Journal of Higher Education & Research Society
A Refereed International
ISSN- 2349 0209 VOL- 6/ ISSUE- 1 APRIL 2018

KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*: AN ENGLISH NOVEL

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Abstract

Kazuo Ishiguro's third novel, The Remains of the Day, earned the 1989 Booker Prize, England's highest literary honor. The novel is, in effect, a character study of Stevens, an aging butler who has spent thirty years in service at Darlington Hall. As he considers his past, he is forced to come to terms with the gravity of the sacrifices he has made in the name of duty. In the following article, an attempt has been made to refute the body of criticism asserting that Ishiguro's novel is largely a Japanese novel.

Keywords : *character, literature, criticism, novel.*

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KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*: AN ENGLISH NOVEL

- **Dr. Prabhanjan Mane**

Before winning the 2017 Nobel Prize for his literary achievement, Kazuo Ishiguro came into limelight with his third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, which earned him the 1989 Booker Prize, England's highest literary honor. The novel is, in fact, a character study of Stevens, an aging butler who has spent thirty years in service at Darlington Hall. As he considers his past, he is forced to come to terms with the gravity of the sacrifices he has made in the name of duty.

Ishiguro's first two novels were set in Japan, but *The Remains of the Day* represents a departure in the author's work. Still, it is consistent with his writing style in that the book is told from a first person point of view by a person who faces past self-deception and regret. Further, the tone is controlled, the language is carefully crafted, and the themes revolve around the position of the individual within a society. While some critics maintain that although Ishiguro's setting is not Japan, the book retains a strong sense of the author's Japanese heritage, Ishiguro is quick to disagree. He responds by saying that most of his life experience has taken place in England and that his fictional influences are Britain's writers. So, he has bristled at being called a "postcolonial" or even an "Asian" writer, given that his Japanese ethnicity is hardly reflective of a collective immigrant narrative in Britain, and his works have rarely directly addressed the Asian immigrant experience, whether collective or individual. Ishiguro's choice of subject matter in this book – and the realism with which he depicts it – demonstrates the importance of England's past and culture to him.

The Remains of the Day is a critical and commercial success. Reviewers' glowing notices of the novel praise its characterization, language, tone, and thematic content. The novel – which won the Booker Prize for Fiction and was subsequently made into a film by Merchant Ivory from a screenplay by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala – is set in post-World War II England; its narrator, an elderly English butler named Stevens, is engaged in recalling his wartime past spent in domestic service in England, working for an employer whose well-intentioned internationalism during the interwar period slowly but surely veered into sympathy for fascist Germany. The novel and its film adaptation solidified Ishiguro's growing reputation in the English-speaking world.

Stevens the butler worked for Lord Darlington, managing a household staff of dozens and orchestrating every domestic detail that would support Lord Darlington's position in the world. As a "gentleman's gentleman," Stevens could be confident that his work was meaningful since it drew its substance from the status of his employer. When Lord Darlington tries to awaken English sympathy for the punitive reparations imposed on Germany after World War I, involving his house and his large staff in the project, he enters onto the stage of international politics and ultimately becomes a pawn in a game he does not fully understand. Darlington Hall becomes the focal point of pro-German activity in England during the years of Hitler's rise to power; with the onset of open war, Lord Darlington undergoes a reversal of fortune and finds himself accused of treason toward his homeland. He dies in disgrace, and Darlington Hall is bought by a wealthy American who reduces the staff to a handful.

Stevens remains in service to this new owner, Mr. Farraday, and does the best he can to adapt to the small scale and the casual routine of this new life. Mr. Farraday urges him to take a vacation and lends him a car for the trip; the novel consists of Stevens's thoughts about the chain of events that has brought him to this vacation. As he recollects the grand old days of Darlington Hall, it becomes apparent that Stevens has made large sacrifices in the service of Lord Darlington, allowing his father to die alone during an important international conference and neglecting the signs of affection from Miss Kenton, an impeccable housekeeper he admired at a distance until it was too late. Underlying this simple story of domestic discipline, however, is the larger search that Stevens is conducting in the attempt to discover whether his life was something more than a pale shadow of Lord Darlington's folly. His vacation takes him to a short encounter with the married woman Miss Kenton has become and he realizes how much he has lost compared to the unworthiness of the cause he lost it in.

But this novel is not a tragedy: Stevens is remaking himself, even though the hour is late. He is adapting to a new world, gradually teaching himself skills he never knew he might need, such as sharing a joke with his employer. The flaw in Lord Darlington does not degrade the quality of Stevens's loyalty, and by attaching that same valuable loyalty to Mr. Farraday, he can in some measure regain the dignity his former employer had squandered. He ends his vacation and his review of his life with new optimism and renewed resolve to fit into the new world.

Lawrence Graver of the *New York Times Book Review* calls the novel "a dream of a book: a beguiling comedy of manners that evolves almost magically into a profound and heart-rending study of personality, class, and culture."[1] In a review for *Observer,* Salman Rushdie praises the novel for its ability to simultaneously present surface understatement

and tremendous underlying tension[2]. In the *Christian Science Monitor,* critic Merle Rubin declares, "Delicate, devastating, thoroughly ironic, yet never harsh, this is a novel whose technical achievements are matched by its insightfulness."[3] David Gurewich of *New Criterion* deems the novel a "remarkable" book in which "the pitch is perfect."[4] Commenting on the comic tradition of butlers in English literature, Hermione Lee of *New Republic* observes, "Butlers in British fiction are a joke. . . Ishiguro's cunning is to invoke these associations – Stevens, after all, is a comic figure, pompous, funny, antiquated, and obtuse – and turn them to serious ends."[5] Ihab Hassan in *World and I* adds that Ishiguro transcends the tradition, or "more precisely, he perfects and subverts it at the same time. He does so with immaculate craft. . . . "[6]

Not only do critics find Stevens tragic and sympathetic, but they also praise Ishiguro's ability to create a consistent and believable voice for a character so unlike himself. Ishiguro is perhaps best known for his protagonists who devote themselves completely to a chosen professional role – as artist, butler, pianist, or detective – and whose first-person, confessional narratives paradoxically conceal more than they reveal about their past lives. Galen Strawson of the *Times Literary Supplement* writes that the book is both strong and delicate, adding that Stevens's voice "creates a context which allows Kazuo Ishiguro to put a massive charge of pathos into a single unremarkable phrase."[7] Echoing this idea, Graver remarks that Ishiguro's "command of Stevens' corseted idiom is masterly," adding that the author's "tonal control of Stevens' repressive yet continually reverberating first-person voice is dazzling. So is his ability to present the butler from every point on the compass: with affectionate humor, tart irony, criticism, compassion, and full understanding."[8] In the *New York Times,* Michiko Kakutani also praises Ishiguro's controlled tone and his portrayal of unfolding realization in Stevens's mind. He writes:

> By subtly modulating the flow of Stevens' memories and the nuances of his tone, by revealing to us the increasingly difficult emotional acrobatics that Stevens is forced to perform in order to remain in control, Mr. Ishiguro is able to create a portrait of the man that is uncompromisingly tough, and at the same time elegiac. He shows us the consequences of both emotional repression and misplaced loyalty, the costs of blindly holding onto values formed by another age. The result is an intricate and dazzling novel.[9]

Joseph Coates of the *Chicago Tribune* applauds Ishiguro's use of an unreliable narrator to reveal so much about the character. Gurewich writes that Stevens is "a fully realized character, through whom the author manages the world of his novel as sure-handedly as Stevens himself manages the beloved estate of Darlington Hall." He adds, "There is an almost-perfect harmony of style and substance in the book's relationship

between the writer and the narrator. . . . "[10] Rubin is struck by the complexity of Stevens's narrative; he remarks:

> Stevens (by his own unwitting admission) has tailored his life to produce a complete façade. What makes his narrative so poignant as well as funny, its pathos and satire evenly matched, is the sincerity with which the façade has been cultivated."[11]

Hassan interprets Stevens as an allegorical representation of modern history, suggesting that Ishiguro intends to symbolize modern politics, class, and suffering in the character of an English butler.

Much is made of Ishiguro's Japanese roots, as many critics believe that this heritage deeply influences *The Remains of the Day.* They note that the themes of service, discipline, and duty are Japanese in nature and that the controlled, detached tone is typical of Japanese culture. Hassan, for example, asks, "Is the result a Japanese vision of England or, more slyly, an English version of Japan? Or is it both and neither, a vision simply of our condition, our world?"[12] Gurewich comments on this at length, observing:

> [W]hen Stevens admires the English landscape for "the very *lack* of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart," I cannot help thinking how neatly his description fits some of the Japanese criteria for beauty. Stevens' attention to detail is comparable to an origami maker. . . Stevens' insistence on ritual; his stoicism in performing his duties, especially in the face of adversity; his loyalty to his master that conflicts with his humanity – all of these are prominent aspects of the Japanese collective psyche. . . .[13]

Similarly, Gabriele Annan of the *New York Review of Books* finds that Ishiguro's first three novels "are explanations, even indictments, of Japaneseness," including *The Remains of the Day,* which features no Japanese characters. She explains that Ishiguro "writes about guilt and shame incurred in the service of duty, loyalty, and tradition. Characters who place too high – too Japanese – a price on these values are punished for it."[14]

Although the majority of the reviews are positive, a handful of critics find fault in the book. Geoff Dyer of *New Statesman,* for example, suggests that the notion of narrative irony (in which the reader understands something the speaker says that the speaker does not) is trite. He believes that Stevens's voice is "coaxed" to achieve this irony and thus lacks integrity. Annan is impressed with Ishiguro's creation of the character of Stevens, but finds the novel's message anti-Japanese and unsatisfying. She explains that the novel "is too much a *roman à these* [a novel written to illustrate a social doctrine], and a judgmental one besides. Compared to his astounding narrative sophistication, Ishiguro's message seems

quite banal. Be less Japanese, less bent on dignity, less false to yourself and others, less restrained and controlled."[15]

The author of *The Remains of the Day,* Kazuo Ishiguro, was born in Japan and moved to England with his family when he was six years old. He has lived in England ever since, although he was reared with full awareness and practice of his Japanese heritage. Because of his Japanese background, many critics of the novel hasten to claim that it is Japanese in nature and content. The two novels preceding *The Remains of the Day* featured Japanese settings and characters, and this may be part of the impulse to categorize Ishiguro's third novel as also being Japanese. The idea is that Ishiguro has retained his Japanese worldview and simply filtered an English story through this way of interpreting the world. Critics point to the character of Stevens as evidence of the Japanese undercurrents of the novel. They observe that Stevens expresses himself in a detached tone and that he is driven by his sense of duty, loyalty, and service; that his lifestyle is characterized by propriety, ritual, discipline, and stoicism; and that he grapples with personal guilt and shame. Some critics go so far as to claim that Stevens's unhappy fate and empty feeling when he reaches his sixties is an indictment against being "too Japanese." That Ishiguro is both Japanese and English certainly warrants the assumption that he sees his world in a unique way, but to deem *The Remains of the Day* a Japanese story grossly diminishes his extraordinary accomplishment in the novel.

While every nation has a distinct culture, there are similarities among them. English culture and Japanese culture, although they are subject to the West-East dichotomy, share certain qualities. Yet critics are quick to attribute any overlapping characteristics to Ishiguro's Japanese influence. Both cultures have a history of well-defined, rigid social and political hierarchies. Both have developed a system of manners and accepted means of interacting that are considered "proper," and in both cases proper behavior is reserved, polite, and respectful. While Ishiguro's upbringing may have prompted him to respond to these cultural aspects in England differently than someone who knew only English culture, Ishiguro is far from unique in recognizing these qualities in England and the English. Readers and critics find *The Remains of the Day* realistic and insightful, and this is because he accurately portrays English aristocratic culture. Further, his portrayal is complex, as it depicts this culture in a time of transition when elitism and dependence on manners are making way for a new social order. The realism – which is so readily recognized by readers – comes from the fact that Ishiguro has drawn from the richness of England's own culture and social history to create his story. Had he included uniquely Japanese elements disguised as English elements, the story would not ring true. For critics to claim that Ishiguro's Japanese sensibility is somehow superimposed onto an English setting and cast of characters only taints the reading of the story.

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It is also worth noting that the subject matter of *The Remains of the Day* is distinctly English. The central character is an English butler, a man who, by his own admission, holds a position unparalleled in any other country. Stevens reflects on day one, "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."[16] If Ishiguro were trying to make a statement about Japanese culture, he would not put these words in his butler's (the supposed symbol of Japanese restraint) mouth. Besides the tradition of the butler, the novel addresses English aristocracy and its descent in the context of Europe in the years just after World War I. These are all uniquely English concerns and characteristics; they are not universal enough to symbolize anything else.

There are a number of other ways in which Stevens is not a suitable representative for the Japanese. He completely lacks a religious or philosophical foundation, for example, an element of Japanese culture that guides a person's decision making and way of interpreting life. Stevens comes to realizations about himself not through meditation, reading, or music, but as a side effect of thinking about his career. He does not seek wisdom or honor; the latter is something he does not even want for himself; rather, he is content in deluding himself into believing that he is serving a great man. When he arrives at a personal crossroads, he has no resources on which to draw for insight. He has no religious convictions, philosophical inquiries, or mentor.

This relates to another way in which Stevens is decidedly un-Japanese. He has no sense of family whatsoever. While Japanese society is paternalistic and places a high value on the family unit, Stevens speaks passively about his brother, who died needlessly, and he has a stiff relationship with his father. Stevens and his father are both butlers, and they have transferred whatever energy and attention that would naturally go to family members into their profession. When Stevens's father attempts to make amends on his deathbed, Stevens merely responds that he is busy and has work to do. The years of distance between them cannot be bridged, and the night his father dies, Stevens chooses to continue working. He adds that his father would want him to go on performing his duties with dignity, and he is probably right. In fact, Stevens's father pretended to accept his other son's death rather than seize an opportunity for revenge. Does he do so because of a belief in karma? No, he does so because he values duty absolutely. His son, Stevens, does likewise.

Another aspect of Stevens that makes him an unlikely symbol of Japanese culture is his deep, though long repressed, need to be recognized as an individual. This need is at odds with the Japanese (and, more generally, the Eastern) emphasis on the collective, as opposed to the individual, experience. Once Stevens leaves Darlington Hall, he gradually realizes that he regrets not being more individualistic. He has ignored his potential and his

personal needs, and at a level that is almost buried, he realizes that he deserves to be treated as an individual. This need is also revealed when he sees that locals in the town he visits on his way to Cornwall believe he is an important aristocrat, and he enjoys letting them think so. Having never felt important in his own right, he savors the experience. This indicates that his years of putting himself last are not true reflections of his desire or personality. Instead, these are learned behaviors that have become second nature. Yet the truth of Stevens's desires can not be squelched, even after sixty years.

As a writer, Ishiguro is influenced by his dual heritages, but he has stated that his fictional influences are the British greats, such as Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Ford. If *The Remains of the Day* had been published anonymously, the criticism regarding the possible Japanese connection could be lifted out, and there would still be a Booker Prize and an impressive body of commentary about every aspect of the book. Because of the consistent portrayal of English culture and history, the distinctly English subject matter, and the many ways in which Stevens is not a good representative of Japanese culture, the claims of the novel's Japanese nature must be regarded as overstatements. Worse, the overemphasis by many critics on the author's Japanese roots only acts as a distraction to an impressive fictional work.

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