

## ***THE REMAINS OF THE DAY: A HARSH REALISTIC NOVEL OR A HARSH IRONIC NOVEL?***

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### **Abstract:**

Today, England is a face of multiculturalism. This new face of England is a result of various English novels published by writers with non-British origins. In this context, the myth of hegemonies England has been presented by Ishiguro in his Booker Prize winner novel *The Remains of the Day*. This novel speaks of professionalism of a butler, Mr. Stevens, in a very traditional sense. The inner conflict of Mr. Stevens as well as his confrontation with his surroundings between WW-I and WW-II has been given prominent voice. The novel takes a detour of Mr. Stevens' life in flashback and presents to us the ironies and clashes of a professional life. There are some instances under which we can receive this novel as ironic or harsh. The message of the novel goes like this: be less bent on your dignity/values; be less false to yourself and to others; be less restrained and less controlled.

**Keywords:** Irony, Multiculturalism, Professional values, Myth, Hegemony

Kazuo Ishiguro, the Nobel Prize winner, in an interview with Cynthia F. Wong made a claim that England had to make up multiculturalism. It is a term to be best understood not as a combination of different nations but as a combination of different groups within England, with different orientations what English literature was becoming then. It was England where he produced his first two novels whose settings are essentially Japanese.

By 1980 England developed a new climate within which 'other writers' could write and publish a novel in English about other culture in the foreign way and still be accepted. England started showing a greater deal of interest in those writers who wrote books with different settings. Ishiguro tends to think that if he did not have a Japanese name and if he had not written books set in Japan it would have taken longer years to get the attention which he had already received.

He wrote his novels in English. But, we must keep in mind that he was born in Nagasaki in 1952 and migrated to England with his parents in 1960. By the end of the 70s,

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he was included in the original 'Best of Young British Novelists'. In 1980, he completed his M. A. in Creative Writing from University of East Anglia. By that time, he had already published three stories and had got a contract of a novel which he produced in 1982 as *A Pale View of Hills*. In 1986, he published his second novel *An Artist of the Floating World*. But, it was 1989 that he won the Booker Award for his bestseller *The Remains of the Day*. His first two novels examined Japanese culture from the western point of view. In *The Remains of the Day* he shifts his focus to the England post World War I. His fourth novel *The Unconsoled* (1995), he cites the focus on some unreal city in Central Europe with English characters. His other novels *When We Were Orphans* (2000), *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and *The Buried Giant* (2015) have all displayed the nature of the changing world and the changing tone of narrative.

One of the difficulties in decoding Ishiguro's narratives is to come to the terms with the peculiar characters that he produces. Ishiguro himself is committed to one mode of telling the tales as the story of isolated characters. These characters are self-delusional. They seek some kind of relief in an imagined situation but, in reality, there is no such imagined situation. On the other hand, his novels are based on historical facts with a unique and finely crafted first-person narrative.

'To rediscover the British novels' a whole lot of new publishers with a whole lot of new writers emerged in the late 70s and early 80s. In those times, Britain was becoming an international face precisely because it had got a new cosmopolitan society. In the beginning of the 80s, England became a part of the international design but within the context of a whole international scene. The early 80s were marked with a sudden interest in literature particularly in foreign writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Milan Kundera, Mario Vargas Llosa etc. At that time, many British novelists, who all had a kind of racial background, started dealing with the international themes. There was an atmosphere where people were looking for exotic young writers having an international flavour. Even the general British were contracting themselves because of the fear of losing the province. Still within the designs of a large group, Ishiguro cannot be put in any particular group.

Even if we try pinning him in any group, he can best be put in the group that of Timothy Mo and Salman Rushdie, not because of any literary reasons but for his transculturalism. The thing which is similar among them is only that Britain is no longer a centre of the universe or large empire. For a long time in history, it was supposed that one could write about British life and issues which would be automatically seen as things of global significance. But, they did not think of differences as valid cultures, they did not think of the interest of people outside of England, but what by definition a thing of international interest.

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It is the delusion that the character discovers something as memory and yet that can be an unreliable thing. The memory is disturbing in the struggle for a correspondence. There are memories but there is no correspondence to that memory. Finally, they struggle for the experience acquired recently without the sweet resemblance with the memory. The characters are struggling to recall what they might have felt or experienced in a particular tumultuous period. The character has a memory but that memory, today, is unable to present the same experience. The characters, then, are encroached with the flawed memory. And, that memory can be stated in the case of Mr. Stevens in the novel *The Remains of the Day*. Ishiguro's memory becomes a horrible one. In that way, the narrative is an attempt, at once or simultaneously, to remember and to distance from the memory of the past.

It is then that Ishiguro's novel begins dealing with this divide whether it is between individuals or nationals. All of his novels have narrators who structure their tales according to describe historical events.

The narrative unfolds the text. And, in that process, the narrator appears closer at uncovering missing truth about that particular period in the past. It is subjective in its narration. The missing version is not just an addition to the lost history. Then, the movement towards the discloser indicates some secrets to be revealed about the narrator's past guilt or embarrassment or disgrace. The narrator discovers that particular moment of glorification that he considered himself valuable to his master and that he believed that the Butler system is a conventional system. He produces a butler in such a time when there it must be possible to discover that disgrace which Stevens had undergone. And, this cannot be achieved in history by any means.

*The Remains of the Day* is a topical index of all the features of the narrative system. It is written in first person narrative. Then, there is a missing link and that missing link creates a pang of past guilt or a personal embarrassment or a disgrace. Mr. Stevens is a 'picture perfect English Butler'. All his life is sought to embody the ideal of this profession—loyalty. He is the narrator of his own story with a unique tone that of a monotonous and anxious butler type of story telling. Still, that particular style is contagious or inspiring. The whole story is set in the 1950s at the terminal point of British imperialism and also people's faith in leaders. Although he now has a new master in Mr. Faraday, he is still living in the past and recalls his old master Mr. Darlington. The narrative reveals the venerable society which is based on the traditional hierarchies of faith. He is absolutely trying to capturing the voice of the middle-aged butler in the summer of 1956 as well as reflecting on the time that he has had at his disposal. Ishiguro, through Mr. Stevens, does it in four layers of the novel—his birth (1954); period of writing the novel (1987-1989); novel's setting (1956); and narrator's attitude and voice (1920-1930). While corroborating the four layers, Ishiguro has become as English as Mr. Stevens.

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Then, what is that which remains? The remains are twofold. First, all the references those point toward Stevens' past. Secondly, it refers to the twilight of the British imperialism. Imperialist Britain has virtually become a mythical landscape which is now working only at a metaphorical level. The problem of Ishiguro as a writer is to see how to make a particular setting actually take off into the realm of metaphor (1950s-1960s) so that people do not get the feeling that it is just about England. This is done in non-fiction with the help of pieces of evidence and arguments. Here, it is done through emotional manipulation. This novel actually reworks a particular myth about a certain kind of England. Gunter Grass' England is based on the stereotypical images. The images of England, of Gunter Grass and those of Kazuo Ishiguro, when compared often produce a vivid distinction between the ages.

The myth of England was harmless but it was also used as a political myth. In the novel, Mr. Stevens—as a character—is a symbol of that particular myth which might not have existed. But, here we are not branding him as a true representative of that myth. The myth will be a thing of a past. It is impossible to express this type of narrative without irony being involved in the 'past'. This is a novel which brings out several ironies. It exposes assumptions about class, correct behaviour and right kind of people.

It expresses these ironies through the narrative of the protagonist himself who locates himself not in the past but in the present. It means, then, that this expression depends heavily to a single character to blindly reveal in it's own sensibility. And, then the narrative goes through infighting experiences like nostalgia, regrets etc. Ishiguro is reworking with the ideas of false control and self-deception. The entire novel is treated as an imitation of a myth. Ishiguro says:

“It is like a pastiche where I have tried to create a mythical England. Sometimes it looks like or has the tone of a very English book, but actually, I'm using that as a kind of shock tactic: this relatively young person with a Japanese name and a Japanese face who produces this extra-English novel or, perhaps I should say a super-English novel. It is more English than English.”

(Brian W. Shaffer and Cynthia F. Wong, 2008)

Ishiguro calls himself a pastiche. The England which he narrates is not an England which he believes to have existed.

This novel is not an attempt to reproduce some accurate past. This novel is just not a book about butler living in the 1930s. Instead, it is an attempt to rework on a myth about England. Hermione Lee writes extensively about *The Remains of the Day* in one of her very critical articles “Quiet Desolation” (1990). She says, “...the novel is an extraordinary act of mimicry, [it is] an impeccably professional miming of the thoughts of an impeccable

professional.” One can view the novel as a big performance which Ishiguro performs with the help of Mr. Stevens. Ishiguro employs an effortless reproductive art of the timber and tenor of ‘butlerspeak’. He has produced a mime of mimes. So then, if it is a performance, what does Mr. Stevens perform? He performs loyalty, devotion, propriety and pride in his profession. After going through various phases and patches all in his mind, he decides that loyalty has the dignity that his profession achieves.

The greatness of his profession consists not just some of the unflawed professional excellence but of three deeper qualities—“dignity, either inherited or acquired by years of self training or by care absorbing of experience”; “you should be a great gentleman because you will be serving nation”; and “the total ‘inhibiting’ of the role i.e. it is a professional being to be worn like a suit of cloth and not just like a façade or mask”. Mr. Stevens sacrifices to his profession not only the Fillian affection but also he sacrifices his own happiness in order to be a perfect butler.

Stevens gets obsessed and passionate about Miss Kenton but he doesn't reveal or even show it. The articulation of passion is the speculation or the theme/frame of the novel. The extraordinary ‘objectivity’ is carefully obsessed by the extraordinary ‘subjectivity’ and is shown by the characteristics of Mr. Stevens. Mr. Stevens' character is like the one that of constantly posing although the novel. Here, he knows ‘what is what?’, but he pretends not to know ‘what is what?’ In that way, he pretends to be mistaken by Miss Kenton's weeping:

“One memory in particular has preoccupied me all morning – or rather, a fragment of a memory, a moment that has for some reason remained with me vividly through the years. It is a recollection of standing alone in the back corridor before the closed door of Miss Kenton's Parlour; I was not actually facing the door, but standing with my person half turned towards it, transfixed by indecision as to whether or not I should knock; for at that moment, as I recall, I had been struck by the conviction that behind that very door, just a few yards from me, Miss Kenton was in fact crying. As I say, this moment has remained firmly embedded in my mind, as has the memory of the peculiar sensation I felt rising within me as I stood there like that.”

(Kazuo Ishiguro, 1989)

For him, what matters is Lord Darlington. Mr. Stevens pretends to Lord Darlington as the most distinguished employer, who is an eminent figure in English politics. Mr. Stevens is fully convinced that arranging parties is like doing something for the country. In the end, when Lord Darlington is dying broken hearted and discredited he is very much loyal to him in spite of knowing all the facts. The worth of his character is in his misunderstanding utopian eloquence in his character. Mr. Farrade is known for his genial style and he is more diplomatic. The takeover of the Darlington Hall is actually a move in the direction of democracy i.e., the Nazi ‘discipline’ has to disappear.

Then what is so funny and so serious, simultaneously, a question in the novel that what 'makes' a good butler? It becomes a question which is put at the centre of the contemporary butler:

"It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of. Continentals – and by and large the Celts, as you will no doubt agree – are as a rule unable to control themselves in moment of strong emotion, and are thus unable to maintain a professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations. If I may return to my earlier metaphor – you will excuse my putting it so coarsely – they are like a man who will, at the slightest provocation, tear off his suit and shirt and run about screaming."

(Kazuo Ishiguro, 1989)

But, even by taking this point to say that this novel is a book that is about a certain historical period of England or it is about the fall of British Empire can be dangerous in order to merely understand a particular past. Ishiguro is not disturbed by such juxtaposing subjectivity. Ishiguro is disturbed by those comments that the readers make about it as pastiche and for not taking it in a metaphorical role. It is not just a book about a butler living in the 1930s. It appears too realistic for the story. However, its metaphorical level always goes unnoticed. And, the metaphor goes unnoticed because the specialist reader actually comes from the society where the novel superficially resembles to.

The debate on the novel also hovers over the allegories. Not allegories as a literary term but allegories as a common understanding of the common readers. But, if this novel is to be understood as a metaphorical novel and then allegorical, then the novel becomes analysis of 'ordinary' people and their political analysis. Mr. Stevens is someone who desperately wants to contribute to something larger, a fear which haunts us as to remain unfulfilled. This makes Mr. Stevens' character a little positive because he at least wants to contribute something to all those small questions. This comes out of some anxiety. But then, Mr. Stevens knows that he is merely a butler and he thinks that the only way in which he could contribute is only by serving to a great man. His sense of self respect is drawn from an idea that he is serving a great man and he is anxious to know whether or not he is able to make the desired contribution and that his previous contribution was used properly:

"...And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. 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?"

(Kazuo Ishiguro, 1989)

So, in the end he has that pain of not contributing enough but he hides that.

If Mr. Stevens were someone who does not care at all as to how his contribution was being used he would end up a broken man in the end. He always urges to do things 'perfectly' but then that perfect contribution should be used to improve the humanity. But, the problem is he does not have a great understanding of the severity of the situation. His life is spoilt because he does not have an extraordinary insight into life. The problem in Ishiguro's novel is that the ordinary hero gets involved in a political arena even in a small way. Butler is a mere metaphor. Mr. Stevens has myopia that he does not give a thought. For Mr. Stevens, this myopia is the duty. For him, everything is good in the allegiance to the master. The central thing for Mr. Stevens is duty and everything is blinded for this duty consciousness. His blindness can also be taken as a metaphor for England's own blindness for its own national character and destiny. Mr. Stevens is proud of the contribution he made but we gradually discover the nature of what he was contributing to. He actually fails to discover the nature of true service. So, we must drastically re-evaluate his service.

These are some instances under which we can take this novel ironic but not harsh. The message of the novel goes like this: be less bent on your dignity/values; be less false to yourself and to others; be less restrained and less controlled.

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