

A Political and Social Analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains Of The Day

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Abstract - Remains of the Day was a post World War I book written by Kazuo Ishiguro. Kazuo Ishiguro is an English writer with a Japanese origin. Since both of his parents are Japanese, they had kept him well versed in the Japanese ethos and culture. Because of him having this diverse cultural background, we see that Kazuo has made this fictional world where the characters possess immaculate depths, making the book that much more special. Stevens's narrative in the book is rife with contradictions and a careful analysis gives us invaluable insights into his mentality. All of this only makes the characters of Ishiguro more relatable. It is this reliability which has led to the book Remains of the Day being as successful. This kind of shift in the contemporary literature is transformational in terms of the vernacular and writing style employed in these books, which make them accessible to the common man.

Keywords - Kazuo Ishiguro; Remains Of The Day; Literature; Japanese.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Remains of the Day is a first-person narration by Stevens, an English butler, who has worked at Darlington Hall for 34 years. The house has now come under the ownership of an American gentleman who urges Stevens to take a road trip. Casual conversation with his new employer, which Stevens terms as "bantering", is a skill he wants to improve at.

The story comprises of Stevens's reflections on his work as a butler in the aftermath of the World War I, and during and just after World War II. It is gradually revealed—largely through other characters' interactions—that Lord Darlington, due to his naivety, sympathized with the Nazis. Stevens maintains that Lord Darlington was a good man, and that his reputation has been damaged simply because of this misunderstanding.

The main purpose of his trip is to visit Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper of Darlington Hall who left twenty years earlier to get married. Stevens has received a letter

from Miss Kenton, and believes that it hints towards a desire to return as the housekeeper.

Stevens's most notable relationship is with Miss Kenton for whom he seems to have repressed romantic feelings. At the end of the novel, Miss Kenton expresses her regrets towards leaving, something which makes Stevens extremely upset.

This is a story primarily about regret: throughout his life, Stevens puts his absolute trust and devotion in a man who makes drastic mistakes. His facade of formality cuts him off from every other relationship thereby leaving him desolate in the end.

We will now begin to analyze the themes (in no particular order of importance) providing proper socio-political context, wherever needed. We get most of this information through Stevens's musings and reflections, as he continues his journey through the England countryside.

II. SHIFT IN POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES

Even today, we have debates about the merits and demerits of democracy over other forms of government, debate over action and the like. One important parameter then becomes comparing the stability of previous different forms of regimes. Before World War II, we see a similar kind of confusion in people, wherein there were some really strong advocates against democracy amongst the aristocracy, who lamented the system's inherently inefficient nature. This was further strengthened by the fact that the working class, to some extent, were indifferent to the idea of having opinions on government policies and the rise of powerful dictatorships during that time, including the Germans, Italians and the Austro - Hungarian empire. There was this curiosity among the populace as in to what were the forms of government in countries such as Italy and Germany which had led them to the path of prosperity and made Britain stagnant in terms of economic growth. However, as the truth of the World War II sunk in, it made people realise the value of freedom which they had in the Allied world but wouldn't have been possible pretty much everywhere on the planet. The atrocities in the Nazi era could never be repeated simply because in a democratic system, the government valued all citizens. It's about the kind of association which people felt with their country England, that kind of association wouldn't have been there anywhere else. We demonstrate this through Steven's own mentality (Conservative, and to a large extent a reflection of that of Lord Darlington), as well as his interactions with other people during his road trip (Post War), wherein he questions his beliefs as to whether common people having opinions really help the world.

- ❖ "Mind you," put in Mr Harry Smith, "with all respect for what you say, sir, it ought to be said. Dignity's something every man and woman in this country can strive for and get. That's what we fought Hitler for, after all. There's no dignity to be had in being a slave. That's what we fought for and that's what we won. We won the right to be free citizens. And it's one of the privileges of being born English that no matter who you are, no matter if you're rich or poor, you're born free and you're born so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out. (Post War)
- ❖ Stevens himself believes "There is, after all, a real limit to how much ordinary people can learn and know, and to demand that each and everyone of

them contribute 'strong opinions' to the great debates of the nation cannot, surely, be wise. It is, in any case, absurd that anyone should presume to define a person's 'dignity' in these terms". This idea was somewhat strengthened and to some extent drilled into him, by Lord Darlington who himself believed in these ideas "Democracy is something for a bygone era. The world's far too complicated a place now for universal suffrage and such like. For endless members of parliament debating things to a standstill, we need something different moving forward, like Germany and Italy." (Pre War)

III. PERSPECTIVE INTO THE SECOND WORLD WAR (GERMANY AFFINITY)

We see Lord Darlington as a symbol of confusion representing a subsection of the mass populace at that time, including that of the German society. In the story, we see that Lord Darlington had not been initially so preoccupied with the peace treaty when it was drawn up at the end of the Great War, and I think it is fair to say that his interest was prompted not so much by an analysis of the treaty, but by his friendship with Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann and the tragic circumstances of his death. Consequently, we see glimpses of Mr. Darlington working hard, with a sense of remorse, to try to influence dignitaries from all over the world, to make them recognize the injustice being imposed on the German common public by virtue of the utterly humiliating nature of the treaty.

This sympathy, on the part of Lord Darlington continued through the years, and through Steven's remembrings of the past, we see him as a figure trying to promote peaceful relations between Britain and the new German regime under Hitler. There's also a subtext that he, like many other people of that time, had been fooled by the German propaganda.

- ❖ "Over the last few years, his lordship has probably been the single most useful pawn Herr Hitler has had in this country for his propaganda tricks. All the better because he's sincere and honourable and doesn't recognize the true nature of what he's doing. During the last three years alone, his lordship has been crucially instrumental in establishing links between Berlin and over sixty of the most influential citizens of this country. His lordship has been trying to persuade the Prime Minister himself to accept an invitation to visit Herr Hitler. He really believes there's a terrible misunderstanding on the Prime Minister's part

concerning the present German regime."Stevens's says "I cannot see what there is to object to in that, sir. His lordship has always striven to aid better understanding between nations."

IV. RELATIONSHIP WITH MISS KENTON

This is one of the most interesting aspects of the story and the reason it merits its own analysis is because of the importance that this relationship bores in Mr. Steven's life, however seemingly platonic. Mr. Stevens is a confused personality, struggling to understand Miss Kenton's attempts at intimacy, or deal with his own feelings in a normal humane manner. We see instances of this when he refuses to let Miss Kenton into his personal space, despite her repeated attempts and fails to demonstrate his empathy at the unjust dismissal of the Jew girls, leaving Miss Kenton desolate. Stevens ,through his misguided sense of professionalism, is cut off from any possibility of a meaningful relationship. For example, in his awkwardness, he couldn't express his condolences to her when her aunt died, but rather ended up pointing out flaws in her work. He utterly ignores her when she tells him her decision to leave and get married (in order to finally get his attention, wanting him to stop her and express something), treating her like a mere replaceable object in his life.

But Stevens ends up betraying his feelings for Miss Kenton, which are underlying in his enthusiasm to bring her back to Darlington Hall, and outright, when he confesses that his heart was breaking for what could have been.

- ❖ I paused in the dimness of the corridor, the tray in my hands, an ever-growing conviction mounting within me that just a few yards away, on the other side of that door, Miss Kenton was at that moment crying. I do not know how long I remained standing there; at the time it seemed a significant period. But I left, for of course, I was required to hurry upstairs to serve some of the most distinguished gentlemen of the land and I cannot imagine I would have delayed unduly.
- ❖ "Do you realize, Mr Stevens, how much it would have meant to me if you had thought to share your feelings last year? You knew how upset I was when my girls were dismissed. Do you realize how much it would have helped me? Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend?"
- ❖ When I left Darlington Hall all those years ago, I never realized I was really, truly leaving. I believe I thought of it as simply another ruse, Mr Stevens, to

annoy you. There are occasions now and then - extremely desolate occasions - when you think to yourself: 'What a terrible mistake I've made with my life.' For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr Stevens". Stevens admits that their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. "Indeed - why should I not admit it? - at that moment, my heart was breaking".

V. ESTATE STRUCTURE DECLINE

With the changing tides of time, the entire structure of the English stately homes, built on the ideas of feudalism, slowly went into decline. These changes firmly crystallized during the World Wars, when incomes from agriculture fell, and more and more people started leaving for jobs in towns and factories. As a result, it became difficult for the owners to support their luxurious pre-war lifestyles with an army of servants and they increasingly started cutting down on their staffs, eventually selling off the properties to foreign investors, often Americans. We see that here when the new owner Mr. Faraday comes in to buy the Darlington family estate, and as Steven's reveals, the staff having been cut down to a skeletal staff of four, and his fears regarding the daunting prospect of managing as a butler under the new system.

- ❖ What had occurred was this. Once the transactions were over - transactions which had taken this house out of the hands of the Darlington family after two centuries by Mr Farraday. This 'staff' he referred to was, of course, nothing more than the skeleton team of six kept on by Lord Darlington's relatives to administer to the house up to and throughout the transactions.
- ❖ Recalling a time when I had had a staff of seven teen under me, and knowing how not so long ago a staff of twenty-eight.

VI. LANGUAGE OF SELF DECEPTION BY STEVENS

The central idea which we want to present here is that of the fact that Mr. Stevens is an individual who has somewhat of an escapist nature and does not want to confront any realities if they challenge his pre-existing notions or make him deal with harsh situations. As a result, his narrative becomes somewhat contradictory in itself, where he wants us to believe the narrative he has taught himself to believe, but his subconscious mind, through his other narrations as well as the situation and the people around him, betray the truth. We see such contradictions rife throughout the

narrative, some instances being like his emotions for Miss Kenton, his state of mind on the day of his father's death when he pretends to not care and simply go about his duty in a dignified manner but Darlington keeps on asking him if he's crying and feeling alright, or his general perception of Lord Darlington when he wants us to believe his goody-goody idea of the man but consciously avoids any association with the man on account of dealing with any unpleasantness or his own views that common people needn't have opinions and yet the butlers should be judge of their owners self worth. Following are a few evidences to support this :

- ❖ Despite being a stickler for professionalism, he called Miss Kenton by her maiden name, refusing to acknowledge her marriage and inwardly revelling at the fact that her marriage is coming to an end.
- ❖ Lord Darlington - Stevens tells the reader about his Anti Semitic actions in dismissing Jew maids from the household, speaking out in favor of fascist dictatorship regimes including Germany and Italy and his actions, despite repeated warnings from people close to him, thus inevitably painting him a traitor in our minds. He then carefully avoids any association with the man. "You mean you actually used to work for that Lord Darlington?" He was eyeing me carefully again. I said: "Oh no, I am employed by Mr John Farraday, the American gentleman who bought the house from the Darlington family." With Mrs Wakefield, when she said "But tell me, Stevens, what was this Lord Darlington like? Presumably you must have worked for him." "I didn't, madam, no.
- ❖ I think it fair to say, professional prestige lay most significantly in the moral worth of one's employer.(But he rejects the idea of the importance of one's own opinions as dignity).

VII. DIGNITY, LOYALTY AND GREATNESS

It is things like dignity and loyalty which it appears matters the most to Mr. Stevens in order to be the best butler he aspires to be. His idea of dignity was inspired by that of his father's story about a butler's behaviour when he discovered a tiger in the dining room. His entire perception of greatness revolves around the opinion that the greatness of the butler lies in the moral worth of his employer and his influence on the world, for that ensures the butler, through

his actions, has made a mark. There are various instances in the book when we see that Mr. Stevens justifies his behaviour to others due to the fact that he is bound by duty and professional activities. But to the reader, this seems like a misguided pursuit on numerous occasions, when we see blatant undignified actions on his part.

- ❖ Steven's doesn't afford to his father the proper dignity while reducing his workload, damaging his self esteem to maintain his own professionalism. "The fact is, Father has become increasingly infirm. So much so that even the duties of an under-butler are now beyond his capabilities. While Father is allowed to continue with his present round of duties, he represents an ever-present threat to the smooth running of this household, and in particular to next week's important international gathering."
- ❖ He doesn't afford dignity to his father in death by reassuring him that his life was as fulfilling as it could be and instead in his own selfishness to avoid dealing with his father's illness, lets him believe that he was a bad father. Then he said slowly: "I hope I've been a good father to you." I laughed a little and said: "I'm so glad you're feeling better now." "I'm proud of you. A good son. I hope I've been a good father to you. I suppose I Haven't." "I'm afraid we're extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning."
- ❖ He refuses to challenge his employer on his outrightly unjust actions, accepting his immoral master for the sake of dignity "Miss Kenton, I am surprised to find you reacting in this manner. Surely I don't have to remind you that our professional duty is not to our own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of our employer."
- ❖ In the end, he concedes that he has been unable to attain all that he ever strived for. He reflects "His lordship was a courageous man. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, 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?"

VIII. REPRESSED EMOTIONS

Again, this theme is one of the most recurring ones, where one can't help but recall a popular line of lyrics from a famous English song by Pink Floyd "Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way". Each of Steven's journal entry becomes a mannered exercise in avoidance and projection. When Stevens reaches a sensitive subject – such as whether Miss Kenton was driven away by his refusal to admit his feelings for her – he veers off into self-protective shell, carrying on for pages before he feels able to continue.

We get a picture of a man trying desperately to keep a lid on his emotions. In the end, after four decades of repression wherein he lost his father, his professional satisfaction and most importantly, the potential love of his life, he finally gives into his feelings. You want to give him a hug, except he'd be outraged. In the following excerpts, you see clear evidences of his feelings for the important people in his life and yet his clear inability to express them until it was too late.

- ❖ Indeed, I recall that shortly after Miss Kenton's departure to Cornwall in 1936, I would often glance through Volume III of Mrs Symons's work. It was thus that I had been able to gain some sense of the sort of place Miss Kenton had gone to live her married life.
- ❖ I say, Stevens, are you sure you're all right there?" "It seems as if you're crying" "Miss Kenton, please don't think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition just at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now."
- ❖ "Do you realize, Mr Stevens, how much it would have meant to me if you had thought to share your feelings last year? You knew how upset I was when my girls were dismissed. Do you realize how much it would have helped me? Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to pretend?"
- ❖ Indeed, it was not impossible that Miss Kenton, at that very moment, and only a few feet from me, was actually crying. The thought provoked a strange feeling to rise within me, causing me to stand there hovering in the corridor for some moments. But eventually I judged it best to await another opportunity to express my sympathy and went on my way.
- ❖ Moreover, as you might appreciate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain

degree of sorrow within me. Indeed - why should I not admit it? - at that moment, my heart was breaking.

- ❖ "The fact is, of course," I said after a while, "I gave my best to Lord Darlington. I gave him the very best I had to give, and now - well - I find I do not have a great deal more left to give. 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?"

IX. BRITISH SENSE OF SUPERIORITY

The British have always seemed possessed a sense of superiority about their ways, in terms of their culture, people and general ways of life. Even today, one of the best examples of this is their perception of EPL(English Premier League). The war was an interesting time where much such perceptions were undergoing rapid changes, wherein people realized that with the emergence of new powers, like America and the Soviet Union, and various colonies seeking independence, that the British Empire was no longer the powerful force it used to be. This was evident, with the decline of the class structure and yet many conservatives, including to some extent Mr. Stevens, refused to let go of this idea. We see Mr. Stevens speak condescendingly about his American employer where he, implicitly, resents this American invasion of traditional British culture. It was also evident in Lord Darlington's conversations, as recalled by Stevens.

- ❖ As you might expect, I did not take Mr Faraday's suggestion at all seriously that afternoon, regarding it as just another instance of an American gentleman's unfamiliarity with what was and what was not commonly done in England.
- ❖ "My, my, Stevens. A lady-friend. And at your age." This was a most embarrassing situation, one in which Lord Darlington would never have placed an employee. But then I do not mean to imply anything derogatory about Mr Farraday; he is, after all, an American gentleman and his ways are often very different.
- ❖ I recall also some years ago, Mr Rayne, who travelled to America as valet to Sir Reginald Mauvis, remarking that a taxi driver in New York regularly addressed his fare in a manner which if repeated in London would end in some sort of

fracas, if not in the fellow being frogmarched to the nearest police station.

- ❖ The English landscape at its finest - such as I saw it this morning - possesses a quality that the landscapes of other nations, however more superficially dramatic, inevitably fail to possess. It is, I believe, a quality that will mark out the English landscape to any objective observer as the most deeply satisfying in the world, and this quality is probably best summed up by the term 'greatness'. I would say that it is the very lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint. In comparison, the sorts of sights offered in such places as Africa and America, though undoubtedly very exciting, would, I am sure, strike the objective viewer as inferior on account of their unseemly demonstrativeness.
- ❖ 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 the emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of.
- ❖ I was jolly well tempted to tell him it's those wretched Frenchmen. It's not the English way of carrying on. (Regarding the treaty of Versailles)

Before we go on to the last paragraph, we have here given a small analysis on the possible role of the implied readers. In "unreliable narration" the narrator's account is at odds with what the implied reader's surmises about the story's real intentions. The story undermines the discourse. We conclude, by reading between the lines, that the narrative that the narrator is trying to portray doesn't tell the whole story. The implied reader needs to sense a discrepancy between a reasonable reconstruction of the story and the narrator's account. Along with this, we also sense that the narrator is unwittingly portraying to us this skewed narrative, simply because of the fact that the narrator in himself unable to deal with his own feelings. He, therefore, builds his own narrative around an easier truth. This adds an extra dimension of complexity and intrigue to the novel. There are a number of signs which are fairly easy for the reader to pick up on. Stevens often betrays his own unreliability by not following up his words with matching actions. He claims to be proud to have worked for Lord Darlington, for instance, but whenever someone asks him

about his former employer, he denies to have worked for him. Another similar incident occurs, when Miss Kenton enters his pantry and catches him reading a sentimental book. At first Stevens says: "I was not in fact engaged in professional matters", but later he claims to have read the book mostly because of the "professional desirability of good accent and command of language" which he wanted to improve. We see that the narrator wants to remain in his echo chamber and thus does keep repeating stuff even though it would be glaringly wrong.

One of the things that makes this book special is that this book too can have allegorical interpretations and thus it is upto the reader to weave around the story which he would want to weave.

Below we have one of the many interpretations where people symbolise much more than a single person.

Stevens (butler)--> Japanese population

Kenton --> China

Darlington --> Formal military government of Japan

Farraday --> America

Ishiguro, in this allegorical reading, is dissecting the character of the Japanese people, who have dignity, restraint, social order, and even a certain pride of place, but this came at the cost of them being questioned about their humanity. Like Stevens, by putting duty and obedience as a primary value, the Japanese are often mistaken for even higher than their supposed status-- ordinary people might mistake them for one of the aristocrats of the world. But like Stevens, it came at the cost of supporting the Nazis, and now Japan has entered the evening of its history, during which time all it can do is ponder its significance to the world.

In a nutshell, *Remains of the Day* is a book that makes people reflect on their past. This book breaks hearts when in the conclusive parts we see Mr. Stevens accept that he is all alone today and his life has been a waste. However, we get a renewed sense of hope looking to our future as Mr Stevens does when he hopes to adopt a more positive outlook and tries to make the best of what remains of his day.