

## “WHAT DIGNITY IS THERE IN THAT?” - THE ISSUE OF COLONIALISM IN KAZUO ISHIGURO’S THE REMAINS OF THE DAY

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*Abstract: Present paper attempts to take a postcolonial perspective on Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Remains of the Day. The novel dissects political history from a butler’s personal angle and highlights a truly complex dynamic of a master and servant relationship. The book invites a postcolonial reading in spite of the fact that both the novel’s narrative voice and the writer himself are British subjects. As we try to explore why Remains of the Day can be interpreted as a postcolonial novel par excellence, we also examine the narrative from the colonized/servant’s perspective.*

*Keywords: postcolonial novel, Ishiguro, The Remains of the Day, colonialism, butler*

*The Remains of the Day* is a carefully constructed novel and its complexity heavily builds upon two elements: the reader’s ability to relate to Stevens’ character, and to the environment that the character and the time periods involved create. The novel’s complexity implies many interpretations: on the one hand it can be regarded as a story of character, an internal struggle of an ageing single man and his consciousness; on the other hand is an exquisite compound of imperial critique and subtle social parody. The novel dissects political history from a butler’s personal angle underscoring a master and servant relationship and invites a postcolonial reading in spite of the fact that both the narrative voice and the writer himself are British subjects. The aim of present paper is to analyze the narrative from the colonized/servant’s perspective and explore why *Remains* can be interpreted as a postcolonial novel par excellence.

The personal issues of Stevens, the narrator and protagonist of *Remains* are unquestionably related to the socio-political milieu that surrounds him. McCombe contends that the personal values to which Stevens so blindly adheres, namely the paternalistic attitude of his employer, Lord Darlington and the stiff upper-class doctrines that shape their relationship, are all part of a colonialist ideology. The monophonic narrative of the novel centering around the utterly unreliable narrator, whose reflections on the world greatly differ from that of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s epic narratives, also invites a postcolonial reading (McCombe 77). James Lang observes that Ishiguro nurtures a specific interest in: “the ordinary, private and marginal lives and moments which fill the long spaces between the historic battles, the treaties, the summits and the incidents of public record” (151). Stevens’ narrative serves as an alternative version to the public historical record that frequently oppresses the narrative voices of those who are forced into a subordinate position either by colonialism, gender or, as in Stevens’ case, by austere class division (McCombe 77).

A short socio-historical overview is indicated before emerging into further discussions of the problematic. Essentially, *Remains* questions and parodies the validity of an image that depicts England as a prelapsarian vision that is corrupted by the presence of immigrants, trade unions and counter culture. Stuart Tannock claims that: “contemporary media and political life are saturated by a number of dominant nostalgic narratives (of the Family, of the Nation, of Empire, of the Frontier) that are deeply alienating to large groups of people” (456),

*Remains*, however doubts and questions at least two of them. Even so, the phenomenon of alienation and otherness in the case of the British society are harsh realities, therefore the feeling of otherness and deep identity crisis imbuing the novel are not by any chance curious.

Historian Linda Colley claims that in Britain's case the issue of Britishness is largely based on difference and she rigidly denotes when speaking of British historical heritage that: "this is a culture that is used to fighting and has largely defined itself through fighting" (9). Colley states that the only factor shoring up a common British identity against the controversies of nationalism was the socio-cultural tenor of the Empire and this entity facilitated the swift formation of a ruling elite that consisted of English, Welsh, Scottish and Anglo-Irish members, which draws after itself that "the sense of a common identity here did not come into being because of an integration and homogenization of disparate cultures. Instead, Britishness was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and in response to conflict with the Other" (6). As a result: "Great Britain is an invented nation that was not founded on the suppression of older loyalties so much as superimposed on them...it was heavily dependent for its *raison d'être* on a broadly Protestant culture, on the threat and tonic of recurrent war, especially war with France, and on the triumphs, profits, and Otherness represented by a massive overseas empire (Colley 327).

Colley maintains that the presence of the issues mentioned within the British society serve as an explanation for Britain's 20<sup>th</sup> century controversies: "the Other in the shape of Catholicism, or a militant France or Germany, or an exotic empire is no longer available...the natural result has been a renewed sensitivity to internal differences" (328). Strongman continues the argumentation by saying that the phenomenon of a multicultural Britain built up of immigrant groups from the former colonies became apparent by the 1960's, however the fact that the society lacked a self-aware mindset towards multiculturalism until Tony Blair's Labour government in the 1990's meant a serious issue; the deterioration of empire clearly presumed the eventual decay of imperial confidence which ultimately lead to Britain's withdrawal into itself (215). John Rex claims that:

The first official British response to the presence of large numbers of immigrants distinguished by their skin-colour, their language, their religion and their culture was simply to declare that they must be assimilated to a unitary British culture. Thus the Commonwealth Immigrants Advisory Council, referring to educational provision, argued in 1964 that "a national system cannot be expected to perpetuate the different values of immigrant groups". This policy was very quickly abandoned, however, and in 1968 the Home Secretary said that what he envisaged was "not a flattening process of uniformity, but cultural diversity, coupled with equal opportunity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance" (Patterson 1968). Since these policy aims have never formally been abandoned, it may be assumed that, in some degree at least, they still influence government policy (26-28).

Multicultural Britain under the Blair government in the late 1990's was different from what it was in the 1950's primarily due to the process of cultural adjustment it had undergone during the previous decades, thus expanding the term British to include the many ethnicities for whom Britain became an adopted home (Strongman 217). The canvas of troubled ethnic policy served as a wonderful background for the Japan born, British subject Ishiguro to paint the picture of an England suffering of post imperial nostalgia and to give voice through Stevens' persona to formerly colonized ethnicities.

By pondering upon the above idea, it becomes obvious that *Remains* presents the British Empire from the angle of those on the peripheries, whose standpoints “are belatedly recognized in the imperial center because they differed from the official perspective” (Cheng 11). Cheng denotes that postcolonial narratives emerge belatedly not because of their absence in the imperial era, but because the differences they represented were oppressed then and have been postponed to this day. Attending to the Victorian ruins in post-war Britain, *Remains* depicts a vanishing empire and the consequences of its mistaken policies that continue to haunt the present, whereas Stevens’ nostalgic craving for Britain’s former imperial grandeur and denunciation of the upper class’ political decisions presume a troubled viewpoint (Cheng 10). The conflict is further complicated by what Susie O’Brien calls: “an opposition between what are commonly regarded as Victorian values—formality, repression, and self-effacement, summed up under the general heading of ‘dignity’—and those associated with an idea of ‘America’ that has expanded, literally into a New World—freedom, nature, and individualism” (788).

Meera Tamaya argues that the dynamic between the upper and lower classes is perfectly exemplified by Lord Darlington and Stevens in the novel, whereas their odd natured master-servant relationship stands as a replica for England’s relationship to its colonies (46). Stevens very own tragedy is provoked by what Albert Memmi terms the cruel “hoax”, a device by which the master ensures that the servant exists “only as a function of the needs of the colonizer, i.e., be transformed into a pure colonized” ( Memmi qtd. in Tamaya 46). Tamaya focuses her argumentation on analyzing Britain’s Imperial attitude and then applying the classic colonizer-colonized pattern on Darlington and Stevens’ relationship. She very effectively compares colonialism to parasitism, as the main objective of the venture being to draw not only physical nourishment but also imaginative stimulation at the expense of the natives. More specifically, whenever the English set foot on foreign shores they established mini-Englands and turned the natives into their bureaucrats and slaves-by teaching them the language of the colonizers they ensured the problem free quotidian life. Seldom did the colonizer encounter rejection from the subjugated nations; therefore training the natives into an obedient mass of bailiffs was not jeopardized by any obstacle (Tamaya 47).

One of the core problems underscored by the novel is Stevens’ confusion over important notions related to his life. He mistakes servitude for ‘greatness’ and self-denial for ‘professionalism’, thus Stevens turning himself into an imperial element perfectly fitting into the scheme of colonizer/colonized; he lacks any kind of self-respect or self-awareness and he executes what he is told without opposition:

Stevens, the butler, is the apotheosis of the perfect manservant who obliterates all traces of his own personality, all instinctive drives and desires, all individual dreams in the service of his master. The dream servant is none other than the English butler, the human robot with the “correct” accent, the “correct” manners. Stevens expresses, without a hint of self-awareness or irony, the quintessential Englishness of butlers (Tamaya 47).

Webley states that Ishiguro’s emphasis is on the fact that Stevens’ dedication to his profession and the acceptance of hegemony transformed him into a mere historical agent (15), however as a defense for his protagonist, Ishiguro forbearingly points out that: “often we just don’t know enough about what is going on out there, and I felt that’s what we’re like. We’re like butlers” (Ishiguro qtd. in Vorda). Still, in spite of Ishiguro’s apologist speech the problem remains unsolved: in the novel the complex relation between the “problem of agency, the difficulty of cultivating a consciousness of history and the tendency of hegemony to colonize language and shape conceptual thinking is clear”, albeit “much of Stevens’ narrative is taken

up with his attempts to define the concept of dignity” (Webley 15). As Stevens contemplates in *Remains*:

The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstances tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of ‘dignity’ (Ishiguro 43-44).

Webley contends that for Stevens, ‘dignity’ is the ability of a butler to maintain his professional role under any circumstance without taking into consideration the occurring emotional or moral controversies he might face. Instead of pondering upon the numerous possible meanings of the concept of ‘dignity’ and leaving space for a critical interpretation of his circumstances, Stevens sabotages the larger scale interpretation of his own situation by failing to raise the question of exactly how dignified it is to be so subjugated and dedicates the majority of his time to working out how he can serve his master better (Webley 16).

Irene Tung explores that Stevens is colonized not only mentally on the inside, but in his language, as well. The fact that he utilizes upper class verbal manners signifies a sort of acculturation from his part as he must learn the language of his master in order to be professional enough in the eye of the colonizer. Tung argues that Stevens creates an illusory appearance of likeness with Darlington by using the same eloquent upper-class language and pronunciation as he does, thus preventing his employer from having to confront ‘otherness’ in any form that might prove to be positively annoying. She denotes that his linguistic manners lead the villagers he encounters along his motorcar-journey to believe that he is a representative of the aristocracy, but at the same time his strange language suspends him between class lines making him unable to interact with those who might be closer to him socially. The transformation of his language makes him a stranger in all lands. In Darlington Hall he is always on other people’s words, whereas in the ‘outside world’ he cannot relate to his peers either. “Language is an empty tool for people’s ideas, as Stevens has become a tool in the service of other people’s agendas” (Tung “Language and Objectification”).

Important to mention that the characters’ ‘languages’ within the novel, like that of Stevens, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Taylor, and Dr. Carlisle “mingle and intersect, producing a dynamic movement through which various ideologies, including democracy, conservatism, imperialism, and socialism, are discussed and viewed. Indeed, they create a ‘muddle’ of enthusiastic celebration, self-contradiction, indifference, hypocrisy, disillusionment, cynicism and comicality in a kind of ‘festival’ of critique” (Park 61). However, the clearest indication of the political muddle pervading Britain in 1956 is best transmitted through the ‘voice’ of Harry Smith, who is an unquestionable adherent of labourist ideologies. He is a keen propagator of the democratic process, and he assumes further responsibilities by actively participating in the local government. He has a more conservative take on issue of the empire, which does not remain hidden, either (McCombe83). During his conversation with Dr. Carlisle Smith claims that: “I was hoping Stevens would have a few words to say about your ideas on the Empire, Doctor...Our Doctor here’s for all kinds of little countries going independent. I don’t have the learning to prove him wrong, though I know he is” (Ishiguro 192). In spite of avoiding to come up with an answer, Stevens would surely agree with Smith, that the doctor’s liberalism is farfetched and unrealistic, since the colonial system in which Smith believes in is shored up by Stevens’ personal values (McCombe 83).

Stevens is essentially a confused and anachronistic character; he deals with oppressed emotional tribulations and his value system is largely based on outdated Victorian nostalgia. The question arises: do his obscure values validate or at least explain his deeds? I believe they do. His personal confusion over professionalism and notion of dignity might highlight why he considers the conference of March 1923 a hallmark moment in his professional life and Lord Darlington's political career. He rather forgivingly claims that Darlington : "had not been initially so preoccupied with the peace treaty when it was drawn up at the end of the Great War, and I think it is fair to say that his interest was prompted not so much by an analysis of the treaty, but by his friendship with Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann" (Ishiguro 71). Stevens' blind loyalty prompts the butler to protect his master's incorrect political ventures; moreover, as a gallant act of servitude, he defends him by claiming that Darlington nurtured a strong connection with Bremann, which friendship *incidentally* involved Nazism. O'Brien and McCombe point out that Stevens resembles the colonized in his dependence and "his belief in the benevolence of the father figure" (McCombe 83), while his devotion parallels with an attitude that a colonial subject would have manifested vis-à-vis the colonizer (O'Brien 789). In spite of the evident fact that his master is crypto-Nazi Stevens' childlike trust in Darlington remains intact:

The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and I, and those of us who wish to make our mark must realize that we best do so by concentrating on what is within our realm; that is to say, by devoting our attention to providing the best possible service to those great gentlemen in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies (Ishiguro 199).

If one considers Edward Said's theory on the colonizer-colonized relationship, one does not fail to interpret Stevens' above utterance as a clear manifesto of colonialist theory. According to Said the colonized are "a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves" (35). Stevens is a colonialist apologist as he devotes himself to a doctrine which theoretically suggests that the colonized need to be represented as they cannot do that for themselves (McCombe 84). Stevens makes his position clear when he reflects on Harry Smith's political activism:

But life being what it is, how can ordinary people truly be expected to have "strong opinions" on all manner of things-as Mr. Harry Smith rather fancifully claims that the villagers here do? And not only are these expectations unrealistic, I rather doubt if they are even desirable. There is after all, a real limit to how much ordinary people can learn and know, and know, and to demand that each and every one of them contribute "strong opinions" to the great debates of the cannot, surely, be wise (Ishiguro 194).

Curiously enough Stevens does not harbor ill feelings towards Lord Darlington for transforming him into a colonial subject in the very heart of England, albeit his connection to his American employer, Farraday shows another tendency, which is subtly portrayed within the novel's narrative. I would like to return to Susie O'Brien's argumentation as her view can be applied to the relationship that Stevens and Farraday share. She astutely points out that in the novel the Victorian doctrines gathered around the "general heading of dignity" are conflicted with values set by a new world order: freedom and individualism ( O'Brien 788). The butler fails to come to terms with his new employer's liberal views and the relaxed master-servant relationship propagated by him, as Stevens interprets it as a breach in the

social hierarchy he tries so meticulously to uphold. I do believe that after an austere professional relationship with Lord Darlington, in which the hierarchical borders were clearly defined, and the butler had the *opportunity* to nurture an infantile admiration towards his master, Stevens feels confused and lost in his old/new role.

In spite of the constant reiteration on how Farraday “is in no sense an unkind person” (14) , Stevens considers such casual manifestations, like bantering for instance, utterly unprofessional and expresses his ill feeling on the topics when he says that: “ one need hardly dwell on the catastrophic possibility of uttering a bantering remark only to discover it wholly inappropriate” (16). Farraday apparently lacks the proper qualities that his hierarchical station requires as the resident of Darlington Hall and the paternalistic obligations it presumes, thus he fails to become part employer and part father to Stevens, both relationships requiring a social barrier that the new owner menaces to break down (McCombe 86). McCombe exemplifies the potential dangers that evoke Stevens’ anxiety by presenting an episode in which Stevens is asked to provide sexual education to Darlington’s godson, a task that is accepted in an “interesting conflation of imperialist and military metaphors as ‘my mission’” (88). The fact that the latter command originates from a man Stevens serves so willingly, the absurdity of his task to tell the “facts of life” to a social superior does not seem alarming to him, whereas a bantering maneuver implies a social freedom that largely corrupts the social restraint that Stevens craves so much for (McCombe 88).

Stevens represses everything that in his perception does not fit into the frame of Englishness and dignity as such. His maniacal adherence to the manners demanded by his ‘profession’ eventually lead him to the oppression of his own affections towards Miss Kenton, which act is nothing more than emotional self-mutilation. Stevens’ does so because he firmly believes that his sacrifices grant him a place within the hierarchical scale set up by the post-Victorian value system. Park aptly points out that by contrasting Stevens’ hopes and misbelieves with his actual position within the walls of the manor house one can realize that he is nothing more than a marginalized voice within the narrative, and “despite his illusion that he shares personally in the grandiosity and triumph of Darlington Hall, the text portrays his cheerless, dark, and austere room as a sort of “prison cell,” showing his complete alienation and even exile from the glory and grandeur that the house represents” (52).

The portrayal of Stevens’ room as a ‘prison cell’ and his subsequent exile from national glory, as Park further points out, are inseparable from another important issue explored on apropos of the novel, that of homelessness. Stevens obviously belongs to Darlington Hall, however he is helplessly excluded and segregated in a prison cell-like room within the Hall which idea leads to the conclusion that national discourse alienates those standing on the peripheries, especially on those occasions when they try to enter its realm (Park 52). Walkowitz claims that: “national identities are invented not only to maintain a boundary from the outside but also to erect boundaries in the face of new, perhaps internal estrangement” (Walkowitz qtd. in Park 52). Even though Stevens envisions himself as a permanent resident of Darlington Hall he is perceived rather as an individual without a home. On the occasion of international conference at the Hall, Mr. Cardinal makes a few funny remarks on the topics concerning the guests:

I wonder if it wouldn’t have been better if the Almighty had created us all as—well—as sort of plants. You know, firmly embedded in the soil. Then none of this rot about wars and boundaries would have come up in the first place ... but we could still have chaps like you taking messages back and forth, bringing tea, that sort of thing. Otherwise, how would we ever get anything done? Can you imagine it, Stevens? All of us rooted in the soil? Just imagine it! (108).

Even in a tender aged gentleman's wild imagination in which every human being is fixed in a plot of land, Stevens is the only one who is not similarly embedded, he moves back and forth, carrying out orders, serving others while being homeless (Park 55).

Stevens is the target of constant humiliation, which he finds perfectly reasonable in his position and considers it as a challenge that grants another occasion to prove his 'professionalism'. He does his best to please others and reiterate his devotion towards those he so loyally serves. According to Park, the only occasion when the actual hierarchical structure is reversed and Stevens transforms from a mere a historical agent into an all-knowing master is the episode when Stevens is called to the drawing room in the middle of the night and is put through an interrogation with a series of complicated questions regarding international policy (55):

I was naturally a little surprised by this, but then quickly saw the situation for what it is; that is to say, it was clearly expected that I be baffled by the question. Indeed, in the moment or so that it took for me to perceive this and compose a suitable response, I may even have given the outward impression of struggling with the question, for I saw all the gentlemen in the room exchange mirthful smiles (Ishiguro 195).

Stevens manifests an incredible behavior which is elaborately planned and executed with great skill, that of the 'dumb' butler. He recognizes what is expected of him in the situation in question and performs his role in accordance with it. Stevens repeats the same answer, "I am very sorry, sir...but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter" (Ishiguro 195) to the greatest delight and satisfaction of the gentlemen. Park states that: "This scene, however, displaces and subverts this paternal hierarchy and the political/social structure it might imply once and for all. Here, the snickering gentlemen look more like children enjoying a practical joke, while Stevens looks like a benevolent adult figure playing along with the children's whim and trying to protect their illusion with a little pretense" (55).

Stevens' unconsciously reached and transitory liberation from the position of the colonized does not exonerate him from the burdens of the subjugated ones. The reader does sympathize with his situation and comes to reject any imperial allusion, but does not forgive Stevens for deliberately ruining his life, because unlike others, he did have a choice. Some questions inevitably arise: what happens to the 'Others' when they embrace their preset roles without objection? What are the consequences of physical and mental commodification? How can identity and selfhood resist or survive colonization? The questions are answered by Stevens himself.

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