

Exploring Narrative Innovation: A Postmodern Analysis of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

Anvee

Research Scholar, Department of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya Khanpur Kalan, Sonapat

Abstract: The aftermath of destructive conflicts brought about significant and swift transformations across various aspects of the world. Numerous individuals found it challenging to reconcile themselves with these ongoing shifts and had to learn to coexist with the established norms. Postmodernism views humans as social beings who must adapt to circumstances using available means. Ishiguro's literary works exist within a broader humanistic tradition that explores human connections. His narratives delve into the workings of consciousness and the subconscious mind. Ishiguro is particularly interested in reevaluating the past from a perspective rooted in the late twentieth century. This analysis aims to identify postmodern elements in *The Remains of The Day* by examining Mr. Stevens' life and interactions. Mr. Stevens grapples with accepting his present situation, conveying his struggles through stories and recollections of his past experiences. The novel illustrates how memories can shape the past to bring meaning to the present, aligning with a postmodern standpoint. The novel's protagonist, a British individual in the postwar era, strives to suppress his emotions both personally and professionally to forge a new identity. Stevens finds himself torn between his memories of the past and the present's representation. He remains uneasy in his surroundings, perpetually pursuing an unattainable perfection in a world marked by conflicts and strife.

Keywords: Postmodernism, fragmented self, memory, professionalism, suppression, crisis, unreliable narrator.

I. INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism within Western philosophy emerged in the late 20th century and is distinguished by a widespread sense of skepticism, subjectivity, and relativism. It harbours a general mistrust of reason and a heightened awareness of ideology's influence in upholding political and economic dominance. Postmodernism stands as a response to the intellectual paradigms and principles of the modern era in Western philosophical history. In fact, numerous beliefs commonly linked with postmodernism can be accurately labeled as a direct contradiction to prevailing philosophical stances that were widely accepted in the 18th century.

Kazuo Ishiguro stands out as a highly skilled and achieved writer in the modern era. This short story writer, television scriptwriter, and novelist has earned a place on Granta's prestigious roster of Best Young British Writers not once, but twice, showcasing his remarkable talent. His creations have garnered significant critical acclaim. Ishiguro's focus lies in constructing avenues for discussing matters related to class, ethics, national identity, location, gender, and related challenges. His fiction work is particularly notable due to its

skillful and structured approach. His compositions shine with an aesthetic coherence and a contemporary essence.

Ishiguro's novels delve into the realm of memories, exploring their capacity to deviate and warp, to fade and linger as haunting remnants. The narrators in Ishiguro's initial series of novels, speaking in the first person, contemplate individual grief, their pains, unfulfilled loves, and regrettable decisions. By recounting these sorrows and the futile hopes that accompany them, Ishiguro provides readers with an avenue for connecting with his characters on an empathetic level. These characters yearn for understanding and absolution. Ishiguro once elucidated that the characters and the emotional force of his novels are set within "an internal world it's an emotional logic that is being played out" (24).

In his 1989 novel *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro masterfully employs negative space to achieve a unique impact, subtly conveying his intended messages. Presented in the first-person perspective, the narrative takes the form of a controlled memoir chronicling the professional journey of the central figure, James Stevens, as a butler at Darlington Hall. Following the pattern of much post-World War fiction, *The*

Remains of The Day embodies traits such as a fragmented self, paradoxes, and an unreliable narrator.

In a true postmodern fashion, Ishiguro proposes that human existence inherently involves constant movement, while simultaneously engaging in the cognitive endeavour of comprehending the world. Crafting a narrative of the self becomes a means of communication ideally suited to navigate this continuous state of flux. This transition often gives rise to the actions of remembering, forgetting, and ultimately redefining one's identity. As in his other literary works, Ishiguro employs the memory-identity analogy here as well, asserting that an individual's essence is most accurately defined by the amalgamation of their memories. The story's progression is achieved by meticulously and analytically delving into the character's mental landscape, achieved through a deliberate temporal disruption of the conventional narrative structure.

Similar to other postmodernists, Ishiguro is a self-aware creator deeply engaged with the internal realm of his main characters. Recognizing that society places certain expectations on art's role, Ishiguro adapts his work to align with evolving societal 'requirements'. Furthermore, he shapes the narrative to establish a deliberate sense of separation between the narrator, Stevens, and the readers. Employing a technique known as 'defamiliarization,' which Shklovsky discussed in his 1917 essay "Art as Technique", Ishiguro takes everyday subjects and portrays them from perspectives that render them strangely unfamiliar, inviting readers to perceive and experience them in novel ways. Ishiguro employs this approach by presenting not a typical butler serving a master, but a caricatured butler driven by an exaggerated commitment to propriety and professional decorum. This deliberate detachment prevents readers from fully identifying with the character and prompts them to critically examine Stevens' behavior.

Readers are able to capture the essence of Stevens' character in *The Remains of the Day* quite well. His role as both protagonist and narrator allows readers to witness his self-deception and disillusionment. His introspective moments on various aspects subtly convey his unspoken desires and regrets. His lack of transparency and careful narrative construction showcase his unreliable narration. Through his guarded narrative, it becomes clear that he's invested in upholding his persona. The suppression of emotions leads to a loss of his true self, illustrating Ishiguro's caution against excessive restraint and lack of warmth. Stevens' dedication to duty at the expense of personal connections highlights the theme of his life choices. Stevens' deliberate lack of transparency and the complex subterfuge that he employs to maintain his carefully crafted narrative reflect his psychological investment in upholding his perceived persona. The concept of "inner surveillance" is a perceptive

observation, as he constantly monitors and controls his thoughts and emotions to protect his self-image. The suppression of emotions and the prioritization of propriety and restraint, while valued by English society, ultimately result in a loss of his true self. Ishiguro's cautionary message about the consequences of excessive emotional restraint and the absence of genuine human connections comes through effectively in the character of Stevens. His relentless pursuit of becoming an exemplary butler, while prioritizing his duty above all else, leads him to sacrifice personal connections and meaningful relationships. This dedication to his profession ultimately leaves him isolated and unable to form the friendships and loving relationships that could have enriched his life. It's a poignant illustration of the consequences of his chosen path.

The crucial aspect of the novel is its structure and character development. Ishiguro strategically places clues throughout the narrative to hint at Stevens' true desires and emotions, gradually leading readers to a moment of epiphany at the end of the book. This sequence of events aligns with Stevens' realization about the wasted opportunities and choices he made. His inability to act on his emotions and his unwavering commitment to duty keep him emotionally stagnant. This, coupled with his adherence to traditional values, leaves him out of sync with the evolving post-war world. The gradual revelation of these aspects creates a poignant impact on the reader and underscores the tragedy of his situation. A significant turning point in Stevens' life and the way Ishiguro crafts the narrative. As the timeline unfolds, Stevens confronts the flaws in his master's character, particularly Lord Darlington's anti-Semitism. Simultaneously, he realizes the loss of the woman he loved. This convergence of realizations creates a poignant climax that is experienced by both the reader and Stevens at the same time. This moment of intense revelation transforms Stevens from a mere butler into a tragic character, highlighting the depth of his internal struggles and the impact of his choices. Ishiguro's narrative structure allows the reader to empathize with Stevens' emotional journey.

II. DISCUSSION

The dual narratives threads in the story. One involves Stevens' potential self-realization about the wasted years of his life, while the other revolves around the revelation of Lord Darlington's anti-Semitism. Ishiguro skillfully employs the narrative structure to move between these events, creating a temporal movement that leads toward closure but also keeps the mystery alive by deferring resolution. This technique engages readers by presenting them with a puzzle to unravel. The true impact of Lord Darlington's actions becomes evident to Stevens as he embarks on his journey and reflects on his time at Darlington Hall. The memories resurface, hinting at his master's involvement with the German side, which Stevens had previously chosen to ignore. This gradual unfolding of the narrative adds depth and complexity to the story, making the

reader share in Stevens' process of realization. The significance of revisiting the past is identified in the development of Stevens' narrative. The way he reflects on overlooked events demonstrates how seemingly insignificant choices can have a profound impact on one's future. Ishiguro's inclusion of both real historical events and fictional elements adds depth to the novel by illustrating how the past, both on a personal and societal level, shapes the present and influences the uncertain future. This interplay between personal experiences and broader historical context contributes to the richness of the narrative and allows readers to engage with the characters and their struggles in a more meaningful way.

An insightful perspective from Ishiguro's interview captures his fascination with first-person narrators and their utilization of memory is evident in his writing, particularly in *The Remains of the Day*. Ishiguro's focus on how characters use memory for their own purposes aligns with the way Stevens' narrative unfolds. Instead of simply revealing information for the readers' sake, Ishiguro strategically presents the story through Stevens' lens. This allows readers to experience the narrative alongside Stevens, sharing in his discoveries and the subsequent impact they have on him. This technique deepens the reader's connection to the character and enhances the emotional resonance of the story. Summarising the key theme of the novel, Ishiguro in one of his interviews says, it is "following somebody's thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves" (Wall, 1994).

An important aspect of Ishiguro's portrayal of the Englishness in *The Remains of the Day* is the depiction of characters like Stevens and his master, the description of Darlington Hall, the British landscape, and weather, together which contribute to creating a vivid sense of Englishness. Ishiguro's detailed descriptions evoke a realistic and nostalgic ambiance that's rich with tradition and history. However, there's also a sense of defamiliarization that arises from the fact that this idyllic setting belongs to a time that has passed. The distance in time can make the portrayal seem somewhat foreign or disconnected from the present, and this contrast enhances the novel's themes of change, loss, and the fading of traditional British values. The difference in Stevens' character is evident, i.e., his public persona is at variance with his private self. The narrator says:

"But what is the sense in forever speculating what might have happened had such and such a moment turned out differently? while it is all very well to talk of 'turning points,' one can surely only recognize such moments in retrospect. Naturally, when one looks back to such instances today, they may indeed take the appearance of being crucial, precious moments in one's life; but of course, at the time, this was not the impression one had . . . There was surely nothing to indicate at the time that such small incidents would render whole dreams forever irredeemable" (Ishiguro 130).

The evolution of Stevens' character is evidently depicted by the end of the novel. While he doesn't openly acknowledge his master's betrayal or his own misjudgments, the reader can discern a subtle shift in his perspective. As he reflects on his past and his service to Lord Darlington, there's a change in the way he perceives his master's actions. This alteration in his thinking signifies a growth in his character, revealing a more complex and nuanced understanding of the past. This transformation highlights the concept of a fluid identity, where Stevens' beliefs and perceptions are subject to change as he gains new insights and experiences. It underscores the novel's exploration of personal growth, self-realization, and the impact of hindsight on one's perceptions.

There is a discussion between the public and the private self that seem to be at war:

"Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all. 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. One has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?" (Ishiguro 176).

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, an insightful analysis of the duality in Ishiguro's novel, particularly in relation to the characters' public and private selves is explained. The distinction between the narrating self and the analyzing self adds depth to the characters and contributes to Ishiguro's psychological realism. Stevens' case, exemplifies this division, where his public persona as a butler is driven by control and suppression of emotions, while his private rational self operates beneath the surface. The Freudian superego highlights Stevens' internal struggle between societal expectations and personal desires. The lack of emotional display and the suppression of feelings prevent genuine connection with others, such as Miss Kenton. These narrative and character elements indeed align with Ishiguro's characteristic style, where the exploration of inner thoughts and emotions is central. The connection of the novel to postmodern narrative is well-observed. Ishiguro's departure from traditional storytelling, his use of narrative techniques, and the exploration of subjective experiences contribute to a narrative that challenges the absolutes of traditional realism and embraces a more nuanced and layered form of storytelling.

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