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DYNAMICS OF RESTRAINT AND DIGNITY IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the narrative excellence employed by Kazuo Ishiguro in the novel The Remains of the Day. The central protagonist, Stevens, exemplifies ideals of a great butler. His inability to respond to the quotidian affairs in his life subjectively, figures the self-restraint imposed by him in parading his finer feelings. The unreliability of memory, the agency of self-deceit and the hindering of meaning through the use of language along with the protagonist's persistence in pursuing self-improvement is at play in the novel. Kazuo Ishiguro's work does not easily fit the model of the international literary novel associated with post modernizing experimentalism and flamboyant hybridity.

Keywords: restraint, travel narrative, memories, dignity.

Kazuo Ishiguro's emergence as an important cultural figure can be attributed to his works which tap emotional intensity and intellectual verve. His bi-cultural status along with the existential issues addressed in his writings has enabled him to carve a niche within British literature as well as other academic disciplines. Kazoo Ishiguro is sometimes presented as a novelist who has slipped comfortably into the new role of International Novelist, randomly picking its recognised modes of mimicry, ventriloquism and double perspective, taking on themes of global significance in virtuoso fictional performances that resist simple or particularized allegorical reduction (Groes 15). This paper is an attempt to analyse the dynamics of restraint self-consciously imposed by the protagonist on himself and the notion of dignity in the novel *The Remains of the Day*.

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* qualifies as a travel narrative sauntering on the memories of the aging butler Stevens. The novel stretches over a period of six days and the intricate plot revolves around the motoring to West Country undertaken by Stevens to visit Miss Kenton. The narrative modulates and surreptitiously unfolds in the first person. As with many of the characters in Ishiguro's novels, the protagonist Stevens

undergoes a rigidity of the expression of his feelings. The portrayal of the protagonist as a butler, the most English of stock characters, stands testimony to the skillful manouevre of Ishiguro to bring to surface his experiences and credentials as a 'dignified' butler and also his troubled past.

It was the suggestion put forth by Stevens' new employer Mr Farraday that he should "see around (this) beautiful country" (Ishiguro 4) of England. Stevens was not amused by this magnanimous offer made by his American employer but he was resolved to give a reply which would extol his position as the butler in the distinguished English manor, Darlington Hall. The pride with which he apprised himself is palpable when he retorts, "It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls" (4). Susie O'Brien opines that Steven's reading of 'country' is strikingly different from the image invoked by Farraday; while 'country' for Stevens signifies a socio-political construction held together by the 'great ladies and gentlemen of the land', Farraday seems to see it as synonymous with nature (794).

The novel strides with two story lines in two different time frames. The readers discover the allure of the fictional estate Darlington Hall in the midst of many political events during the twentieth century. Stevens moves through various narrative modes to come to terms with his memories at Darlington Hall in the years before the II World War. The lack of a purely personal space in the life of Stevens makes him look at everything from an objective point of view. Stevens valued his reputation as highly esteemed and he reflects repeatedly on what makes a 'great' butler and the "truth is therefore constantly evoked, mentioned, looked for, alluded to and somehow never obtained, it invades the text as a constant though unattained and undefined object" (Patey 144-145). Stevens self-consciously evokes the notion of dignity throughout the novel. This evasive concept of dignity is diligently sought out by Stevens who recalls the two great butlers of the time – Mr Marshall of Charleville House and Mr Lane of Bridewood. To Stevens, "good accent and command of language, general knowledge on wide-ranging topics" comprise the various attributes of a great butler (Ishiguro 35). Stevens, in his yearning to be a 'great' butler, is both practical and organizational. His absolute take on dignity becomes evident when he says:

> Moreover, my main objection to Mr Graham's analogy was the implication that this 'dignity' was something one possessed or did not by a fluke of nature; and if one did not self-evidently have it, to strive after it would be as futile as an ugly woman trying to make herself beautiful. (34)

For Stevens, 'dignity' is acquired "over many years of self-training and the careful absorbing of experience" (34). Stevens is concerned with the essence of greatness in butlers not its secondary characteristics. Consequently, he looks towards the pronouncements of the Hayes society which is a fictitious professional organization which flourished in the 1920s and early 1930s. It prided itself on admitting only the highest quality of butler into its ranks. One of its prerequisites is that its applicants must be attached to a distinguished household. Stevens

takes considerable pride in being fortunate enough to serve in Darlington Hall, the distinguished household of Lord Darlington, as it fits the expectations of the Hayes Society (Lewis 80).

Even the formal and crisp language used by Stevens and his preoccupation with the duties of a butler underscore the enormous and excessive element of professionalism. The journey embarked on by Stevens is not in itself one for entertainment; deep within the caverns of his mind one can discern the calculations for taking in Miss Kenton in the staff. According to him, "the ability to draw up a good staff plan is the cornerstone of any decent butler's skills" (Ishiguro 5). This journey amounts to self-discovery of the protagonist where his self-deception is starkly exposed. His obsession with dignity, duty and decency reaches a state where he deceives himself. Stevens tries to make himself believe that the journey undertaken by him to meet Miss Kenton is purely professional in nature but deep within the recesses of the mind, it is evident that he is afraid to even think of his attachment to Miss Kenton. Such a relationship can even tarnish the self-conceived notion of a dignified butler. Dignity, for Stevens, is largely a matter of "reserve and aplomb in the pursuit of butlering excellence" (Lewis 82).

Historical events contributed considerably to the background of the novel. Lord Darlington being a man of repute hosted numerous meetings of foreign officials, politicians and statesmen including the conference of 1923. Stevens strongly believed that it was this conference which greatly moulded him when he says, "I demonstrated I might have a capacity for such a quality" of 'dignity' (Ishiguro 73).

The novel as a travel narrative explicates the historical events, the pride nurtured by Stevens and his disillusionment. On closer analysis, one can find that Stevens is not the unconscious victim of psychic structures of repression, but rather a conscious speaker who has suppressed his emotional life. All his life, he had been playing a role which camouflaged all traces of a non-professional strain of identity. His life is an enactment of this when he says "a butler of any quality must be seen to inhabit his role, utterly and fully" (Ishiguro 178). Stevens is seen not to tolerate the entry of anything personal in his professional capacities. It is when Stevens comes out of his confined and comfortable space in the Darlington Hall that the fangs of self-restraint and 'butlerian' role playing he had been equipping himself with, bares its teeth. Even in extremely trying situations, Stevens aspires to attain the highest rung of the standards of his father. During the 1923 conference in the Darlington Hall, though his father was dying after a severe stroke, Stevens continues to serve the guests in the smoking room. It is not that he is bereft of emotions, but they seem to occupy only a collateral space in his life. In many instances especially where Miss Kenton is about to get married, Stevens hides his personal concerns and suppresses them.

The concept of 'dignity' proves to be problematic throughout the story. The words and actions of the protagonist are shaped and aimed in such a manner as to touch the paradigms of dignity. In a sense such vain ambitions tend to make Stevens artificial and

deluding. In the incident where two of the housemaids were sent packing, the repeated cries of Miss Kenton were unheeded to. Almost after a year when Stevens came up with a justification with his real feelings, Miss Kenton was on the brink of bursting up and in the episode of solemn innocence and grief she asked him, "Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to *pretend*?" (162). His professional pretension was a surprise to even Mr Cardinal who was sharp enough to point out the blind adherence of Stevens to Lord Darlington without being aware of the social setting.

Stevens excessive admiration of professionalism has affected him negatively be it personally or in relationships. Towards the fag end of his journey his acquaintance with another butler near the pier makes him envisage his life so far. The new butler stands as an antithesis to all Stevens has been in his life. According to him, "The evening's the best part of the day. You have done your day's work. Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it" (256). Stevens sojourn is a figurative journey into his past and the self. His fulfillment of his butlering role is a performance of that which is already a performance, a history of the 'great' butlers of England.

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