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In Search of Lost Time: an Analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *the Remains of the Day*

ALI MASUD

(M. A. in English),
The University of Burdwan
masud5039@gmail.com

&

RABI KANTA ROY

Assistant Professor
Department of English, Kabi Nazrul College
(Affiliated to The University of Burdwan),
Birbhum, West Bengal.
robiroy111@gmail.com.

Abstract

*Kazuo Ishiguro is a Japanese Diasporic author. He is the master of storytelling. The way he narrates a simple story makes him special in the field of World Literature. Kazuo Ishiguro's novels are scattered with characters who are obsessed with their past. Past is always a significant part in their lives. Though they live in the present, their heart is always in their past which is, according to them, comparatively superior to their present state. Human beings have a tendency to miss their good times. The problem arises with their constant wish to go back to that time, which obviously they cannot do. Stevens, the butler at Darlington Hall, in the novel *The Remains of the Day* is such a character. He is in search of his lost time. He is very much obsessed with the past, he pursues his physical and emotional journeys into past occurrences, talks, geographical spaces, values, and stories with a great sense of heartbreak, remorsefulness and distress at times and of satisfaction and pride. He time and again remembers his past and unconsciously lives in the past. He is in search of his past that is long lost. This paper will analyze Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* and show not only Stevens' search for lost time but also the lost time of his country England before World War II.*

Keywords: Past, Time, Search, Human Beings, Lost, Sense, Distress and Heartbreak.

Introduction

Ishiguro's Booker Prize winner book *The Remains of the Day* is considered to be his best book. He uses the first person narrative technique yet it is different from the traditional

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first person narrative. The story unfolds not in a chronological order. The story goes according to the narrator's memory. Memory, here, played a great part in the narration of the story. *The Remains of the Day* is the story of an ageing butler named Stevens. Stevens is a butler at Darlington Hall. He served Lord Darlington and at present he is serving Mr Farraday who suggested him to take a trip. Now, the idea of taking a trip for pleasure is a strange one for Stevens. Since the trip is his new employer's suggestion. The opening already implies changed expectations from the past. Stevens said he had seen the best of England within the walls of the house. Stevens is so accustomed with his living that he forgets there is a life outside the house. Stevens believed that he had a life full of what he called 'dignity'. However, the letter he received from the former housekeeper named Miss Kenton triggered him to take the journey which will be sponsored by Mr Farraday. From here the real story begins. Now this journey could be seen as Stevens' journey to his past throughout the vehicle of his memory. He remembers his past and becomes so engrossed with it that his present situation hardly matters.

Remembering becomes extremely vital in this novel. Ishiguro is always concerned with memory in his novels. On March the 17th, 2015, in an interview conducted by Tina Srebotnjak in the Appel Salon, he states that many "societies grapple with this question: To what extent should we remember our past? To what extent should we forget it?". The question he raised here cannot be ignored. He further expresses his interest "in this question: how does a nation, how does a society decide when it is better to remember things? And when is it better to keep certain dark memories just buried?".

Stevens' memory played a huge role in his search of his past. The journey he undertook can be seen as a metaphor for the journey towards his past. However, the past is not always comfortable, not always happy. It is also full of suffering and unease. Remembering some sad incidents may bring a lot of harm to the heart, wound prides, cause trauma to the mind, and unsettle the serenity of both individuals and community.

Stevens' Search of His Lost Time

Stevens was about to journey to Salisbury when his mind was occupied with the thoughts of Darlington Hall. What might happen after his departure. He believed once he departed,

"Darlington Hall would stand empty for probably the first time this century perhaps for the first time since the day it was built" (*The Remains of the Day*, p 23).

The self importance, here Stevens gave himself was due to his attachment towards the house. Of course, the house witnessed the best time of Stevens' life. When he used to work for Lord Darlington. He served the house with utmost sincerity. Stevens remembers his past sometimes as a means

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“to escape moments of bemusement and embarrassment. Stevens’s searches in the repository of his memories for specific moments, feelings and incidents which can help keep him aloof from unpleasant realities and get out of embarrassing situations. It is a sort of relief from uncomfortable instants”.

He is now a lonely man passing his days with maintaining the staff and also trying to adjust in this world. For him the past was his comfort zone and the best time was when Miss Kenton used to work there. Miss Kenton represents Stevens’ beautiful time, the time which is lost now. After the departure of Miss Kenton, Stevens’ gradually lost his own self; he, unaware of himself, became somewhat lonely. Stevens reading Miss Kenton’s letter again and again is a hint that he is struck with the memory of Miss Kenton, his beautiful time. Stevens’ hope of Miss Kenton’s coming back to Darlington Hall is nothing but his own desire to go back to his past. From a neuro-psychological point of view, his “mind is programmed in a way which gives much weight to the remembrance of the past with little regard to the future.”

It is also interesting to note that Stevens in so many occasions expresses his willingness to remember only happy things especially those related to his employer Lord Darlington as it is the case with his two-hour meeting with Mrs. Kenton in the tea lounge,

“predominantly concerned with very happy memories ” (Kazuo Ishiguro, p 10).

He doesn’t like to remember the terrible insinuations made by newspapers about Lord Darlington throughout the war. Instead, he favors the recollection of those great moments at Darlington Hall when great events and important gatherings take place. When talking to Miss Kenton who is Mrs Benn now he says:

“ Oh yes, Mrs. Benn. But enough of this. I know you remember Darlington Hall in the days when there were great gatherings, when it was filled with distinguished visitors. Now that’s the way his lordship deserves to be remembered” (The Remains of the Day, p. 247).

Stevens’ life is shaped in the light of what he experienced in the past. He sometimes utilizes his memory as a way to “ pore over the past events”. His Journey to the past is a journey to a significant life: it is better, happier and more respected. It also helps to draw a comparison between life in the past and now and Stevens chose past over present. It may sound strange but the memory of the past and man’s constant search for the past can be sometimes a real obstacle to change. Living the present with the mentality of the past “hampers the development of both individuals and communities and makes them stagnant and backward-looking”. Stevens’ stuck in the past and remembering it with a great nostalgia means he is satisfied with it and has a burning desire to relive it. Hence he is in search of lost time and the search never stopped.

Stevens remembers his past with dignity. Dignity is very important for the butlers like Stevens. Stevens remembers:

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“In looking back over my career thus far, my chief satisfaction derives from what I achieved during those years, and I am today nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege”(The Remains of the Day, p. 133).

Stevens being proud of him has nothing to do with his present position. He is proud of what was in his past. He is grateful for his past. His days under Lord Darlington were surely a glorious time of his life. But now his life has become a huge disappointment. Once he used to maintain the house like a pro now he has started committing errors. Though the errors are trivial, it is uncharacteristic of Stevens. As if Stevens is missing his old self when he was in his prime. The scene where his father was in deathbed and Steven tactfully concealed his emotions before the guests. Even when his father died he first did his duty as a butler then as a son. He believed that his father would have wanted him to do the same. And now when he remembers all these he feels very proud of himself. That Stevens is gone and the one who is here is missing him.

He hoped that Miss Kenton’s returning to Darlington Hall might restore his lost time. When he met Miss Kenton at the end of the novel, he realized his mistake. Miss Kenton had moved on from her past though sometimes she missed it within a limited extent. Whereas Stevens was living in the past. Miss Kenton and Stevens were not so different. Miss Kenton was somewhat regretting the wasted opportunity. She at the end hinted:

“..I get to thinking about a life I might have had with you, Mr Stevens. ‘ And I suppose that's when I get angry over some trivial little thing and leave. But each time I do so, I realize before long my rightful place is with my husband. After all, there’s no turning back the clock now. One can’t be forever dwelling on what might have been. One should realize one has as good as most, perhaps better, and be grateful” (The Remains of the Day, p. 251).

The good thing was that Miss Kenton was aware of her wasted opportunity and accepted it. She had moved on. Accepted her lot and was grateful for what she had. On the other hand, Stevens was contrary. Stevens was unaware of his own wasted life. He looked back in pride. He was unaware of the fact that he could have had a beautiful life with Miss Kenton. But Alas! It’s too late now. Steven was unwilling to accept that he wasted his life. When Mrs. Benn asked him:

“What does the future hold for you back at Darlington Hall? Steven answered “ Well, whatever awaits me, Mrs. Benn, I know I am not awaited by emptiness”(The Remains of the Day, p. 249).

But at the end, Stevens realized it is not Miss Kenton who wasted her life, rather it was him. His life is empty and for that he for the first time questions his existence while pondering over his former employer:

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“His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I trusted. I trusted in his lordship’s wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really - one has to ask oneself - what dignity is there in that?” (The Remains of the Day, p. 256).

In Search of England’s Lost Time

Ishiguro, in this novel, not only focuses on the protagonist but also on the country. It is not a story of Stevens’ personal history; it is also a history of England. The depiction of England before WWII and after WWII is parallel to the life of Stevens’ life. As the story moves forward, some harsh reality of England is presented. The author seeks to allude to the fact that England of the past was in a state where the common people were placed on the margin, they are regarded as second-rate citizens who could not have a say and participate in the making of political decisions. It is the upper class people who make or break the country. Again, Ishiguro’s treatment of colonialism in this novel cannot be ignored. Stevens’ journey of memory reveals not only his personal life but also England, albeit implicitly, as a colonial power. The relationship between Lord Darlington the master and Stevens the butler can be considered a microcosm of the relationship between England and its colonies.

The novel also made the readers aware of few historical events such as two world wars and Versailles Peace Treaty, Nazism and its role in the outbreak of the second war. Lord Darlington tries to organize meetings to keep WW II from happening; the Nazi agenda takes the world to this war, causing much harm to the world and his reputation. After the war, so many nations are severely destroyed and Lord Darlington is remembered as a Nazi advocate and traitor. Stevens though loved his former employer but denies any connection with him not because he is ashamed of his association with his lordship; it is because he simply tries to avoid unpleasantness.

We got two pictures of England in the novel: the first one is England as an imperial force. It is no denying that before WWII England was the superpower of the world. Darlington Hall itself is the symbol of this power where the great meetings are used to be held. Many great people used to visit it. Second one is after WWII and to be specific the year 1956 which is the year of present day narrative. The narrative is rich with its reflection upon the British imperial past and the transference of power from England to America as the new superpower in the world. With America rising, the British then was grappling with what they previously had, losing their colonies such as India in 1947. England constantly tries to retain their ownership of one third of the globe. Constantly fighting a battle towards an inevitable demise. The empire is slowly losing its hold and is no more the most feared one. Even the

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great Darlington House of England is now owned by an American and Stevens, a great English butler, is an employee under an America.

Falling from grace, the country is in search of its lost time. The character of Stevens is not merely a character who searches for his lost time, he is the embodiment of England in search of lost time. Stevens' missing his past can be viewed as England's lamenting for its glorious past. In this context Stevens represents the old England. Coincidentally it is also the reason why Mr Farraday kept him. In one scene between Stevens and Mr Farraday, the latter confirmed this view :

“I mean to say, Stevens, this is a genuine grand old English house, isn't it? That's what I paid for. And you're a genuine old-fashioned English butler, not just some waiter pretending to be one. You're the real thing, aren't you? That's what I wanted, isn't that what I have? ” (The Remains of the Day, p. 131).

The real thing here refers to the real England which is lost. Stevens time and again missing his old time can be viewed as his missing the old England. So, the search of an individual's past is paralleled with that of a country. In both cases the searching is vain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we must acknowledge that the inclusion of missing the past in the fabrics of the novel *The Remains of the Day* is not done out of blue. Ishiguro deliberately uses this as he is aware of the human psychology. Human Beings always has tendency to miss their past. Ishiguro here uses this to portray his protagonist Stevens. He interwoven the plot with Stevens' search of lost time with that of England. Stevens' meeting with an old butler opened his eyes. The old butler advised:

“Don't keep looking back all the time; you're bound to get depressed. And all right, you can't do your job as well as you used to. But it's the same for all of us, see? We've all got to put our feet up at some point. Look at me. Been happy as a lark since the day I retired. All right, so neither of us is exactly in our first flush of youth, but you've got to keep looking forward.'...You've got to enjoy yourself. The evening's the best part of the day. You've done your day's work. Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it ”(Kazuo Ishiguro, p. 256).

In the end Stevens realized that it is not possible to regain the past. Both He and England cannot regain the lost times. He realizes that he should live at present moment. So in the end he decided not look back because what can we gain in forever looking back?

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