



Memory's Tapestry: A Deeper Understanding of Self in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract: A common strain that pervades all the works of Kazuo Ishiguro is the meandering thought process of the narrator, an idea that this paper builds on extensively apart from a deft delineation of the themes of his works. After a detailed dissection of the oeuvre of Ishiguro, it can be safely deduced that his works mark a departure from the works of his contemporary writers as they cannot be typecast to fit into one common mold since they are all different from one another and pertain with different issues while keeping the overarching play of memory intact. Thus, a deeper study of his works serves to indicate the distinct identity that the author has managed to create in the postmodern literary canon. Each of his novels can be taken as a microcosmic representation of life. Throughout his literary work, Ishiguro has given voice to a wide range of characters, backdrops, and plots and has dabbled in stories cutting across genres. He has been equally successful in dispensing equal weight to his both female and male central characters. As mentioned above, an important recurring theme in his works and especially the novels selected for the paper viz. *The Remains of the Day* has been the role of and the indelible impact of memory in shaping characters' understanding of themselves. What Ishiguro also relentlessly demonstrates is a resolute concern with power and the draconian ramifications of authoritarian ideologies.

Keywords: Memory, Identity, Trauma, Kazuo Ishiguro.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is a 1989 novel. The work received the Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 1989. The novel was adapted into a film, directed by James Ivory, and the screenplay was written by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and Harold Pinter. It was nominated for eight academy awards.

The novel is narrated from the perspective of Stevens, an elderly head butler, who, during a six-day road trip to England's West Country, reflects on his past at the country mansion Darlington Hall. He dedicated all his life serving Lord Darlington, a labelled traitor and Nazi sympathizer, and to the deed of being a 'great butler'. Shortly, after the War, Mr. Farraday, an American purchases the estate and minimizes the staff drastically. Under whose command the Hall was no longer the meeting point for 'the wealthy and influential'. While travelling through the country, Stevens's narration alters between the present and the memories of the past. The two settings create two contrary moods in the story; the narrative episodes of the motoring trip lead Stevens through the open, mostly rural countryside of a large proportion of south western England. It allowed him to visit a number of places along the road- homely little guesthouses, scenic nature, which evokes the mood of brightness, peacefulness and openness. Whereas, the narrative episodes set inside the Darlington Hall evokes the image of narrowness, seclusion. The events are mostly inside the Hall or during the night which gives the impression of dullness. Stevens travel through different landscape during his motoring trip and meet all sorts of people; he then retrospect about his life in Darlington Hall. He reminisces about the significant events in his life; his relation with Miss Kenton and the staff, his father and his deteriorating health and most importantly his devotion to Lord Darlington and his ideologies. During his reminiscent moments, readers get the image of glorious Darlington Hall and also into his psyche and the values he strives for.

Butler's dual Journey

The novel takes place in post-war Britain. James Stevens is the protagonist of the novel, and the head butler of the Darlington Hall, who devotes his whole life serving the owner of the Hall. Stevens takes the road trip across the country to visit a colleague and reminisce about the events that took place in Darlington Hall in the 1920s and 1930s. Ishiguro paints Stevens as the most loyal servant, who values his profession more than anything. Stevens goes to the length of disregarding his emotions for the sake of his job. He forfeits his love for the housekeeper Miss Kenton.

The entire plot of the novel is based on Stevens' flashbacks. At the start of the novel Stevens receives a letter from Miss Kenton, they both served under Lord Darlington. Miss Kenton left her job when she got married and became Mrs. Benn. In the letter, Miss Kenton informs Stevens about her life, marriage and her pregnant daughter. Presently, Stevens works under American owner of the Darlington Hall, Mr. Farraday. Stevens has confined himself in the estate for a long period of time, so Mr. Farraday suggests him to take a trip. Encouraged by the owner and a motive to meet Miss Kenton with the expectation of persuading her to come back and join him, Stevens commences his six-day journey. During the course of the journey, he retrospects about his life and the decisions he had made. For the first time, he realizes that he had failed at a number of things in his life.

Stevens had perceived the external world only through the books. He had devoted all his life to his profession; therefore, he was hesitant to go out initially. When Mr. Farraday first suggests him to undertake the journey, Stevens' first reaction is, "It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within those very walls" (4). It was during the journey; he comes to the realization that he was a stranger in his own country. His alienation was apparent in the sentence when he said, "I continue to find myself in surroundings with which I had at least a passing acquittance...But then eventually the surroundings grew unrecognizable and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries...the surroundings grew strange around me" (23-24).

Many critics believe that the novel is characterized by nostalgia as Stevens looks back to what he regards as England's golden age. While Ishiguro agrees that nostalgia is a substantial part of his work, but what he is interested in nostalgia is as personal memory not historically. In a CNN interview he says "As a writer, I'm more interested in what people tell themselves happened rather than what actually happened"(CNN, 2000).

Retrospection plays multiple roles in a novel. One is to take the story forward. The story of *The Remains of the Day* moves in a back and forth action. The novel opens up in the present with Stevens' plan of taking up a road trip. Through retrospection, Stevens gives an elaborate description of his previous owner Lord Darlington. Stevens reflects upon a number of topics during his journey. He talks about his loyalty towards the Lord and what magnificent and lavish dinners he once hosted. He gives snippets about the meetings between German sympathizers and English aristocrats in efforts to sway international affairs swelling up to World War II. The retrospection makes him ponder over Lord's reputation and character. In addition, Stevens for the first time is able to see the Lord in a different light. Therefore, in this way two journeys are covered in the novel by the protagonist; one is a physical journey around the country, and another is psychological. Retrospection in the novel is done through the technique of flashbacks, which chiefly comprise of memories. Memories are narratives of a human life unweaving in front of one's eye. In the novel memory is overtly thematized in almost every page and sometimes more than once. There are so many phrases that act as the reminder to the reminiscing nature of what is being told. Stevens regularly resort to the use of the word 'remember' and 'recall' furthermore he goes on to expound on those moments. For example, "I am pleased to recall the memory of that moment" (73); "I recall, then it was only an hour or so" (83); "once, shortly after lunch, I recall" (96). In the boredom prompted from his long solitude drive, Stevens' relapses more and more into the past, wallowing in his recollections of the glory days of Darlington Hall in the 1930s. Stevens relies laboriously on memories. Through his memory, he narrates events related to his personal life experiences, defends himself, and externalizes his emotions and feelings. He also makes events of great historical value known to himself, people around him as well as the readers.

Stevens' reminiscence brings out both, public and the private memory to the readers. Ishiguro in an interview states that, "things like memory, how one uses memory for one's own purpose. One's own ends, those things interest me" (Mason,357).

For Ishiguro memory has a deeper meaning too, he says, "societies grapple with this question: to what extent should we remember our past? To what extent should we forget it?" (Tina). According to Ishiguro the process of remembering and forgetting are societal issues. It concerns societies at large and not just individuals. Whatever Stevens has stored in his memory reflects something about him be it any event or people. Stevens has the habit of digressing and giving a detailed account of some trivial affair. For example, he would give a detailed account of as to why he considers his father is a 'great butler'. The time when an English butler shot a lion in the dining area in India and later served dinner in the evening. The incidents point out that Stevens aspires to be like the people mentioned above. *The Remains of the Day* through Stevens' memory refers to historical events and incidents i.e. Nazism and Adolf Hitler's ideologies as well. Those are referred to shed some light and also to criticize some dehumanizing ideologies and aristocratic forces which promoted them. It is done through the character of Lord Darlington.

The process of retrospection and reminiscence in that way builds the characters. Through the storehouse of memory and series of flashbacks, multiple layers of a character are peeled off. The deeper mental anguishes are unfolded, and readers get a better understanding as to how the character became what he is now. The retrospection and reminiscence are a journey into the character's world of sorrow and happiness. It is a means to escape moments of embarrassment, confusion, and astonishment as well. It also draws a comparison between the past and present and comes to a better understanding of self and the world.

Butler's memory and Identity

Herbert Hirsch in *Genocide and the Politics of Memory* writes: "As an individual reconstructs his or her biography through memory, that biography becomes the basis for identity." Hirsch asserts, "the connection between memory and identity is dialectical because memory both shapes the content of what is communicated by the socialization process and is formed by that process. Ultimately, the self does not develop in a vacuum" (133).

Stevens tries to locate himself after losing touch from the aristocratic world of Lord Darlington along with losing his father and separation from Miss Kenton. He is trying to overcome the loss and establishing a coherent identity by exploring himself through his memories. He desperately seeks an anchor to anchor himself. When he renders on a journey, he is threatened by the prospect that he has lived his life without any purpose and significance. While journeying across England, he felt that he is “speeding off...into wilderness”, and looking in the “thick foliage” (24) to obtain a clearer view. On venturing into the journey, Stevens retraces his past through his memory and attempts to gain the identity he aspires to achieve, that is of a ‘great butler’.

It appears that Stevens is continually torn between his past decisions and yet when he approaches the truth behind those choices, he decides to negate them. He says, “one begins to search one’s past for such ‘turning points’, one is apt to start seeing them everywhere” (175). Stevens tries to explain his decisions from a unique and estrange perspective in order to establish a coherent identity. Therefore, the majority of Stevens’s retrospective episodes are his explanations for his decisions and believes. He now strives to rework the lies that made up his life but turns out to be futile for him. Miss Kenton tells him that her life with her husband, daughter and a grandchild holds so much for her, which implies that he has nothing in life to look forward too. His only hope in life is “work, work, and more work” (249). Stevens finally admits though, that he tried, but it’s no use. He has given what he had, yet he is unable to attain that identity and meaning in life. Ultimately, after realizing inaptness of his past Stevens gets hold of his thoughts and tries to come up with another meaning to life. The new layout validates him in some way and also evokes some hope for the future. Stevens opines, “what is the point worrying oneself too much about what one could do or could not have done to control the course one’s life took?” (257). In the end, he focuses on “what remains of my day” (256).

Projection of Trauma through retrospective episodes

Critic Cynthia Wong says “Stevens is unable to account equivocation without revealing the nature of his own wasted existence” (7). Stevens ignores some of his memories and avoids talking about his feelings and emotions because recalling them is painful to him. As Eva Szederkenyi says, “Stevens is blocked by trauma and cannot verbalize or express his emotions in other ways and those elements with the most painful memories are told in retrospect following the logic latent memories making their way to the surface” (10).

Stevens suppresses his feelings and emotions in a way to protect and maintain his sense of dignity. At times, he lies about certain things to avoid pain and comes out as an unreliable narrator as well. His life becomes full of misunderstandings and inconsistencies because of his dedicated life as a butler at Darlington Hall. The inconsistencies in Stevens’ narrative is also because of the fact that there is a disparity between the life he wants to live and the life he is living at present. The inconsistencies are used to hide certain feelings about his past life. Zuzana Foniokova remarks, “Stevens tries to justify his actions by presenting it as the only possible way of dealing with the situation and uses his devotion to the idea of a great butler. His philosophy of dignity serves as the means to rationalize his suppression of emotions.” (94).

The back and forth action of the story and through retrospection which at times was instigated from the present conditions of Stevens, gave him a better understanding of his past, his notions of dignity, his identity and the world in general. Although, it shatters him to the point of absolute destruction of self but it enlightens him at the same time. The repetition of certain events is done for the sake of comparison in the novel and brings forth a clearer picture.

Title’s significance

The title of the novel is a shrouded one. On one level, “the remains of the day” refers to what is left of Stevens’ life. Whereas on another level, the most important part of Stevens life is his past memories and that is what all he had by the end of the novel. A time in past when Lord Darlington’s fame was at its height and Stevens was at peak of his profession.

Conclusion

In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro procures two distinct narratives of Stevens’s life; the past life in Darlington Hall set between the World War and the present where he undertakes a road journey.

By engaging in retrospection and reminiscence, characters undergo a transformative process. Through the exploration of memories and the use of flashbacks, various layers of their persona are peeled away, revealing deeper emotional struggles and providing insight into their present state. This introspective journey allows readers to comprehend the factors that shaped the character's identity. Additionally, retrospection and reminiscence serve as a means of escaping moments of discomfort, uncertainty, and surprise. Furthermore, it facilitates a comparison between the past and present, leading to a greater understanding of the self and the world at large.

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