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Silverware and Space: The Construction and Deconstruction of the Butler Figure through Object Metaphors in *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract— *In Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day, a system of metaphors built around objects such as silverware, corridors, and banquet halls constructs a paradox of existence in which the butler Stevens dissolves his humanity in the pursuit of professional dignity. Silverware, as the material embodiment of the butler's spirit, and the sacred ritual of its polishing—alongside the meticulous spatial order of corridors and other domestic spaces—together weave a disciplinary network of professional myth. This transforms Stevens's sense of self-worth into a mechanical gleam and order akin to that of objects. Yet as silverware becomes historical evidence of Nazi complicity, and as the spatial order of Darlington Hall is restructured by an American businessman, both elements metaphorically expose the hollowness of professional dignity. The rise and fall of this system of metaphors not only deconstructs the emotional void Stevens conceals beneath the identity of the "great butler," but also reflects the crisis of British cultural identity in the postcolonial era. When silverware is reduced to a historical relic and spaces of power are reshaped by the new world order, the individual's adherence to "English dignity" becomes, like a drooping curtain, the last fig leaf of a fading empire.*

Keywords— ***metaphor, object, postcolonial era, professional dignity, silverware, spatial order, The Remains of the Day***

I. INTRODUCTION

In *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro employs the metaphorical function of objects such as silverware and spaces—including the pantry, banquet hall, and corridors—to shape the complex figure of the butler Stevens, who suppresses his personal emotions in the name of professional duty. As these objects evolve in meaning throughout the narrative, they gradually deconstruct his constructed identity and reveal the underlying tragedy it conceals.

Existing scholarship on the characterization of Stevens generally falls into two categories. The first focuses

on his self-discipline. For example, Zhang Guoqing and Xu Zhen argue that in the banquet hall, Stevens views the aristocrats as "light" and the servants as "shadow," a metaphor that illustrates "his strict adherence to social norms" (80). O'Brien, through an analysis of Stevens's alienated use of language, notes that he treats humor as a matter of "duty" rather than a mode of natural interaction, highlighting his inability to engage in genuine emotional communication (790). The second perspective emphasizes his awakening humanity. Horton, for instance, contends that the moment at the end of the novel when Stevens admits to having made "mistakes" marks his first genuine acknowledgment of the value of human warmth (22).

"Objects do not create their own world but are embedded in human behavior and interaction" (Hahn 41). Scholars have analyzed the metaphorical function of objects in representing imperial ideology from various angles. Li Chunfeng and Liu Fuli suggest that silverware symbolizes "the decline of an empire once glorious" (14). Wang Ye points out that "landscape, as constructed by Stevens, becomes a form of power—an unconscious political expression of imperial desire and imagination" (140). Lin Ping takes the example of a story in which an Indian butler subdues a tiger, arguing that "the tiger symbolizes colonial unrest threatening the order and rationality of the imperial center, but the British butler neutralizes the threat with impeccable composure, thereby upholding 'dignity'" (128). In addition, Nalkara notes that the spatial distribution and function of the hall mirror the disciplinary mechanisms of a modern prison, and that Stevens lives within it like a "docile prisoner," passively subject to hierarchical control (64).

Overall, while existing research has focused on the symbolic meaning of material objects and the shaping of the butler image, it tends to serve broader thematic concerns such as "Britishness" or "colonial metaphors," and seldom provides a systematic analysis of how these objects dynamically contribute to the construction and eventual collapse of Stevens's identity. This paper will center on silverware and the physical environment of the butler's life, exploring how these objects evolve from "tools sustaining a professional myth" to "agents dismantling self-deception." In doing so, it aims to offer a more comprehensive portrait of the tragic dimensions of Stevens's character and a deeper understanding of the novel's central themes.

II. FROM RITUAL OBJECTS TO IMPERIAL SYMBOLISM — THE CONSTRUCTION OF PROFESSIONAL DIGNITY IN THE BUTLER FIGURE

2.1. The Sanctity of Silverware: Symbolizing Professional Dignity and Imperial Order

In Victorian Britain (1837–1901), silverware, as a central medium of material culture, embodied the complex interplay between social power and class identity. It reflected the "financial power and social status" of the upper class and becoming a "hierarchical representation catalogue" (Railey 69). In *The Remains of the Day*, silverware appears 25 times, and its symbolic weight far exceeds its practical use.

Polishing silverware, though simple in form, was of paramount importance. For Stevens's father, it was "his chief responsibility" and a source of pride (Ishiguro 73). Stevens himself treats this task with equal reverence, regarding the shine of silver as a direct reflection of his professional excellence. "A butler's duty is to provide the best possible service," he insists, "not to meddle in matters of national importance" (260). For him, the spotless silver signifies not only meticulous service, but more importantly, a disciplined sense of dignity. When asked, "What is dignity?", Stevens responds: "It's something to do with not removing one's clothes in public" (272). This seemingly trivial remark reveals a deeper ethic of self-discipline: emotional restraint, decorum, and "a certain noble reserve" (37). Silver becomes the physical embodiment of this restraint, a surface onto which he projects his obsession with perfection. As Davis observes, "He is obsessed with personal perfection" (24). Stevens polishes the silver "to a gleam" (181), not tolerating a single stain—each blemish a

metaphor for human emotion. As Liang writes, "His inner wall crumbling under the weight of humanity, his outer walls standing firm" (17). Stevens offers his entire being to the profession. "Any professional butler," he says, "must inhabit his role completely when in front of others" (218). Even as his father lay dying, Stevens continued serving Lord Darlington without interruption, viewing emotional deviation as a breach of professional dignity.

Silverware represents more than occupational pride—it mediates personal value. To Stevens, the shine of silver reflects not only his professionalism, but also the grandeur of Darlington Hall. He believes that serving a "great gentleman" is equivalent to "serving humanity" (154), and only "when his lordship's work was done" could he consider himself "a satisfied man" (224). He sees silverware as instrumental in enabling Lord Darlington's "global conferences" (283), and thereby as central to both men's fulfillment. As one guest remarks, the silverware was "a delight to the eye"—an aesthetic pleasure Stevens equates with historical contribution. "However small," he reflects, "one has made one's contribution to the course of history" (182). This inflated self-valuation reflects a blind loyalty to aristocratic hierarchy and an unequal master-servant dynamic.

2.2. The Pantry, Corridors, and Banquet Hall: Spatial Discipline and the Internalization of Hierarchy

"Space is political, ideological." (Lefebvre 46) At Darlington Hall, space—especially the banquet hall, pantry, and corridors—is saturated with hierarchical power relations. These spaces become tools of external discipline that shape Stevens's identity as a butler.

The pantry, Stevens's domain, is described by Miss Kenton as "cold and dark," "bare and colorless" (67), like a prison. In contrast with the sunny outdoors, this space is stark and lifeless. When Miss Kenton tries to decorate it with flowers, Stevens considers them "a distraction." The room reflects his inner world—rigid, restrained, and emotionally sterile. He isolates himself within this cold and joyless space as a constant reminder of professional discipline. His rejection of Miss Kenton's warmth suggests a deeper refusal to expose or share his emotional self. Stevens insists that "every object must be arranged exactly to my wishes—and stay that way" (213), signaling his resistance to change and deep anxiety about disorder. This spatial discipline mirrors his internal repression.

As Zhao notes, "spatial design is a means for the subject to constitute the other and for the other to be subjected" (9). The corridor and banquet hall starkly illustrate social hierarchy. Even on sunny days, the corridor "never gets any sunlight" and remains "dim and gloomy," whereas the banquet hall is lit by "a giant chandelier, soft and delicate" (129). This contrast in lighting reflects status distinctions: the banquet hall is the realm of lords, while the corridor is the servant's domain. Stevens moves through "dark corridors" (295), embodying his perceived inferiority. Darkness becomes a metaphor for his subservience—he exists in shadow to illuminate his masters. This spatial inequality is also visible in the quarters of Stevens's father, which Stevens describes as "cramped and stark," like "a prison cell" (84), where his father can't even straighten his back. By contrast, the banquet hall is "magnificent, full of distinguished guests" (129). Such contrast reveals the estate's internal hierarchy. For Stevens, the great house is "the hub around which the wheel of the world revolves" (152). Within this spatial structure, he devotes his life to noble service. "To have given one's best years in service to such a person," he says, "is a source of deep pride" (80). During dinners, he stands "far in the shadows from the table" (95), literally embodying the role of the invisible servant.

Ultimately, both silverware and space function as disciplinary instruments, shaping Stevens into a butler who lives only through duty and suppresses his humanity. The hierarchical order and internalized service ethic reflected in these objects mirror broader imperial ideologies, rendering Darlington Hall a microcosm of the British Empire.

III. OBJECT ALIENATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS — THE COLLAPSE OF THE BUTLER'S BELIEF SYSTEM

While the object constructs his professional identity, it also reveals the cracks in his humanity, foreshadowing the gradual disintegration of the dignity system he believes in. This identity crisis not only concerns the individual's inner self, but also implies the author's reflection on the decline of the British Empire and moral misalignment.

3.1. The Dissolution of Silverware's Value: From a Symbol of Dignity to Meaninglessness

Previously, we established silverware as the physical embodiment of Stevens's professional dignity and blind devotion. However, the object also comes to signify the hollowness of his beliefs.

On the third day of his journey, Stevens recalls visits to Darlington Hall by figures such as Lord Halifax and von Ribbentrop. He lingers over memories of silver polish brands and the shine of the cutlery, noting how the gleam left a strong impression on guests and, in his view, contributed to the "tenor" of political discussions. Yet he avoids mentioning the actual content of those meetings. Given the presence of Nazi officials and appeasement sympathizers, these "unofficial meetings" (177) were likely acts of collusion. As Liu observes, Stevens "like a submissive slave, obediently obeys his master's command" (23). In this light, silverware becomes complicit in moral failure. It is not just an emblem of service—it facilitates silence and participation in historical wrongdoing. Moreover, his focus on silver rather than substance suggests a psychological evasion. Even as Lord Darlington's moral fall becomes apparent, Stevens clings to material signifiers to avoid confronting the collapse of the ideals he has built his life upon, because that would mean the dissolution of the meaning of professional dignity he had been pursuing all along. By the sixth day, he finally acknowledges that his master "had been misguided," and questions: "What was the point in it all?"(316) This signals a gradual erosion of his inner defenses and an emerging awareness of his complicity.

Another scene that underscores the diminished symbolic power of silver involves Stevens's current employer, Mr. Farraday. While reading his newspaper, Farraday briefly glances at the silverware. Stevens, misreading the gesture, hastily replaces the silverware and feels deeply humiliated. In reality, Farraday—an American unfamiliar with British rituals—likely found nothing wrong. His words "Ah, Stevens" (*183*) was not an blame for dissatisfaction with the cleanliness of the silverware, but simple confusion and a little bit of blame for Stevens interrupting the newspaper. The moment exposes the growing disconnect between Stevens's world and a modern, post-imperial reality. What once represented prestige and self-worth is now outdated and irrelevant. The silver, once central to British etiquette, no longer commands respect in the eyes of newer elites.

3.2. The Double Deconstruction of Space: Emotional Awakening and Shifting Power

The spatial symbolism in the novel also unravels Stevens's image. One scene, deeply etched in his memory, features Miss Kenton crying in the corridor—"a feeling rising from deep inside me" (274), he recalls. On another occasion, hearing her weep behind a door, he pauses in the dark hallway, admitting, "At first, I was a little downcast" (296).

From this, it can be seen that Stevens had deep feelings for Miss Kenton. He did not show them on his face, but from the fact that he wanted to comfort the sad Miss Kenton and the special feelings in his heart that he was reluctant to admit, his cold and detached appearance was self-evident. He was very reluctant to let Miss Kenton go, so when she met her old acquaintance, Stevens stomped his feet "bang bang bang" in the kitchen, causing a huge commotion (279). His body couldn't deceive himself, although his words seemed indifferent. Just as he thought in his heart when he saw Miss Kenton for the last time: "--Why should I be so evasive anymore?" At that moment, my heart was broken. (10) In the end, Stevens still let down his psychological defense and admitted his love for Miss

Kenton, leaving behind endless regret and self-reproach.

In addition, the final destination of Darlington House was to be sold to an American merchant. The purpose of the American merchant in retaining the butler's status was merely to conform to the refined and experience the British style. The butler became a commodity and a symbol of status, which further demonstrated the emptiness of the butler's value.

These moments reveal the limits of Stevens's emotional repression. His cold, ordered exterior begins to fracture, exposing a man filled with regret, affection, and unresolved longing. The butler's crisis is not merely personal—it reflects the breakdown of a larger imperial ideal founded on service, discipline, and control.

IV. FROM BUTLER TO EMPIRE — THE IMPERIAL PREDICAMENT OF BUTLER NARRATIVE

4.1. The Butler Identity as a Metaphorical Isomorph of the British Empire

As the previous chapters have shown, objects such as silverware, corridors, and banquet halls not only construct the image of Stevens as a butler who suppresses his emotions and relentlessly pursues professional perfection, but also, through the destabilization of their symbolic meanings, gradually deconstruct the very dignity he strives to uphold. This process of identity collapse on an individual level mirrors the ideological structure, hierarchical order, and eventual decline of the British Empire itself.

Through the motif of silverware, Kazuo Ishiguro shapes Stevens as a figure who devotes himself entirely to professional service while neglecting the pleasures of life. His sense of self-worth is entirely derived from serving upper-class gentlemen, thereby rendering his identity wholly dependent on those with greater social power and higher status. This self-sacrificing obedience echoes the imperial ideology of Britain: to subsume its colonies into a grand system of power, disciplining and educating them into submission under a unified imperial vision. Stevens's blind loyalty functions as a metaphorical justification for imperial dominance. The novel's implicit deconstruction of this loyalty suggests that such a power structure is ultimately unsustainable and destined to collapse under the weight of historical change. The dignity that Stevens so persistently pursues mirrors the values Britain once imposed upon its colonies—values that are, in essence, built on self-deception and hollow ideology.

The spatial configuration and resource distribution within Darlington Hall similarly allude to imperial logic. The stark contrast between the simplicity of the pantry and the opulence of the banquet hall, or between the darkness of the corridor and the brilliance of crystal chandeliers, symbolizes the rigid division between social classes and the insurmountable barriers of identity. Such a highly stratified spatial structure reflects the unequal relationship between the imperial center and the colonial periphery, where wealth and power are centralized, and marginal individuals or nations are relegated to subservient roles. The series of "historic meetings" held within the estate function like imperial diplomatic conferences, orchestrated by dominant powers while silencing the voices of the oppressed.

As silverware becomes complicit in historical wrongdoing, corridors expose Stevens's hidden humanity, and Darlington Hall is eventually sold to an American owner, the meaning of Stevens's existence—once thought to be as a participant in "great history"—is reduced to being merely a symbol of his new employer's fascination with British traditions and customs (61). In this transformation, Stevens becomes an ornamental relic, commodified as a cultural curiosity. This shift not only implies the waning of British imperial discourse but also signals the failure of the old colonial order in the post-war global context. Stevens's desperate denial of having served Lord Darlington—an attempt to sever his professional dignity from its historical consequences—reveals a profound act of self-deconstruction. His identity crumbles alongside the empire he once served so faithfully.

4.2. From Individual to Nation: Possibilities of Reconstruction in the Postcolonial Era

In the novel' s final pages, Stevens begins to shed the hardened exterior he has long maintained. At the end of his journey, he acknowledges, "You've got to enjoy your evenings. They're the best part of the day" (316). Sitting on a bench and waiting for the pier lights to turn on, he tries to practice small talk with his new employer. This moment is rich in symbolism: while the old era has come to an end, the lights on the pier gesture toward an uncertain yet possible future.

This scene embodies not only the possibility of personal redemption but also the first step toward reconstructing identity. After the disintegration of the old hierarchical system and its associated values, Ishiguro leaves a glimmer of vitality within his protagonist. In this sense, *The Remains of the Day* is not entirely pessimistic. It implies that even after the collapse of imperial values, the individual may still have the capacity to reimagine the self and rebuild a meaningful life.

V. CONCLUSION

Through an analysis of the metaphors of silverware and space in the novel, this paper explores how these objects work together to construct—and simultaneously deconstruct—the image of a butler who suppresses his humanity in pursuit of extreme professional dignity. The hierarchical tensions and shifting values embedded in this figure reflect the underlying imperial ideology, revealing the author's contemplation of the uncertain future of a declining British Empire.

Through this novel, Kazuo Ishiguro offers a restrained yet incisive critique of the postcolonial identity crisis and the moral vacuum within British society. He refrains from prescribing a definitive new order, but through Stevens's awakening and belated self-reflection, he intimates that the true question worth asking in the wake of history and institutional collapse is not "Whom should I serve?" but rather "Who am I" and "How should I live".

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