

Memory as a Recurring Theme in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Explaining the importance of memory and its imperative connections to identity Janet Feigenbaum opines without memory we would have no goals or direction, no ability to plan a course of action and no concept of ourselves in relation to the world. Our capacity to learn from mistakes and to change and grow as individuals depends on our memories.

Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the most talented and renowned writers of contemporary era. He has created many best-selling works that receive constant admiration from both academics and critics. Born in Nagasaki, Japan and brought up in England, Ishiguro's novels are written in a prolonged humanistic tradition. He moved to England at the age of five and became a post graduate in English Literature and creative writing. Granta Magazine included him twice in 'Best of Young British Novelists' list. A pale view of hills was his first novel which brought him great admiration and success but his Booker winning novel *The Remains of the Day* published in 1989 took him to the pinnacle of success. This modern classic was also adopted into a film which was an Oscar-winning blockbuster.

It is not an exaggeration to say that Ishiguro is a writer of memory and loss because these are the central themes of most of his novels. James Procter also admits this saying, "Ishiguro's novels are preoccupied by memories, their potential to digress and distort, to forget and to silence, and above all to haunt. The protagonists of his fiction seek to overcome loss (the personal loss of family members and lovers; losses resulting from war) by making sense of the past through acts of remembrance."

This research paper is an attempt to highlight how memory plays an important role in *The Remains of the Day*. The novel is thematically rich and significant. Memory and its functions in human life are the basic themes which are woven essentially to form the fabrics of the novel.

The Remains of the Day presents the story of Stevens, an aging butler who spent a major part of his professional life in unconditional service to Lord Darlington, an aristocrat of England during the nineteen thirties. Stevens has devoted the whole of his life to serve his master who was a sympathizer of the fascist. He dedicated for his service suppressing his own feelings. He put his profession on primacy and never expressed his feelings for his father and Miss Kenton, his colleague in the Darlington house. The Darlington hall is now owned by an American Mr. Faraday. Observing that Stevens is leading a life without any leisure he advised him to take a short break to visit the Western Countryside.

Mr. Faraday says to Stevens “It is wrong that a man can’t get to see around his own country. Take my advice; get out of the house for a few days.” (Ishiguro 5)

While his six days expedition to his countryside Stevens indulges in his past memories. His memory recalls the incidents related to his professional as well as personal life and his relationship with his father and Miss Kenton, meeting with Miss Kenton on coffee on each day ending, discontinuation of those meeting, his suppression of emotions for Miss Kenton and her departure from the Darlington Hall due to his ignorance. He also remembers those significant historical events which took place in Darlington house like the meeting between the diplomats and the grand conference of influential leaders from all over the world before the World War II.

In the meeting with Miss Kenton which is now Mrs. Benn Stevens says, “Oh yes, Mrs. Benn. But enough of this. I know you remember Darlington Hall in the days when there were great gatherings, when it was filled with distinguished visitors. Now that’s the way his lordship deserves to be remembered”. (Ishiguro 10)

The butler seems greatly rely on what his memory collects and uses to build up his personal stories, narrates experiences of his life, defend himself, outlines his views, express his feelings and emotions, and make known events of great historical value not only for him, but also for the people around him, more importantly for his readers.

Stevens’ journey of memory touches not only on facts but also on feelings and emotions. The inclusion of memory sounds sometimes to be melancholic in its advance as it talks on the incidents of mournful touch. For example, Mrs. Kenton’s letter evokes in Stevens’ mind the sad old love story they had at Darlington House. The distressing tone of the letter makes Stevens bother as he starts thinking why such feelings of sorrow rest on her heart. The letter reminds some regretful past moments of his relationship with Miss Kenton. He remembers how he suppressed his feelings for Miss Kenton and preferred his service of being a perfect butler. Stevens’ desire to get her back to Darlington House again makes him highly nostalgic for the days they spent together.

Through the story of Stevens Ishiguro tries to present the hierarchical system and the social class divisions exist in England in the first half of the twentieth century. Ishiguro wants to point towards the reality of past when the ordinary people were placed on the margin and regarded as second-rate citizens. The common men could not have any involvement in the making of political decisions. Even democracy was seen as something outdated or obsolete. Lord Darlington expressed such a view to Stevens, “Democracy is something for a bygone era” (Ishiguro 199).

This opinion of Lord Darlington is an open revelation that there is no need for the common people to believe in democracy and justice and they have to be depended on their superiors to think and act in their place.

At one side aristocrats like Darlington were at the top in the society who are capable to talk and discuss about the issues of great political value, build and take decisions of high political level and on the other ordinary people like Stevens, unquestioningly accept this chain of command for the reason that they don't have any idea about political affairs and they don't want anybody to put blame upon them of any political mistakes.

Another important aspect of the journey of Stevens' memory is the mention of Versailles Peace Treaty, that played a major role to stop the World War I and caused terrible economic harms to Germany. Due to extreme financial crisis, Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann, a German and an intimate friend of Lord Darlington commits suicide after the war. This makes Lord Darlington feels guilty and he calls for meetings in Darlington House to request Europeans to reassess the terms of the Treaty. He also invites some British and German leaders to prevent Second World War but the Nazi agenda makes the world to face this war resulting much harm to the world and the reputation of Lord Darlington. So many nations are severely destroyed after the war and Lord Darlington is remembered as a Nazi supporter and conspirator.

Stevens' memory bears feelings of regret with his previous master's incorrect actions and mistakes. This memory makes us visual emotions of regret for having wasted so many years in the service of a man who is no longer noble. At the end he feels detached to be known as the servant of Lord Darlington. He does not feel a bit of regret or disgrace for his master's failures to deal with numerous issues. He was very loyal to Lord Darlington till present though he has a realization that he devoted his life to the person who did many great mistakes. He escaped assuming the mistakes made by his master.

"It is hardly my fault if his lordship's life and work have turned out today to look, at least, a sad waste- and it's quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my account." (Ishiguro 201)

From the beginning to the end of the novel Stevens talks about the greatness and dignity of a butler. In order to define the greatness of butlers and the values which determine this greatness he remembers Hayes Society, an organization which sets its criteria for butlers of the first place. According to the norms of The Hayes Society, a great butler is: "of only the very first rank, working at an excellent household and carries out the tasks following his position with dignity. Without the right amount of dignity, the butler cannot satisfy himself or his employer." (Ishiguro 119). He also recalls the gathering of some great butlers of his time, "many hours of enjoyable discussion on this topic around the fire of the servants' hall at the end of a day." (Ishiguro 22)

All the way through, Stevens names two butlers, Mr. Marshall and Mr. Lane, who according to him, are 'great' butlers because they both are "not only competent, but additionally they act out the concept of dignity." (Ishiguro 33)

Stevens considers his father no less greater than Mr Marshall and Mr Lane and calls him “the epithet of dignity” (Ishiguro 35). Though other people see a lack of traits in his father, which are expected for a ‘great’ butler, such as the lack of a good accent or general knowledge, Stevens argued that those qualities are not necessary but only put some spice or add flavor.

Stevens rationalizes his philosophy of dignity on his own way. He thinks that memories of the past enables him to construct a new identity and that such memories are the means for finding solace in a world that is not consolable.

CONCLUSION

To conclude we can say that Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* beautifully provides an example of a man who finds in his past life a powerful force to build a better life in the present to live the remains of his life. In memories, Stevens finds some energy to keep moving forward. Ishiguro, as a social worker, sees that memories can play an active role in adapting to the present with its circumstances and needs and that separating history from the present can result in crises mainly with identity and existence. To sum up, *The Remains of The Day* provides its readers an invitation to release themselves from any kind of dominance that might result in a life of self-abasement. It also suggests freeing ourselves from the social, cultural or ideological barriers that might hold back us from leading a life of our own and not for others.

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