

Erosion of Individuality and Personal Life in the Pursuit of Dignity and Duty in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract

The present paper sheds light on a butler's life being sacrificed in the pursuit of duty in Kazuo Ishiguro's third novel *The Remains of the Day*. Kazuo Ishiguro has depicted the character of Stevens in the present novel. The researcher has tried to bring out the psyche of this butler and how he has imbibed dignity. Stevens has been working in the Darlington Hall for more than forty years without taking a single holiday. Through the perusal of the novel, the researcher has come to find out that the butler has given more and the utmost priorities to his duty towards his lord and has just marginalized his personal concerns. The researcher has noted down certain instances from the novel to substantiate his point in support of his paper. At the same time, the researcher has tried to bring to light what makes the butler more subservient i.e. his parameters for dignity which makes him a single minded devotee of his professional lord. The novel turns out to be postcolonial one in the sense that having been colonized by his lord, Stevens has started to view life from his employer's view points i.e. his service to his master would achieve him dignity and professional triumph. The researcher has tried to view the novel from the aforementioned perspective to present his point in the present paper.

Key Words: Dignity, Emotional Restraint, Subservient, Identity, Individuality.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro, one of the bubbling postcolonial writers of the 20th century, has contributed vastly in the literary field in terms of his literary outputs. Kazuo Ishiguro, a Japanese born British novelist has many novels on his name such as *A Pale view of Hills (1982)*, *An Artist of the Floating World (1986)*, *The Remains of the Day (1989)*, *The Unconsoled (1995)*, *When We Were Orphans (2000)*, *Never Let Me Go (2005)*, *The Buried Giant (2015)* and *Klara and the Sun (2021)*. Kazuo Ishiguro has the first-hand experience of migration, and that too at the age of five since his father was appointed to work as an oceanographer in England. Childhood is a phase in life when a child starts learning various things related to his culture, family, society, and the social milieu. Childhood is a time in life which is supposed to be delightful and comfortable as it proves to be instrumental in building the personality of an individual. But unfortunately, this is not the case with Ishiguro. He has to migrate to a new country to experience a new way of life and new forms of traditions and customs. All these have a major influence on the psyche of this young man. Most of his novels depict the themes concerning homelessness, displacement, slavery, loss of individuality and identity and being subservient to the higher authorities at the expense of one's individuality.

In his novels, the main characters search similarly for compensation or consolation from a loss in their lives. Whether the loss is a physical or an emotional one, the characters revisit the traumatic events surrounding their past as they move into an uncertain future. Telling their stories might provide catharsis, by allowing them to reconstruct and perhaps comprehend their loss.¹

The researcher has selected Ishiguro's third novel, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) for the discussion of his point in the present paper.

Critical Overview of the novel:

The novel *The Remains of the Day* presents Mr. Stevens who is working as a butler in the Darlington Hall. Darlington Hall is a stately house belonging to Lord Darlington. The choice of this character, the butler as a protagonist of the novel is a symbolic one for Ishiguro. The way a butler serves his master, the way he remains subservient to his lord, is according to Ishiguro, somewhat similar to the people at large. Stevens performs his duties more than just

a domestic servant. It appears that Ishiguro has selected the character of a butler with some intention. He thinks that he and even most of the people are just butlers metaphorically. What is implied here is that a person during his life span does most of the things using his talents to serve higher interests. Stevens has been catering his services as a butler in the Darlington hall for over forty years. Moreover, he has not taken even a single holiday from his duty yet. But the years have passed and now the Darlington hall belongs to a new owner. His name is Mr. Farraday.

One day Mr. Farraday asks Stevens to take a break from his work and take a round in the West County for some days. Following the advice from his master, Stevens takes a motoring trip to the West County. Stevens narrates the story while he is on his trip. He remembers his past life at the Darlington Hall and his days with his co-worker Miss Kenton. Another reason behind Stevens' motoring trip is to meet and bring back Miss Kenton (now Mrs Benn) to the Darlington Hall.

Once given the idea by his employer, Stevens determines that the trip, if taken in the westward direction leading to Mrs Benn's home, could be very beneficial for securing additional household help at Darlington Hall. Persuaded by Mrs Benn's unhappy situation at home and believing that her letter to him is a ruse for returning to her former post of twenty years past, Stevens begins the journey with something like cheerful determination. As the trip progresses and Stevens rereads Mrs Benn's letter in the light of his reflections of the past, he grows uncertain of his earlier interpretation. His initial enthusiasm for her desire to return to Darlington Hall now wanes.²

Stevens, the butler admits:

I am inclined to believe I may well have read more into certain of her lines than perhaps was wise.³

The novel highlights Stevens's predicament who with the passage of time comes to know that his life time loyal services to Lord Darlington has been a waste has not endowed him with a slight of happiness.

Dignity is a key word in Ishiguro's most famous novel, *The Remains of the Day* (1989). It is the opposite of displacement. To be dignified is to be 'at home' with oneself and one's circumstances. To have dignity is to be correctly placed vis-à-vis your self-demands and the expectations of others.⁴

Dignity is a word which Stevens has imbibed in himself. It is for himself a trait of a butler. Stevens feels that he is very fortunate that he has got an opportunity to cater his services as a butler in the Darlington Hall. Stevens' father was also a butler. And Stevens has idealised his father into his mind and he wants to follow the foot steps of his father in terms of his services to his master at the Darlington hall. It appears that Stevens takes pride in working at Darlington Hall because it fulfils all the expectations of the Hayes Society. Apart from having an attachment to a distinguished household, there is one more condition for a butler to be admitted into this group. And that is what Stevens commits:

The most crucial criterion is that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position. No applicant will satisfy requirements, whatever his level of accomplishments otherwise, if seen to fall short in this respect.⁵

Stevens has created dignity as an instrument to measure his self esteem. In his opinion to be English is to be great the way the landscape is. Moreover, someone who is great must possess dignity in him. And dignity, according to Stevens, is a perfect example of the great butlers.

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of... In a word, 'dignity' is beyond such foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman.⁶

In the novel Stevens highlights the event when his father subordinated his personal feelings just to perform his professional duties. During the Boer War Leonard, his son died because of the military exercises which were inapt. It is after ten years that the General who was

responsible for this tragic incident comes to visit the employer of Stevens's father. Suppressing his indignation and following his professional duty, his father acts as his valet and serves the guest *'to the usual standard.'*⁷

It is an aspiration on the part of Stevens to achieve the standards of his father which are impossibly high. Even under very trying circumstances Stevens fulfils the requirements for achieving the standards of his father by maintaining his dignity. The novel presents many instances depicting the above gestures of Stevens. But the most remarkable case happens during the 1923 conference. It is at this time that his father had a severe heart attack. But instead of being with his father who was dying upstairs, Stevens represses his feelings and continues to serve the guest in the hall. He serves drinks to the guests and also accompanies the ill-at-ease Reginald Cardinal in comforting talks. Moreover, he attends the painful feet of a unfriendly and aggressive French diplomat. In the above instance, Stevens' priorities appear to be perversely awry through normal eyes. But he is able to present his behaviour in terms of his professional victory. As he says:

If you consider the pressures contingent on me that night, you may not think I delude myself unduly if I go so far as to suggest that I did perhaps display, in the face of everything, at least in some modest degree a 'dignity' worthy of someone like Mr Marshall- or come to that, my father. Indeed, why should I deny it? For all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I find I do so with a large sense of triumph.⁸

The same kind of incident happens on some later occasion. Once Stevens was busy attending Lord Darlington and his guests. At this time, Miss Kenton was weeping upstairs with a decision to marry Mr. Benn. Within the heart of his heart, Stevens had a soft corner for Miss Kenton but he always suppressed his emotions with a view to not allowing them to create a hindrance on his professional duties. And Stevens forgoes the opportunity to persuade Miss Kenton not to marry Mr. Benn because he thought it more important to serve Lord Darlington and his guests. It would not have taken more time of the butler to express proper words to Miss Kenton and persuade her to reconsider her decision of marrying Mr. Benn. But the butler, prioritizing his professional duty, negates his personal duties by waiting outside the

hall to get a call from his master. At this place, Stevens manages to hide his personal concerns in the cover of self-congratulation. As he says:

As I continued to stand there, a curious thing began to take place; that is to say, a deep feeling of triumph started to well up within me... I had, after all, just come through an extremely trying evening, throughout which I had managed to preserve a ‘dignity in keeping with my position’- and had done so, moreover, in a manner even my father might have been proud of.⁹

Conclusion:

Thus, Stevens has always denied his personal life in the pursuit of his professional accomplishments. Whether it is his duty towards his father or his concerns for Miss Kenton or even his duty towards his personal and private life, Stevens has always sacrificed on personal levels with a view to pleasing his employer and assuming a role of a butler in the real sense of the term. It is in the pursuit of being accepted by the dominant class or his master or to be a great butler with dignity in the eyes of the people at large that Stevens has allowed the erosion of his individuality and personal life. Towards the end of the novels, Stevens stumbles upon the reality of his life and he opts for the ‘remains of the day’ i.e. he decides to start a fresh beginning with much more optimism.

References

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