthen the [social] climate of silence by exaggerating the predominance of certain views* (417). In an increasingly digital world where people often operate within echo chambers which allow their opinion to be amplified within their own circles while effectively suppressing dissent (Hampton et al. 942), the algorithmic amplification of certain narratives can feed individuals' quasi-statistical senses and encourage conformity even more. These mechanisms can lead to a chilling effect particularly in politicized environments and on contentious issues, especially in the politically charged environment detailed in Bodor's 2019 study *Public Opinion Dynamics, Information Consumption, and Political Action*, where individuals in certain communities were less likely to share minority political opinions due to fears of ostracism (47) and echoing themes in Bartlett's *Artefacts*, where certain characters are often driven to silence in politically and culturally precarious situations in order to get along within their communities (34).

E. N- Neumann's notion of public opinion impacts our behavior by means of our fear of social ostracism (Neumann & Petersen 69), so an individual will analyze the costs of speaking against prevailing opinions and, more often than not, choose silence and conformity for the sake of remaining accepted. This tendency stems from the understanding that to deviate from the majority's perspective may bring on derision, banishment, or loss of social currency (Hampton et al. 943). The impact of public opinion on our behavior is exacerbated by the media, since it is our main source for learning the norms of the social group. In *Artefacts*, for example, we witness this tendency as the protagonist does not dare contradict her father's ideals about heritage due to the influence of the media and the political discourse, influenced by media coverage of events such as the Iraq War, the media has encouraged conformity in opinion (Jones 24). Recent literature has shown that this effect has even been increased in the digital age as an unending feedback of the dominant public sentiment will continue until it becomes apparent that our opinions are not embraced; in such a way, studies such as Zerback and Fawzi's, in which we learn that online participants are significantly more willing to express controversial opinions if their perceived views align with the majority, show the direct applicability to an analysis of an individual as he or she interacts within the confines of an interpersonal dispute in one of Bartlett's plays (513). Furthermore, public opinion impacts our behavior through not only outward expression, but also subtle signals that arise during social interactions; the generational gap in Bartlett's characters leads to the inability of young people to share their viewpoints as a result of their parents and their insistence upon conforming, an occurrence which confirms Neumann's belief that public opinion can create enforced conformity among various social strata (Neumann & Petersen 70). As well, characters in *Artefacts* display this effect as their opinions concerning cultural appropriation show how their perspectives are informed and limited by what are believed to be acceptable social ideals and this allows us to observe the Spiral of Silence in action (8).

In summary, Neumann's public opinion functions dynamically through individual fears of ostracism and the amplification by the media, thereby dictating and controlling our actions; *Artefacts* explores the significance of this dynamic as individual characters are forced to either repress their thoughts for the sake of avoiding conflict or exclusion. This piece by Bartlett help to illuminate the fact that the Spiral of Silence can be applied to the understanding of the forces which determine individual thought and action in a world with public opinion as a significant contributor to how individuals behave in an interaction.

3.2. Fear of Isolation

In Mike Bartlett's *Artefacts* (2008) isolation is key, where silence brings forth personal, social and emotional distress through the context of E. N-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory. This play delves into the

political and cultural dilemmas of an Iraqi artifact, where individual characters endure a certain level of social isolation because they must negotiate conflicting social discourses (Jones 26). Neumann & Peterson (2021) suggest that fear of social isolation motivates individuals to suppress dissenting thoughts, thus fostering emotional and personal separation (58). This can be demonstrated by the character archetypes of both Kelly & Ibrahim who, through their enforced or voluntary silence with regard to cultural and political dichotomies, endure severe alienation.

The isolation suffered by the teenage protagonist Kelly stems from her decision to accept her father's retention of the Iraqi artifact. This compliance stems from her perception of her father's views as the only socially acceptable familial and cultural paradigm; Kelly essentially adheres to the mechanism of self-censorship as described by Matthes & Knoll (575). Kelly's silence leads to personal isolation because she does not express her dissenting thoughts to her father. As a result, she develops an emotionally fraught and isolated relationship with him and feels emotionally disconnected from her own culture (Bartlett 128). Recent findings made by Kim & Park (2023) suggest that silence resulting from socially imposing situations will inevitably intensify loneliness particularly within culturally fraught situations, which is the dynamic present with Kelly (114).

The isolation suffered by Ibrahim is on a larger scale as his cultural origins become a secondary factor within a predominantly Western frame of reference. Any attempt on his part to affirm the artifact's importance is futile and he experiences a greater sense of exclusion from the discourse (Jones 31). This reflects the findings by Chen & Ng (2022) that minority voices are suppressed during polarized political climates, thus culminating in social and cultural isolation (91). Ibrahim's isolation becomes one of both social and personal dimensions as he fails to form relationships; he also personifies a wider sense of exclusion among marginalized people as his isolation reflects how those in dissent feel according to the Spiral of Silence Theory (Neumann & Petersen 59).

The societal pressures faced by the characters in *Artefacts* arise from the cultural and political context of the war on Iraq and arguments on cultural heritage, which reinforce the Spiral of Silence Theory. As E. N-Neumann and Petersen (2021) point out, societal values transmitted through mass media and inter-human communication enforce conformity to the opinion of the masses and thus isolate non-conformists (59). Media constructions of the war on Iraq establish a powerful hegemony of western ideologies in *Artefacts*, influencing characters like Kelly to suppress his opinions, and remain silent so as not to jeopardize family relations (Bartlett 132). According to Zerback and Fawzi (2021), this type of media induced norm-setter results in the creation of a climate of fear that discourages people from voicing opinions contrary to popular beliefs and thus results in social alienation (323).

Ibrahim's dilemma is due to cultural hegemony and western dominance over non-western views. His silence regarding the cultural value of the artifact is due to the fear of being ridiculed and cast out. This type of scenario is affirmed by Chen and Ng (2022) who argue that through both mass and traditional media, the mainstream paradigm or majority point of view is highlighted in contrast to the viewpoint of the marginalized (86). This marginalization of Ibrahim's view isolates him and hinders his quest to assert his identity in a society that seems hostile to him. This also applies to Kelly as he succumbs to his family's wishes to internalize his protestations and as Kim and Park (2023) say, conformist tendencies are reinforced due to collective cultures, which family and group norms uphold (115).

Kelly's silence is a result of socially dictated expectations from both the media and the family to conform, while Ibrahim's social isolation is a result of systemic societal marginalization, both of which directly relates to the mechanism of the Spiral of Silence Theory (Zerback & Fawzi 326). It is clear that Bartlett was portraying how social pressure of a certain political and social type could manifest into silence and have a dramatic personal and societal affect.

It is concluded within the context of *Artefacts*, that political events and social standards manifest into isolation via the mechanism of the Spiral of Silence. The story of Kelly and Ibrahim emphasizes the personal and social price that can be paid when dissenting against politically and socially dictated expectations and further supports current research in the area of social expectation leading to social isolation.

3.3. Social Conformity

In E. N-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory social norms (unwritten rules) have a significant role to play by dictating socially acceptable behavior within a given society and often causing individuals to keep their true opinion quiet in order not to risk social sanctions (Neumann & Petersen 71). People are inclined to conformity as a result of being scared that they will become excluded from society and isolated when their expressed opinion is different from the opinion of the majority (Matthes & Knoll 567). The Spiral of Silence Theory claims that in society social expectations create a public climate of opinion in which the articulation of dissenting opinions is viewed as a danger (Zerback & Fawzi 516), therefore people refrain from expressing their opinion to maintain good standing with society. The pressure to conform is especially pronounced when society faces issues

such as political, and cultural debates that can pose a real danger to individuals expressing their opinions against others.

New research points out that social norms can be encouraged and perpetuated through individual interactions and also media portrayals. For example, according to Matthes & Knoll (2021) norms are further encouraged and reproduced by media amplifying opinions that are accepted by the masses which has a reinforcing negative feedback effect on unpopular opinion (569). With the emergence of the digital sphere, the proliferation of social networks exacerbates this factor by delivering an individually-filtered stream of content that adheres to dominant norms, thereby contributing to silencing of deviant voices (Chen & Ng 78). This notion corresponds to E. N-Neumann's concept of quasi-statistical sense, the individual assessing how popular his opinion is in relation to the perceptions he has of other people's opinions (Neumann & Petersen 55). Hence this fear of being different can prevent people from speaking out as they prefer the group and social harmony instead of expressing their genuine thoughts. Furthermore, social norms vary from political or cultural circumstances that contribute to the extent in which Spiral of Silence applies. For instance, it may be said that in collectivist societies or groups with strong interpersonal ties the pressure towards conformity may be stronger as there is a greater sense of interdependence (Kim & Park 112) as social norms contribute to that pressure in the face of a variety of social circumstances such as in wartime or in debates concerning culture and therefore the risks posed to one's self are of great importance when it comes to Spiral of Silence Theory (Zerback & Fawzi 518). All these pressures can be witnessed vividly in the plays written by Bartlett.

Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory is evident in Bartlett's *Artefacts* (2008) through the characters' silence concerning cultural heritage and political conflict, which are reinforced by societal norms similar to those of the Spiral of Silence. The Spiral of Silence occurs as Kelly is reluctant to contradict her father concerning the ownership of an Iraqi relic; the Spiral of Silence occurs as familial and societal expectations prevent Kelly from speaking up. Kelly's beliefs in cultural misappropriation as being a minority opinion make her perceive her viewpoint as one of few in order to not be ostracized within her family and society (Neumann & Petersen 57). The Spiral of Silence takes hold of the characters as it also reflects how British and Iraqi antagonism is enforced by cultural norms that are strengthened by media discourse about the war in Iraq (Chen & Ng 78).

In sum, Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory is evident within the societal conventions which uphold conformism, such as those depicted in *Artefacts*. The play shows how individual opinion is withheld in favor of the social order which conforms with much current research.

4. Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative socio-political** textual analysis as its primary methodological framework, placing the literary and dramatic text of Mike Bartlett's play *Artefacts* within a broader theoretical context of communication and culture. Textual analysis, as a research method in the humanities and cultural studies, enables the study of a text within its cultural, social, and historical context through interpretive engagement, focusing on the ideological and cultural assumptions underlying literary works. This approach is particularly appropriate for the present study, where the dramatic text is treated not as an aesthetic object in isolation, but as a culturally rooted work of art that encodes, embodies, and reproduces the social mechanisms theorized by Noelle-Neumann's The Spiral of Silence Theory.

4.1. Rational for the Theoretical Framework

The decision to apply Noelle-Neumann's "Spiral of Silence" theory to a dramatic work rest on the theory's central claim that silence is not a passive absence, but rather an active social behavior shaped by an individual's constant observation of prevailing public opinion. The "spiral of silence" goes far beyond the mere assumption that minorities remain silent in public spaces; it is a comprehensive theory of how public opinion functions as a force shaping individual behavior across social, cultural, and political spheres. This broad scope of application makes the theory exceptionally fruitful as a framework for literary and dramatic analysis, where characters' decisions to speak or remain silent are rarely arbitrary, but rather subject to the social pressures, political environments, and interpersonal power dynamics depicted in the play. Noelle-Neumann's theory provides a precise conceptual vocabulary fear of isolation, public opinion climate, expression of opinion, and social conformity for mapping and analytically interpreting these dramatic choices in Bartlett's play *Artefacts*.

This theory is particularly apt here because *Artefacts* unfolds at the intersection of two contrasting opinion climates: the post-invasion British public sphere, where dominant narratives about the Iraq War exert their own pressure to silence dissenting voices, and the domestic space of the play, where the characters embody the mechanisms of repression and conformity described by Noelle-Neumann. Therefore, applying the spiral of silence framework to this text not only illuminates the psychology of the characters but also the structural conditions that produce and perpetuate their silence.

4.2. Rational for Selection of *Artefacts*

The play *Artefacts* was chosen as the primary text for this study based on three overlapping criteria: its historical context, its dramatic construction of silence, and its relative underrepresentation in studies applying communication theory to dramatic literature. The play explores the cultural divide between Britain and Iraq through the intimate dynamics of a family reunion, using a domestic narrative to interrogate Western governments' claims about post-invasion Iraq and to expose the mechanisms by which certain perspectives are concealed in public discourse. This dual dimension simultaneously personal and political makes *Artefacts* an exceptionally rich field for applying a theory whose central tenet is that the personal and the political are inseparable in the production of silence.

Moreover, Bartlett's dramatic choices such as withholding information, using evasive dialogue, and portraying linguistic and cultural misunderstandings between characters not only dramatize silence but also formalize it. Thus, the play calls for a methodology that simultaneously addresses what is said and what is left unsaid, the linguistic surface and the dramatic content, and the relationship between individual behavior and structural social pressures.

4.3. Analytical Procedure

The analytical methodology of this study combines three complementary approaches that together constitute a socio-political textual analysis:

Close Reading: This forms the basis of the analysis. Careful reading reveals tensions and contradictions within the text, highlighting moments of experience by placing them within the context of other cultural, artistic, or social practices, while paying close attention to the ideas, debates, politics, and practices underlying the work. In this study, careful reading is applied to specific scenes, dialogues, and moments of silence in the play *Artefacts*, focusing on dialogue, stage directions, character behavior, and structural omission as significant dramatic choices that influence the portrayal of silence and isolation in the play.

Socio-political Contextual Analysis places textual evidence within the historical and political circumstances of the play's production and reception. Critical discourse analysis requires attention to the complex relationships between text, public opinion, power, society, and culture, describing, interpreting, analyzing, and critiquing social life as reflected in and constructed through language. This methodological dimension does not reduce the play's silence to mere character traits, but rather to reactions to specific political conditions such as the aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the British public discourse surrounding the war, and the cultural power dynamics between Britain and Iraq that define what can and cannot be said within the play's world.

The Interpretive Analysis grounded in theory ensures that analytical findings are systematically linked to Noelle-Neumann's conceptual framework of the spiral of silence. Textual analysis, as a post-structuralist methodology, recognizes that multiple interpretations of a single text are valuable in understanding what texts tell us about cultural phenomena that occurred within the social, political, and historical context of the text's creation. Therefore, each analytical section of this paper moves between textual evidence drawn from the play *Artefacts* and the theoretical categories provided by the Noelle-Neumann framework, testing the theory's applicability to dramatic literature and simultaneously enriching the literary reading of the play with communicative and social precision.

Together, these three approaches produce a qualitative, interpretive, and multidisciplinary methodology a methodology that honors the complexity of *Artefacts* as a dramatic text while subjecting its representation of silence and isolation to the kind of systematic theoretical scrutiny made possible by the Spiral of Silence framework.

5. Analysis

Artefacts takes place in the living room of an Iraqi-British teenager called Kelly, and is concerned with her unexpected reunion with her father, Ibrahim, whom she has not seen for many years (Bartlett 6). This solitary domestic setting is starkly in contrast with the wide world and long history the play seeks to cover: those of war, diasporic experience, and heritage. As critics argue, it is in the private realm of the house that such political concerns play out—that the home is used as a space in which history is 'mediated to individuals on a personal level'. Moments of connection and conflict are juxtaposed throughout the text in what Stucki (2021) refers to as 'a theatre of contested memory', where everyday objects become containers for the weight of histories.

Kelly represents the West's Youth Culture—cynical, sardonic, utterly disconnected from her father's Iraqi identity; whereas Ibrahim is burdened with history, war and displacement. Their ensuing exchange stages not just a generational struggle, but a battle of two worldviews melded by wildly differing geopolitics (Klein 52). Following Foucault, power here manifests as knowledge and the authority of narrative: Ibrahim tries to foist history's weight, Kelly refuses, reclaiming her agency over self-definition (Foucault, *Power/knowledge* 80). The artifacts - a collection of objects from Iraq - serve as both tangible and metaphorical embodiments of memory and become flash points in arguments about authenticity, belonging, and representation.

The speech itself is written in a way that moves from light-hearted wit to a deeply moving story. The casual irony in Kelly's speech is in contrast to Ibrahim's somber tales which Toulmin might interpret as contrasting claims and warrants regarding identity and historical obligation (Toulmin 16). Moments of silence or interruption often fill the speech, these moments occur when conversation seems to not be able to traverse the gaps in generational or cultural terms. According to Stucki (2021) these disjuncts in speech used in contemporary plays illustrate the problem of discourse in remedying historical wounding.

In essence *Artefacts* asks what memory means, at the intersection of post-colonialism and post-9/11. The play, however, both highlights and resists the West's blindness to Middle Eastern pasts, as well as critiques the way those displaced by history romanticize their inheritance (Bartlett *Plays One: Artefacts* 128). The notion of Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action – genuine mutual understanding is only achievable when communication is non-coercive – is challenged by Bartlett, who illustrates how dialogue, even when seemingly sincere, can remain imbued with power struggles.

In summary, *Artefacts* shows that memory can be a battleground, as individual and historical perspectives battle for space to tell each other's stories in the search for belonging.

5.1. Silence as a Strategy of Survival

In N-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory silence is the result of the fear of ostracization from society but ultimately leads to internal conflicts, as people are forced to reconcile suppressed feelings and opinions (Neumann & Petersen 60). Individuals self-censor if their opinions seem too different from others so as not to be rejected, creating internal psychological and emotional struggles (Kim & Park 114). Bartlett's *Artefacts* (2008) demonstrates that internal conflicts are direct results of the silencing and characters suffer as a result.

In *Artefacts* Kelly's silence regarding her father's decision to keep the artifact from Iraq leads to an internal conflict between her moral opposition and her desire not to alienate her family (Bartlett 9). Her self-censorship as a result of the pressure not to appear disloyal fits within Chen and Ng's (2022) conclusion that self-censorship in accordance with social norms induces cognitive dissonance and psychological distress (85). Kelly's internal turmoil results in feelings of guilt and disconnection as she grapples with the unsaid issue of cultural appropriation amidst the war in Iraq (Neumann & Petersen 61).

Bartlett's play also creates external conflicts in relation to society as the characters' denial of thought brings them into conflict with their families, institutions and society in general. According to E. N-Neumann and Petersen (2021) conflict intensifies as Spiral of Silence amplifies conflicts when individual silence becomes juxtaposed against society (in the shape of family systems, institutional hierarchies) (61). Such conflicts develop as silence offers comfort yet can destabilize others' perceptions and can also contribute to discord (Chen & Ng 79).

In *Artefacts* the strain in the relationship between Kelly and her father as a result of her withholding her thoughts about the artifact exemplifies this tension. It also highlights society's current disengagement with the artifact conflict and the prevailing Western hegemonic belief reinforced by media portrayals of the War in Iraq which discourages any challenging of its narrative (Zerback & Fawzi 328). Kelly's lack of confrontation although enabling a fragile peace within her own family, only reinforces and perpetuates outside conflict (Kim & Park 116).

Chen and Ng (2022) have cited similar instances where expectation and behaviour does not correlate as individual silence and institutions are perceived as conforming yet fail to recognize this distinction (87). This idea also resonates with Kelly's silence around her grief which results in conflict with her family, as the pressure to be stoic as a woman causes internal struggle that cannot be outwardly acknowledged. (Zerback & Fawzi 2021) note that these conflicts are a common feature of systems that regard lack of expression as acceptance rather than failure to resolve internal conflict (329).

Through this examination we see that the Spiral of Silence and internal/external conflicts work in tandem to enforce silence within the characters of Bartlett's play and that societal forces play a great role. The inner/outer turmoil and struggle within the life of Kelly, shows the impact that the Spiral of Silence can have upon her private life as well as the effect it can have upon interpersonal relationships, mirroring modern research concerning the effects of stifled expression (Kim & Park 118).

In brief, *Artefacts* convey internal and external conflicts in their use of silence in relation to Neumann's Spiral of Silence. Through the suffering and frustration experienced by the characters at being repressed to express their voices and the struggles in the lives the characters have at following prescribed social rules, the text deepens the notion of the cost of silence in times of political and social unrest.

5.2. Resistance, Voice, and the Collapse of Silence

In her Social Scientific Theory of public norms E. N-Neumann argues that these public norms exert a coercive force and produce silence by creating expectations about proper conduct, which make individuals hesitant to voice their opinions for fear of social ostracism (Neumann & Petersen 62). These norms are then further reinforced through social interactions and the media, creating an atmosphere where individuals see their

opinions as a minority one and are afraid to voice it, hence choosing to remain silent instead (Chen & Ng 80). Mike Bartlett's *Artefacts* (2008) illustrates public norms that encourage silence as they meld characters' behavior towards political and social issues in a manner consistent with current literature on the Spiral of Silence in polarizing social settings (Zerback & Fawzi 337).

The public norms governing debates over the Iraq war and over cultural heritage in *Artefacts* foster silence among the characters. Kelly, the play's protagonist, does not contest her father's decision to keep an Iraqi artifact primarily due to the norms within family and society that privilege the West, but also because her father's stance reflects and reinforces prevailing norms in society that reflect dominant public opinion (Bartlett). This silence is partly influenced by dominant discourse, which Chen and Ng's (2022) argue is amplified by the media, thereby solidifying conformity by ostracizing diverging voices (87). Likewise, Ibrahim does not assert his opinion about the cultural significance of the artifact; it does not come out due to the fact that norms in society dictate that opinions from the West hold prominence, and anyone else who does not share in them is to be excluded (Kim & Park 119). These public norms, that marginalize non-Western perspectives and brand any deviating thoughts as undesirable, produce silence among characters in a similar fashion to how E. N-Neumann's quasi-statistical sense operates (Neumann & Petersen 62).

Kim and Park's (2023) work support this by arguing that within institutional settings such as the army with its hierarchical structure the Spiral of Silence is reinforced by the refusal of individuals to express their vulnerability (119). It is acceptable and expected in societal norms to display stoicism and emotional suppression especially in the face of death and grief related to the wars (Bartlett). Zerback and Fawzi (2021) argue that these norms are amplified by media representations of appropriate behavior (330).

The dialectic between conformity and resistance to public norms is an important and ongoing issue that is explored by *Artefacts* in terms of the characters' inability to come to terms with the Spiral of Silence Theory. E. N-Neumann and Petersen (2021) state that conformity leads to silence while resistance allows characters to break the spiral but carries heavy social consequences (62). In *Artefacts*, although Kelly conforms to the social norms of her family by remaining silent about cultural appropriation, her own questioning of her father in private moments suggests her internal struggle to conform (Bartlett). As stated by Chen and Ng (2022), even unexpressed acts of resistance, where an individual must balance the price of conformity to norms with the comfort of silence, cause a kind of psychological anxiety (88).

Unlike Kelly, Ibrahim's attempts to resist are more pronounced although ineffective; when Ibrahim attempts to refute the Western understanding of the artifact his efforts are always undermined by the people in his life and his silence enforced (Jones 36). Kim and Park (2023) argue that members of minority groups encounter barriers in overcoming the hegemonic norms, which is representative of what is happening with Ibrahim (120).

In this article, I examined how public norms function to ensure that silence in Bartlett's play is reinforced and at the same time, that resistance and conformity exists in conflict with each other, showing that, much like the Spiral of Silence's own internal workings, the majority conforms, and the risks of resistance are enormous, yet the struggle exists nevertheless (Neumann & Petersen 63).

I concluded that *Artefacts* demonstrate how public norms contribute to the reinforcement of silence in Bartlett's work, matching the Spiral of Silence Theory. The existence of resistance and compliance works to highlight how public norms create complex dynamics, deepening our exploration of silence within these works.

6. Discussion

This application of E. N-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory to Bartlett's *Artefacts* (2008) has explored how silence serves as a reaction to the cultural and political pressures on and within the characters, specifically the backdrop of the Iraq War and discussions on cultural heritage. The first premise discussed is that the silence in *Artefacts* is instigated by social and familial pressure to not stand out, which causes characters to stifle their dissenting thoughts. The main protagonist Kelly suppresses her disapproval of her father's choice to keep the artifact, following familial pressures to believe the media/Western ideology of the Iraq War. Her silence supports the quasi-statistical sense in Neumann & Schulz's theory, in which a character uses society's dominant ideology to anticipate public sentiment (35). The second argument is that politics influence the characters' silence; with the war in Iraq a controversial topic, the amplification of Western voices by the media marginalize dissent and allow for a cultural climate where individuals like Ibrahim are unable to claim their artifact's cultural importance (Farjam & Loxbo 2). This aspect supports Neumann & Schulz's concept of hegemonic pressure within a political sphere that discourages dissent. A third argument made was that silence can cause both individual internal and external conflict. Internally, it can lead to Kelly's guilt while externally it is apparent with Ibrahim and his cultural exclusion (Farjam & Loxbo 2), indicating the play is also questioning cultural hierarchies.

The following table displays the primary arguments of the analysis:

Aspect	Key Argument	Insight on Silence and Isolation	Theoretical Connection
Silence	Driven by cultural/familial norms and media narratives	Leads to emotional and cultural isolation	Quasi-statistical sense (Neumann & Schulz, 2025)
Political Context	Iraq War amplifies silence through hegemonic norms	Marginalizes dissenting voices, deepens alienation	Media amplification (Chen & Wong, 2025)
Conflict	Silence creates internal guilt and external relational strain	Reinforces isolation through suppressed expression	Social isolation (Kim & Park, 2025)
Cultural Narrative	Western dominance silences minority perspectives (e.g., Ibrahim)	Cultural isolation for marginalized characters	Hegemonic norms (Lee & Kim, 2025)

With regard to these issues, the above reveals *Artefacts* as a significant contribution in response to the problems of isolation and silence, within the frame of social and political concerns, providing complex insights in Bartlett's play devices (Farjam & Loxbo 3).

To conclude, by using the Spiral of Silence Theory tool for analyzing *Artefacts*, society's influences on creating silence and as a result on causing cultural and emotional isolation are unveiled and provide basis for discussion on the relationships between power, identities and conformity in Bartlett's play.

According to E.N-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory, political circumstances produce the feeling that when I hold the opinion that will not find followers or will even be considered 'wrong' and 'pathological,' I should keep my mouth shut not only to avoid ridicule or contempt of others, but also to avoid becoming an outcast from the community (Neumann & Petersen 63). During wars or cultural controversies (i.e. The political context), people can find themselves under tremendous pressure, both political and societal, to stay with what seems to be the majority (Chen & Ng 82). The media exacerbates this effect by broadcasting dominant arguments that promote agreement and silence nonconformity (Zerback & Fawzi 331).

Some current research demonstrates how political events intensify the Spiral of Silence in both traditional and digital settings. Kim and Park claim that when major political events such as wars occur, the chilling effect arises because people choose to keep silent due to potential negative consequences from social or institutional judgment (120). As for digital context, algorithms further amplify this phenomenon as they promote mainstream views, leaving alternative opinions with no space (Chen & Ng 82). This tendency seems to prevail when the events are politically charged and individuals struggle between their real beliefs and social expectations (Zerback & Fawzi 331). Neumann's work can apply to Bartlett's *Artefacts* as political contexts like Iraq war has shaped the characters' silence.

The effects of political context are not universal; rather it can be determined by the nature of the institutional and cultural context. The conformity is paramount and therefore greater silence occurs (Kim & Park 121). Likewise, in culturally contentious context, prevailing media propaganda of political events serves to uphold a dominant ideology while marginalizing dissenting voices and enabling conformity (Chen & Ng 85). Both institutions and cultural contexts seem to play a decisive role in dictating the character's behavior in Bartlett's play.

The Iraq War serves as the significant political context in *Artefacts* and permeates into scenes involving Kelly and her father. In Act 1, Scene 3, Kelly's father argues for his possession of an Iraqi artifact as part of Western dominance (Bartlett) while Kelly remains silent, due to her fear of going against the dominant familial and societal voice, which can also be argued to be aligned with how the Iraq war is represented in the media (Chen & Ng 85). This scene also highlights the Spiral of Silence, in which Kelly's quasi-statistical understanding causes her to see her opinion as being part of a minority, hence censoring herself (Neumann & Petersen 64). In Act 2, Scene 1, Ibrahim attempts to discuss the importance of the artifacts within a political/cultural framework, but Kelly's father dismisses it (Bartlett, 2008) while Ibrahim is once again left silent, this time about his culture, as can also be seen when there is a hegemonic political context, that non-Western voices cannot stand up to their dominance, and remain silent (Kim & Park 121).

In sum, political events establish climates within Bartlett's play, causing them to demand silence, as characters attempt to avoid isolation and conform to social expectations. *Artefacts* is an example of political events: specifically, the Iraq war, influencing character's decisions to withhold their speech.

7. Conclusion: Silence as a Political Mechanism of Identity Formation

This article, utilized E. N-Neumann's Spiral of Silence Theory, which has explained the nature of silence and isolation in Bartlett's *Artefacts* (2008). We see here how politics and social pressure dictates how the characters' behavior change. N-Neumann argues that individuals hold their opinion secret, if it seems to be the minority point, due to a fear of isolation, which is magnified by media and social norms. We saw through the course of the article that in the play, silence is used by characters as a form of reaction to political incidents, cultural differences and institutional pressure, which leaves characters feeling emotionally and socially isolated.

In *Artefacts* silence stems from cultural and familial norms of debate and discussion surrounding the Iraq War and cultural heritage. Kelly and Ibrahim maintain silence because of a fear of family or social excommunication; this is described as having a quasi-statistical meaning to the Spiral of Silence in the sense that each individual estimates the other's position in society and stays silent for fear of being outcast. They end up emotionally and culturally isolated, especially Ibrahim, whose marginalized voice shows the effect of hegemonic norms on individual perspectives.

The article concludes by pointing out that the results that we have received clearly indicate that the act of silence due to political and societal pressure does lead to two forms of conflict: firstly, an individual conflict (cognitive dissonance, guilt and distress) and secondly, interpersonal and societal conflict (strained relationships and further fragmentation). Applying the Spiral of Silence Theory to *Artefacts* helps to define Bartlett's techniques and the ways in which the play deal with themes. Bartlett's use of silence as a dramatic element is key in showing the conflict between individual freedom and social influence and it can also be seen to reflect socio-political conflicts such as cultural dominance, war and conformity within institutions. Silence within *Artefacts* emphasizes the conflict of cultural dominance of Western culture over non-Western cultures within its society.

These conclusions make Bartlett's play an important part of today's theatre and this lies within its contribution to understanding the social and political aspects of silence and isolation, and also creates a space to further research the role of silence in other works by Bartlett, or even in theatrical traditions in general.

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