



Memory as a Powerful Medium to Determine Identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract— Since memory has often been considered a site of nostalgia and resistance, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) by an acclaimed Japanese-British writer named Kazuo Ishiguro appears to be telling the tale of how memories of past determine a person's identity. The novel is set in England and the narrator is the quint-essential English Butler, Mr. Stevens who has given more than thirty years of his life to serve his English master, Lord Darlington at Darlington Hall. It is July 1956 and his present American master, Mr. Farraday wants him to go on a motoring trip for few days. Consequently, the butler decides to take a leisurely drive through the English countryside and it is during his trip, he realizes the futility of his life spent at Darlington Hall. Stevens, who had confined himself to the four walls and had always been pompous of his professional achievements, now realizes that he has achieved nothing in his life. It is pertinent to mention that though Stevens's master sends him on a trip to relieve him from his duty for a few days but he (the butler) fails to disassociate himself from the past and it is his journey into the past that uncovers various doubts about how his own life has been and how he has failed in building good human relationships. The present paper, therefore, is a deliberate attempt to bring to the forth the memory as a powerful medium to determine one's identity.



Keywords— Memory, Nostalgia, Resistance and Identity.

INTRODUCTION

"You can close your eyes to reality but not to memories."

Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

It has been universally acknowledged that though the human beings always aspire to look forward in life but their association with the past or the memories of the past is totally undeniable. Past or the memories, therefore, can never be defined as something that has merely passed and will never return. The memories are often considered the most unreliable and the most fragile; yet they are endowed with the capacity to affect an individual's life. It would not be improper to state that the memories are in constant relationship with the individuals' present as well as their future. *The Remains of the Day* (1989) by Kazuo Ishiguro

also brings to the forth how the fragile memories of past affect an English butler's life.

Born in Nagasaki, Japan on 8th November 1954, Kazuo Ishiguro has been widely recognized as a novelist and a scriptwriter. He began his literary career by contributing three short stories to an Anthology entitled *Introduction 7: Stories by New Writers* (1981). Thereafter begins the series of the novels that helped him gain an international acclaim and these include *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of The Day* (1989), *The Unconsoled* (1995), *When We Were Orphans* (2000), *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *The Buried Giant* (2015), *Klara and the Sun* (2021) etc. Ishiguro's genius earned him many awards and honours i.e Booker Prize for *The Remains of The Day* in 1989 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. He also received the

Knighthood in 2018 for his services to literature. As far as the writing style of Kazuo Ishiguro is concerned, he writes with utmost sincerity and his works often deal with the ideas of memory, guilt, trauma, shattered human relationships, self-deception, nothingness etc.

The Remains of the Day is Kazuo Ishiguro's third novel that won the Booker Prize in 1989 and the novel was also adapted into an award-winning film starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson in 1993. With *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro became one of the best-known European novelists at the mere age of 35 years. Unlike his first two novels that are set in Japan, the present novel is set in England. Salman Rushdie, an eminent Indian-British novelist has also put forward in an "Introduction" to the novel, "With *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro turned away from the Japanese settings of his first two novels and revealed that his sensibility was not rooted in any one place, but capable of travel and metamorphosis". It needs to be mentioned that though Japan has not been mentioned in the novel, it doesn't mean Ishiguro's love for his motherland has lessened. Japan, as he himself once remarked, is a land of imagination and speculation for him.

The very beginning of the novel takes the reader to Darlington Hall where the narrator, Mr. Stevens has been serving for more than thirty decades. Mr Stevens is a quint-essential English butler whose English master, Lord Darlington has passed away and he is now serving an American master, Mr Farraday. The year is 1956 and his present master wants him to take a break suggesting to go on a trip for few days. " 'I'm serious, Stevens. I really think you should take a break. I'll foot the bill for the gas. You fellows, you're always locked up in these big houses helping out, how do you ever get to see around this beautiful country of yours?' " (Ishiguro 5) However, it appears quite strange that Stevens, despite having lived in England for long, has never been out and confined himself to the walls of Darlington Hall. The following remark by the butler clearly demonstrates how he has limited his life to his service, " 'It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls.' " (Ishiguro 6). Agreeably, Stevens might have achieved a professional excellence but there is no denying that he has failed in his own life. Salman Rushdie again writes in the "Introduction" to the novel, "Stevens's greatest defeat is the consequence of his most profound conviction-that his master is working for the good of humanity, and that his own glory lies in serving him". It is only towards the end that he realizes the worthlessness of having lived such a life.

After having thought a number of times, Stevens finally made up his mind to go on a trip in Mr Farraday's Ford. Since he was driving alone, the memories of the past

continued to dawn upon him and he found himself unable to disconnect from the time spent at Darlington Hall.

What with Mrs Clements and the girls also gone for a week, I suppose I was very conscious of the fact that once I departed, Darlington Hall would stand empty for probably the first time this century-perhaps for the first time since the day it was built. It was an odd feeling and perhaps accounts for why I delayed my departure so long, wandering around the house many times over, checking one last time that all was in order. (Ishiguro 23)

However, there have been numerous other instances in the novel that reveal his incapacity to come out of Darlington Hall. Time and again, the butler seems to be recalling the times of his former employer, Lord Darlington and how he himself used to enjoy the servants' hall evenings. But Stevens, who has striven hard throughout his life for the professional excellence, now stands empty-handed. Stevens's cold exchange with his own father and his failure to reciprocate the love feelings of Miss Kenton, a former housekeeper at Darlington Hall clearly demonstrates how he has failed in building good relationships. While expressing his views about marriage, he had once remarked, "I have found such liaisons a serious threat to the order in a house" (Ishiguro 48). There needs to be quoted one more remark by him that reveals his indifference towards Miss Kenton's emotions; " 'Miss Kenton, I am very busy. I am surprised you have nothing better to do than stand in corridors all day.' " (Ishiguro 48). It is only during the trip, he realizes that he has achieved nothing in his life and calls himself foolish for not having seen the beauty around.

But I see I am becoming preoccupied with these memories and this is perhaps a little foolish. This present trip represents, after all, a rare opportunity for me to savour to the full the many splendours of the English countryside, and I know I shall greatly regret it later if I allow myself to become unduly diverted. (Ishiguro 62)

During the trip, Stevens wishes to visit Miss Kenton (who is now Mrs. Benn) and persuade her to return to Darlington Hall but his hopes come to nothing and he alone makes his way home. The man, who had always thought of himself 'a great butler' and had always believed that his greatness lies in serving his master, is now all

alone and is seen weeping before a stranger on the pier at Weymouth.

‘Lord Darlington wasn’t a bad man. He wasn’t a bad man at all....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?’ (Ishiguro 211)

It is apparent that the butler realizes that all the choices he made in his life were actually for nothing. What remains with him is his old age and that is probably the best part of his life.

CONCLUSION

Remarkably, the beauty of *The Remains of the Day* lies in author’s ability to portray the butler’s character through the medium of memory. One comes to know more about him through his memories and the present moment seems to have disappeared. It has also been rightly put forward, “Ishiguro’s novels are psychological mystery-voyages into the protagonist’s problematic or compromised past” (Shaffer 48). The memories of the past seem to be providing great comfort to the protagonist as “Memory is a means of overcoming the limitations of the human condition as it is understood in the contemporary culture, by making the past appear once again in the present, despite its temporal, and possibly spatial, distance” (Woods and Middleton 2). Stevens appears to be satisfying himself with all the work done for his master but, he is shattered from within.

It must be noteworthy that Mr Farraday’s proposal played a pivotal role in Mr Stevens’s enlightenment. Mr Stevens’s present visit to Salisbury, Somerset, Cornwall, Weymouth and many other places in England helped him re-visit his own past. However, Ishiguro’s butler turns into a metaphor representing all of us. There is always a need to understand that life is something more than “But oh no, there’s work, work and more work” (Ishiguro 206). The butler’s journey in the novel is also something more than a physical journey since it helps him introspect. Lawrence Durrell, a renowned British novelist has also said, “Travel can be one of the most rewarding forms of introspection” (Web). *The Remains of the Day*, therefore, is a beautiful saga of the protagonist’s meeting with himself where the journey into the past plays a significant role. The memories of the past, though unreliable, do determine one’s identity.

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