Qasiet: The Concept of "Dignity" in Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day in Relation to "The Goloshchyokin Genocide"

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Qasiet (Kazakh: **қасиет** • qasïet)
1) natural property; characteristic quality.
2) dignity; positive quality, morality.
(Aryn 2007)

Abstract

This paper aims to draw attention to one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes that remain relatively unknown and under-researched by relating it to Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day*. The story of the main protagonist, Stevens, is used as a metaphorical figure of people with an apolitical stance. The central theme of the novel and the quality upon which Stevens appoints his value is "*Dignity*." *Dignity* continually appears throughout the novel as a leitmotif for the actions of the heroes, as a driving force, and as the focal point of the clash of the ideologies. For the narrator Stevens, dignity is a defining quality of a great butler and a great gentleman. Ironically, it is his concept of dignity that leads him to sacrifice his happiness in the name of service and unwittingly contribute to the society of Nazi sympathizers in England. This paper will argue that the story of Stevens' is a cautionary tale of blind devotion and how passivity can dangerously lead to violation of humanity.

1. Introduction

Goloshchyokin genocide is an unofficial term given to the Kazakh famine of 1930–1933, named after Filipp Goloshchyokin, who was the Secretary of the Kazakh Regional Committee, to emphasize

its man-made nature, also known as the *Kazakh catastrophe*. *Goloshchyokin genocide* was a famine where 1.5 million people died in Soviet Kazakhstan., of whom 1.3 million were ethnic Kazakhs. 38% of all Kazakhs died, the highest percentage of any ethnic group killed in the Soviet famine of 1932–33. Some historians believe that 42% of the entire Kazakh population died in the famine and argue that as many as 2.0–2.3 million people perished during that time (Conquest 1987).

The Kazakh famine was a part of the collectivization famines that afflicted the Soviet Union, including Ukraine, Kuban, Don, and Volga. Each of the famines was caused by the *First Five-Year Plan* of *the Bolshevik Party* under Stalin's command. The goal was to radically transform the way of life in the Soviet Union, affecting industry and agriculture, with little to no regard for the loss of life. The Soviet regime's goal of complete *the Sedentarization* of nomad Kazakhs. Most Kazakhs practiced pastoral nomadism, carrying out seasonal migrations along pre-defined routes. But due to the death of their animal herds, most Kazakhs were forced to settle in the disaster's aftermath. Sarah Cameron (2018) stated that the Kazakh famine was brought on by "the brutal collectivization campaign, compounded on the ground by local cadres, and magnified by longer-term changes that made Kazakhs far more dependent on grain and vulnerable to hunger" (Cameron 2018).

Although, the famine also hit the Russian and Ukrainian peasant communities in the north of the country and the southeast, nomadic Kazakhs suffered especially hard from it. People's livestock and grain were largely taken between 1929 and 1932, with one-third of the republic's cereals being requisitioned and more than 1 million tons confiscated in 1930 to provide food for the cities and ninety percent of the animal population perished during the famine (Cameron 2018). As a result, by February 1932, 87% of collective farms and 51.8% of individual farmers in Kazakhstan had completely lost their livestock (Commission of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan 1992).

"To feed themselves, the nomads began to slaughter their livestock and flee the country. In the period from 1931 to 1933, the peak of the Kazakh famine, more than 1.1 million people left the territory, the overwhelming majority of whom were Kazakhs" (Degitaev 2001). They fled with their cattle to neighboring Soviet republics such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, as well as abroad, to Mongolia, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Chinese province of Xinjiang. In the fall of 1929 and throughout the entire period of the famine mass uprisings broke out in Kazakhstan with several thousand people, but they were brutally suppressed by the troops of the Red Army (Cameron 2016). Nowadays, it is estimated that the events of the early 1900s resulted in the delay of the demographic development of Kazakhstan by a hundred years (Planciola 2004,).

Although, the novel focuses on *World War II* and *the Jewish Holocaust*, in this paper the reference event will be the *Goloshchyokin genocide,* for its obscure history and relative unpopularity.

The story of the award-winning novel by Kazuo Ishiguro *Remains of the Day* is set in England in 1956 and revolves around and is narrated by Mr. Stevens, an aging English butler, as he embarks on a journey across the country. As the story progresses Stevens recalls various moments of his life during the pre-war 1920s and 1930s.

Stevens goes on a six-day road trip from Darlington Hall in Oxfordshire to the Southwest coast of England with the intent to persuade the former housekeeper, Miss Kenton, to return to her former duties, after almost twenty years of her departure. Reflecting during the trip on the life he had lived, the butler sincerely sympathizes with Miss Kenton, who once confessed in a letter to him that the future seemed to her desolate and empty. Unlike Kenton, Stevens is confident that he lived an eventful and fulfilling life. He slowly remembers the most remarkable episodes in his past, the "*turning points*": the events between 1922–1923 and 1936–1938. Metaphorically, the trip represents the journey to his past and as he gets closer to his destination the deep-rooted secrets begin to unveil themselves. The central idea of the novel and the quality upon which Stevens appoints his value is "Dignity." Dignity continually appears throughout the novel as a leitmotif for the actions of the heroes, as a driving force, and as the focal point of the clash of the ideologies. For the narrator Stevens, dignity is a defining quality of a great butler and a great gentleman. Ironically, it is his concept of dignity that leads him to sacrifice his happiness in the name of service and unwittingly contribute to the society of Nazi sympathizers in England.

2. Politics of Dignity

Stevens served as a butler for Lord Darlington, a former high-ranking official in the Foreign Office who hosted unofficial international conferences at his estate in March 1923, in anticipation of the official conference in Geneva. In 1920, Lord Darlington made the first of his many visits to Berlin. As he returned from Germany in a gloomy state of mind, he remarked to Stevens, that in the traditions of Great Britain the humiliating treatment of a defeated nation is considered a shame, and that "... fair play had not been done at Versailles and that it was immoral to go on punishing a nation for a war that was not over" (55). He advocated for the freezing of German reparations and the withdrawal of French troops from the Ruhr and attempted to convince his guests, the French diplomat Dupont and the American politician Lewis.

During the conference, the American diplomat Lewis shrewdly warns of possible future revenge by Germany, calling the politicians gathered at the estate, and Lord Darlington himself, amateurs. Lewis states that the time of amateurs has passed, and there can be no idealists in international politics. Stevens, present at this debate, firmly believes that he is helping his master, who he believes is "furthering the progress of humanity" (84). For him, the moral merit of his employer is above all praise.

Stevens states that the world is like a wheel, and the great houses, the likes of Darlington Hall, are the hubs of this wheel, and the indisputable decisions that come from this center apply to the whole world. Over the long years of service with Darlington, Stevens has come to the firm belief that governing decisions are made behind closed doors in the quiet of the "great" houses, and flashy ceremonies only crown the painstaking work that lasts for many months. Thus, Stevens makes his modest contributions to the creation of a "*perfect world*", professionally serving the great people of the time, those who, he believes, are entrusted with the fate of civilization.

In Stevens' memories, the second turning point in life was the events of 1936–1937, when, the British Foreign Minister Lord Halifax and the German ambassador Herr Ribbentrop discussed the future of Europe in Darlington Hall during informal meetings. Now, in 1956, Stevens realises that "Herr Ribbentrop's sole mission in our country was to orchestrate… deception"(100). But then, back in 1936, according to Stevens' observation, “many of the most distinguished ladies and gentlemen in this country” were completely delighted with Ribbentrop and invited him to their houses as an honourable guest (100). Lord Darlington himself enjoyed the hospitality of the Nazis on his trips to Germany during the "*Nuremberg Rally*" and maintained contact with the insidious enemy. Darlington was also closely associated with the organization of the *British Union of Fascists* and fired two Jewish maids who had previously faithfully worked in his house for nearly seven years.

In his judgments, Stevens seeks to protect his employer from accusations of complicity with the Nazis, explaining Lord Darlington’s behavior by the fact that he was “The sort of gentleman who cared to occupy himself only with what was at the true center of things” (101). Stevens argues that “the figures he gathered together in his efforts over those years were as far away from such unpleasant fringe groups as one could imagine” (101) – “*the blackshirts*.” According to Stevens, “these were figures who held real influence in British life: politicians, diplomats, military men, clergy. Indeed, some of the personages were Jewish” (101). The butler justifies his desire to please the employer by the fact that “one has had the privilege of practicing one’s profession at the very fulcrum of great affairs” (102), when, with a certain right, one can say: "the satisfaction of being able to say with some

reason that one's efforts, in however modest a way, comprise a contribution to the course of history" (102). Stevens assures himself, "looking over the path in his mind," that he is today "nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege" (94).

"The butler Stevens is devoted to his master, Lord Darlington (whose cast-offs he proudly wears), and believes wholeheartedly in the British Empire as a civilizing force in the world in the world; in his eyes, serving a "great" household such as Darlington Hall is equal to serving Great Britain" (Öztabak-Avci 2013:5).

Rereading Miss Kenton's letters on the way, Stevens belatedly admits that he took wishful thinking, that in her letters there was no desire to return to her former life. Selitrina (2018) argues that the entire work of Ishiguro is an analysis by the protagonist of the traversed life path and the desire to prove to himself the expediency and consistency of each of his actions. He convinces himself that he lived a decent life and that each of his actions was distinguished by a special kind of dignity. He takes pride in not leaving Lord Darlington's important guests when his father was on his deathbed. He did not want to read in Miss Kenton's eyes a real great feeling for him, and she married another. And he, Stevens, easily carries the burden of loneliness. He did not want to see in the former owner of the estate a man who had been aiding the Nazis for many years. Each time, Stevens assured himself of a worthy end to difficult and difficult situations in which he found himself. Moreover, he even believed that with his tacit approval he helped his employer to carry out his plans, because he remained calm, acting according to the circumstances. Over the long years of service, he has developed good pronunciation and impeccable use of words, the ability to maintain an expression on his face in which personal dignity is harmoniously combined with a willingness to serve, the ability to curb emotional experiences, and the ability to self-control in a moment of intense excitement and maintain professional equanimity in the most difficult situations (Selitrina 2018: 128).

Stevens regards having "dignity in keeping with his position" as the most important condition for becoming what Stevens calls "a great butler" (22). Stevens explains that this dignity "has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits" (32). In other words, butlers must stay butlers all the time, under all circumstances, which demands considerable "emotional restraint" (32). In this regard Zuzana Fonioková (2006) comments "they must suppress their personality and they must never reveal their feelings. The profession of a butler then includes repression of all wishes, emotions, and opinions that – according to Stevens – do not fit in with the profession. He calls such repression of oneself 'dignity'. He takes great pride in possessing such 'dignity,' which, however, on many occasions contrasts with the usual use of the word. His

interpretation of this term fails to match dignified behaviour as such. Gradually it becomes obvious that his ideal of butler equates blind loyalty to the employer". (Fonioková 2006: 90)

According to Elif Öztabak-Avci in *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro sets out to re-define the figure of the faithful and resourceful or simply "good" servant that appeared in English fiction during the colonial period, as a figure agential in the empowerment of the master, and thereby, complicit in his "crimes". (Öztabak-Avci 2013: 93)

Staying in small hotels, Stevens tries not to mention the place of service if possible, since his former employer was ostracized and contemptuous after the war. He tries to narrate his life in a way that conceals the mistakes of his life and that imparts his existence greater importance. To achieve this goal, he omits some details of what happened and what he did in his life and stresses some other events. Ishiguro comments on this: "(Stevens) ends up saying the sorts of things he does because somewhere deep down he knows which things he has to avoid... Why he says certain things, why he brings up certain topics at certain moments, is not random. It's controlled by the things he doesn't say. That's what motivates the narrative" (Shaffer 1999: 8). In this way, for example, Stevens emphasises his former employer Darlington's qualities of a gentleman and the butler's role in various dealings but refuses to deal with Lord Darlington's proved – although possibly well-meant – support of the Nazi regime" (Fonioková 2006: 90)

Until recently, Stevens was proud of the beauty and grandeur of Darlington Hall, but the moldings and cornices seemed to Mr. Farraday's guest, Mrs. Wakefield, "It looks to me like it's mock. Very skillful, but mock" (94), and not an ornament of the XVIII century. When asked by Mrs. Wakefield whether Stevens had served the former owner of the house and he denied it. He later explained his behavior to Mr. Farraday by the desire not to talk about the life of the former employer, motivating the English unspoken rules supposedly existing in their environment, which surprised his employer.

3. Stevens, The Blind Butler

On the way west, in small towns, Stevens was often mistaken for an important gentleman due to his exquisite politeness, expensive suits, and his car. Only the unnamed chauffeur who filled the car with water, and Dr. Richard Carlisle, unmistakably identified Stevens' profession. Although, Stevens once again denies any affiliation with Lord Darlington.

The villagers that offered shelter and food for Stevens believe he is a high-ranking official and he finds himself in a discussion of the meaning of dignity. Stevens' judgment on dignity can only be interpreted as the ability to keep emotions under control.

Stevens is not only the son of a butler but he also consciously strives to live up to the ideal of service achieved by his father, who in the eyes of Stevens embodies the meaning of dignity. He recalls the incident which showcased this “dignity” in his father’s career. One of the guests expected for luncheon was the general responsible for the needless death of young soldiers during the Southern African War. Stevens' only brother was among the young men who had perished, thanks to the General's criminal irresponsibility. Naturally, Stevens’ father loathed the general and even was offered to take a day off by his employer, but he refused. He, as Stevens puts it, “realized too that his employer's present business aspirations hung on the smooth running of the house party” and volunteers to act as valet to the general, and “thus was obliged to suffer intimate proximity for four days with the man he detested” (31).

Meera Tamaya (1992) compares the relationship between a servant and an employer to one of the colonies and colonizers. “The irony of this self-abasement, seemingly unnoticed by Stevens and his father, is that the business dealings are thoroughly unsavory-illegal arms dealing-and both Stevens and his father do not question whether their sacrifices are for a worthy cause. This blindness foreshadows Stevens' colossal obtuseness as to his master's true moral stature.” (Meera Tamaya 1992: 49)

Striving to live up to his father’s standards Stevens sacrifices his dying father's needs to make sure that the dinner party for the conference that Lord Darlington held at his estate went smoothly. When the housekeeper informs him of his father’s passing Stevens continues to serve the distinguished gentlemen stating "Miss Kenton, please don't think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now" (80). Tamaya (1992) poignantly puts out “As the assembled guests, almost all rich and powerful, feast and drink in elegant surroundings, the death of Stevens' father in a cell-like room is described in terms strangely evocative of human sacrifice. Ishiguro makes a parallel with a delicate economy. As Stevens describes it, "I had expected the room to smell of death, but on account of Mrs. Mortimer-or else, her apron-the room was dominated by the smell of roasting" (82). Thus with a single olfactory detail, Ishiguro inverts the colonizer's nightmare, beloved of cartoonists, of the cannibal chief dining on a well-roasted Englishman. Of course, the reality of the colonial situation is that it is the English, not the natives, who for centuries fed off of the colonies. It's a well-established

fact of history that colonizers systematically depleted their colonies of their natural resources, starved the natives, and enriched themselves and their own country" (Meera Tamaya 1992: 49)

The talk of dignity raised by the villagers alarmed Stevens. One of them, Harry Smith, is convinced that "Dignity isn't just something gentlemen have. Dignity's something every man and woman in this country can strive for and get… That's what we fought Hitler for, after all. If Hitler had had things his way, we'd just be slaves now. The whole world would be a few masters and millions upon millions of slaves. And I don't need to remind anyone here, there's no dignity to be had in being a slave" (135). Stevens is surprised to find ordinary farmers discussing the issues of big politics since he was convinced that there is no place in politics for the common folk. "There is, after all, a real limit to how much ordinary people can learn and know, and to demand that each and every one of them contribute 'strong opinions' to the great debates of the nation cannot, surely, be wise" (141). The discussion during supper reminded Stevens of a case from 1935 when Lord Darlington's guests, who were a bit intoxicated, asked him heavily loaded political questions to which Stevens replied that this is not in his sphere and that he is incompetent in this matter. Lord Darlington praised the strong power in Germany and Italy and confidently declared, "The man in the street can't be expected to know enough about politics, economics, world commerce and what have you" (145).

Stevens's stance on this is "Let us establish this quite clearly: a butler's duty is to provide good service. It is not to meddle in the great affairs of the nation. The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and I …" (145). Moreover, Stevens even thought that Harry Smith's statement was in tune with "Indeed, Mr. Harry Smith's words tonight remind me very much of the sort of misguided idealism which beset significant sections of our generation throughout the twenties and thirties. I refer to that strand of opinion in the profession which suggested that any butler with serious aspirations should make it his business to be forever reappraising his employer– scrutinizing the latter's motives, analysing the implications of his views" (146).

According to Stevens, such views are "the result of misguided thinking" (146). He recalls that butlers of this kind, often disillusioned with their employers and changing them one after another, disappeared from the profession. He believes that "… a butler who is forever attempting to formulate his own 'strong opinions' on his employer's affairs are bound to lack one quality essential in all good professionals: namely, loyalty"(146). He further states "If a butler is to be of any worth to anything or anybody in life, there must surely come a time when he ceases his searching; a time when he must say to himself: "This employer embodies all that I find noble and admirable. I will hereafter devote myself to serving him" (146). True, over time it became clear that "Lord Darlington's efforts were

misguided, even foolish… it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account" (147).

Selitrina (2018) states that "the plot is based on the collision of the erroneous idea of a person and of a just world. Ishiguro's novel is multifaceted, it combines the journalistic principle with the dramatic and lyrical-emotional" (Selitrina 2018: 131). The farewell scene to Miss Kenton reveals a special connection between expression and what is expressed. When she, with her eyes full of tears, tells him that her life could have been happier, Stevens tells the reader his "heart was breaking." But he, as always, maintains emotional restraint and advises her "Now, Mrs. Benn, you must take good care of yourself. Many say retirement is the best part of life for a married couple. You must do all you can to make these years' happy ones for yourself and your husband" (174).

Only at the end of his journey does Stevens experience great and deep despair, with he realizes the complete emptiness of his own life that suddenly opened before him: "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" (176). Stevens finally sees how his devotion to service stripped him of his own agency: "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*?" (176).

Before the final meeting with Miss Kenton, Stevens was sure of the infallibility of his authentic, eventful, and fulfilling life. Selitrina states "the meeting with Miss Kenton, who continues to love him, who told about her life, about her husband, whom she could not appreciate for a long time, about an adult daughter destroys the hero's self-confidence and reveals to him the complete meaninglessness of his own life. Stevens… realizes his mental poverty suddenly opened up before him" (Selitrina 2018: 131).

A passerby advises him not to look back, but to look forward: "The evening's the best part of the day. You've done your day's work. Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it" (177). Once Stevens considered it his duty not to comply to defeat. Even now he decided to accept for the best the way of life that had been characteristic of him for many years, serving his new employer with even greater zeal, figuring out how to respond more appropriately to the endless bantering of Mr. Farraday and decided to continue playing his role as a lackey to the very end.

4. Political Interpretation

Throughout his life, Ishiguro has repeatedly emphasized that he realized himself as an individual at the "perfect" time of the late 60s – early 70s. XX century, when the younger generation (young people of his age) grew up with the idea that they must change the world and that this is their responsibility. Ishiguro has been a member of many political groups and has volunteered for many social projects. His peers had wonderful ideas. However, life was getting more complicated, and at the moment, according to the writer, "I have this notion that it's up to people like me, ultimately, to decide on the big questions, how the country is run, the decisions the government makes – because this is what it means to be a citizen in a democratic country" (Ishiguro 2008: 101). In his opinion, each member of society fulfills his current responsibilities, living with the hope for a better future: "Most of us, we don't head governments or lead coup d'états. What we do is we do a job, we work for an employer or organization or maybe some cause – political cause – and we just do a little thing. We hope that somebody up there upstairs uses our little contribution in a good way. In other words, we're rather like butlers. And so I ended up with this figure of a butler" (Ishiguro 2008: 101).

Stevens often hides some details and exaggerates others in order to justify his actions and ties them directly to his profession, to make them seem as though they were inevitable, only possibilities he could have chosen, suggesting that Stevens is trying to justify his acts and behaviour. He fashions rules of "great butlers" which must be followed by everyone who wants to become one, having "dignity in keeping with his position" being the most important condition (33). "In an attempt at self-justification, butler Stevens unconsciously distorts the narrative of his life. His theory of great butlers, involving his subjective perception of the notion 'dignity,' should help him excuse his life-long passivity, his life spent as a servant. It should also cover the mistakes he made in the relationships with his father and with the housekeeper, the only woman he could ever love. (Fonioková 2006: 96)

Ishiguro explains that Stevens perfectly fulfills his official duties, knows how to serve tea, is proud of how skillfully he manages the house, of what is happening in the world. The butler himself believes that he cannot make a decision on how best to govern the world, that is, he refuses responsibility for what is happening around him in political life. But the employer, for whom he works, is a supporter of the Nazis, that is, the butler indirectly becomes an accomplice of Nazism, tacitly agreeing with the ideology of the owner of the estate. And this, Ishiguro believes, is one of the butler's tragedies. Consequently, the problem of the responsibility of the individual for everything that happens in the world becomes defining in this novel, according to the writer. Ishiguro notes that quite often the

butler in fiction is portrayed as ridiculous, pompous – caricatured. But Ishiguro emphasizes that he wanted to show not a diagram, but a living person, with all his inherent weaknesses and shortcomings, a person who refuses to "live sensually": "I try to paint the portrait of a man by pretending that he's being utterly professional, by pretending that he's seeking out some sort of special dignity, is really just hiding, is really just cowardice. He just retreats and hides from that arena of scary human emotions… Somewhere deep down, he sees the love emanating from the housekeeper… and ignores it… saying that he is this dedicated professional butler. And that it's the duty of the butler not to have any emotions and to him, that's a kind of a professional perfection" (Ishiguro 2008: 102).

In fact, this is the image of the layman, outwardly completely impersonal, but dangerous in his apoliticality and indifference to the movement of history. Addressing the socio-political theme allowed Ishiguro to give the novel "political acuteness and enduring relevance" (Minina 2018: 78).

5. Conclusion

The Remains of the Day is a warning from Ishiguro on avoidance and passivity when it comes to the issues of the world. The story of Stevens can be interpreted how blindly entrusting the higher ups to choose the direction in which humanity as a civilization will go, historically, is often a risk not worth taking. The dangers of leaving people in power unchecked may lead to irreversible catastrophes such as *the Goloshchyokin genocide* or, in case of this novel, the great war and genocide of Jews. *The Remains of the Day* novel is described as "democratic responsibilities of the ordinary man (2)" from the very beginning and it sets the tone for the rest of the story. History is as vital of an element in the story as the notion of dignity and its implications. Stevens tried to lived his life as close to his understanding of dignity as he could, but without its authenticity and integrity was left with a life desolate and empty, as history obliterates and paints him and his former employer in all their mistakes. Stevens is a representation of any person, group or even society, of "butlers" that try to contribute for the betterment of the world, however small or big that contribution may be. But to not end up in Stevens' shoes, filled with regret, exercising one's "*democratic responsibilities*" appear to be a proper solution. Holding oneself accountable and responsible, checking one's biases and who those biases serve, and who does one serve as a "*butler*" on their own accord, practice one's dignity and integrity. By alluding to the actual event in history, this paper attempted to dilute the border between literature, history and sociology and unify what is personal and what is ubiquitous in one's life.

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