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The Unclaimed Possessions of Memory: Redefining the Frontiers of the Cinema in *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro

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Abstract

Aim: *In this paper, the aim is to explore memory and cinematic representations while investigation as to how various issues like personal regret, loss, idea of dignity and loyalty, political influence in social and interpersonal spaces and resistance etc. are visually represented. Through the protagonist Stevens, the material objects and spaces in the Darlington Hall against political background are analyzed as microcosm of the contemporary modern world which is long forgotten.*

Methodology and Approach: *The author have consulted the primary and secondary sources as part of their research. Further the researcher has applied the film adaptation theory in respect of both Andre Bazin and Béla Balázs in this work with the intention to bring out the technicalities and nuances of adaptation from novel. In addition, the online material pertaining to the text *The Remains of the Day* and its relevance in modern world has been discussed in detail.*

Outcome: *Through this paper, the researcher has found that the crisis pertaining to the protagonist as an individual is common to every man. It uncovers the fact that the façade and shimmer of identity under material achievements results in a tragedy. The researcher also wishes to pin point the fact that special attention must be given to film studies and adaptation that redefines the texts and makes the text more relevant and accessible in present context.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *Though through adaptation there are different meanings in the text that have been highlighted but still the understanding of the microcosm of Darlington Hall needs to be extrapolated to the political gatherings for qualitative analysis.*

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Born in the bombed city of Nagasaki, 1954, Kazuo Ishiguro is an internationally acclaimed novelist. A noble laureate, Ishiguro has penned novels like *An Artist of the Floating World*, *A Pale View of Hills*, *The Remains of the Day*, *Never Let Me Go*, *The Unconsoled* and *When We Were Orphans*. Among which *Never Let Me Go* (2010) and *The Remains of the Day* (1993) are marvelously carved out in motion pictures.

Ishiguro's works are often found to be psychological in nature which makes the motion pictures very distinct from the form which we see in popular culture. Just like his novels which are written in the form of elegy for the great socio-cultural-political shift in the world delves in the psyche of characters. It was not before 1970's that any serious cinema was done on war times which could actually influence the sensibility of the people to a large extent. The memory was already fading but not the effects. It was never realized to its core. Few other films which were able to draw the immediate attention of the audience during the same time are *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). But none dealt with the idea of memory which is long lost in false glories.

This paper tries to explore the canvas of adaptation of Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* as an independent work of art. Briefly recalling the age old debate, it has been often said that adaptation is an inferior art form but film theorists like Andre Bazin might disagree. Bazin "propounded a realistic aesthetic whereby film expresses an objective reality with as little intrusion of the director as possible. The medium of the film, since it records in time, is inherently more realistic than photography and other arts." Yes, it conflicts with François Truffaut's idea of auteur theory, but screenplay writer cannot be just ignored and put under the aegis of director.

The other idea of adaptation being a new literary form belongs to Balázs School of motion pictures. According to Béla Balázs, the novel should be regarded, as a potential raw material to be transformed at will by the writer of the screenplay. He says that the screenplay has the capacity to approach reality, to approach the thematic and the formal design of the literary model and represent it with a viewpoint incorporating a new aesthetic design and technology, creating thus a new artistic version.

The screenplay of *The Remains of the Day* is a tricky job done marvelously by Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Harold Pinter (uncredited). Other tenets of the film include Cinematography which is full with deep focus, wide shots, long takes, slow motion, dissolve technique and stills. It adds to the many layers of the plot which already exist and give multitude of meanings. Nuances like music and colour of the film are rather sad and bleak. The colour in the film is toned down to retrieve the texture of memory which is long lost. But there is nothing like nostalgia. It is more like a failing world order. One of the few soundtracks used is Schubert's Sei Mir Gegrüßet. Originally it is abrupt and not at all romantic.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* becomes a political and social commentary on the lives of the people of United Kingdom or then The Great Britain. At the same time giving us insight in the fingerprint of culture. William Stevens, the protagonist, has been brought to life by Anthony Hopkins. The whole idea of the English butler has been diversified and culturally presented. Although the locale is restricted to Darlington Hall, it represents the on-going world order of the times. The elements of the novel like inner narrative and description of scenes got a similar translation on the screen. The reason being director James Ivory seemed working closely with Ishiguro. The form and nature of the film is epistolary. It often moves back and forth in time which draws a parallel and allows us to delve deeper in the characters.

Set in post-World War I scenario, the novel is about the 'dignity' of William Stevens, the butler. It is about the unclaimed possessions of memory which Kazuo Ishiguro tries to instill in the character of Stevens. Being always honest and faithful to his duties, Williams neglects or perhaps restricts his personal and emotional self. His subtle relationship with Miss Kenton is something which torn him emotionally. When it comes to Lord Darlington, owner of Darlington state, Stevens is again very much connected with his responsibilities towards him.

Darlington hall is the microcosm of the contemporary modern world which is long forgotten. It's genesis being the two great wars. Darlington Hall is also a prison and epitome of centralized power of the government. The physical space which translates into self-imprisonment of Stevens and political

imprisonment of Lord Darlington. Stevens thinks that he is an indispensable part of it as his own identity is made out of the cultural fabric of England. As Barry Lewis had critiqued in his work that:

Englishness is constructed out of many overlapping myths and images... It is more accurate to speak of 'Englishness', especially as England has been a multicultural country for some decades. Stevens has no time for such wishy-washy pluralism, and is very precise in his own mind about what constitutes the essence of Englishness. (Lewis 78)

Stevens takes pride in being a butler and also pulls out the best in it. But he fails miserably as an individual. Williams being forever alone, unlike his father who was once in love but later fell out of it, he doesn't make mistakes not like Lord Darlington. He keeps himself intact and as a butler, Stevens leave no stone unturned to make things perfect and more English. But when it comes to Miss Kenton, acted upon by Emma Thompson, he felt things unattended. Even when the Chinaman is misplaced, Stevens resists to Miss Kenton's consistent requests. Stevens ever rejects the idea and emotion that his father who has been in service for the "last 54 years" is now incapable of doing the same. Being in service, Stevens adds moral value to his own self-denial. "Stevens's musings about the greatness of the English landscape lead him to a related question: what is a 'great' butler?" (Lewis 80).

There is stark contrast between Stevens' stiff stance towards his life, which is more professional with negligible space and Lord Darlington, whose past associations and works towards peace are now looked down upon in post-war scenario. Although Stevens had forever been faithful to Lord Darlington but now he thinks twice before revealing his identity when he is on his way to meet Miss Kenton. It seems that he isn't able to connect with the outer world because he never actually thought about that. Today, he feels as if he himself is a misplaced article in the Darlington Hall. Still, Stevens confess that he lied about not knowing Lord Darlington. For Stevens as an individual Ishiguro says in his interview with TIFF that Stevens' life has been crucially flawed and damaged because he didn't even have the ability to say that he made his own mistake.

In the background of the narrative and plot it is the Treaty of Versailles which directly sources the political trajectory in the film. This treaty meant

different things to different people. For American Congressman Lewis it was necessary to maintain world order whereas for “high-minded” people at Darlington it was a tool to barter power. Nevertheless, this treaty literally pushed Germany in the arms of poverty for which Lord Darlington always had sympathy. He even employed two Jewish girls who worked excellently. It is a crucial moment and later turns out to be his mistake when he dismisses them on the arrival of his German guest who justifies the idea of concentration camps just like prisons. Later in life, as we come to know from Stevens, that Lord Darlington realized his mistake. He did introspect for the answers that he doesn't have.

Lord Darlington as a character (acted by James Fox) is as objective with the reasons as it needed to be. His political inclinations and decisions weren't out of place or because of sentiments. It was his ever questioning and self-indulging nature which earned him great respect from American Congressman Lewis. Lord Darlington got caught in the storm of circumstances which made him a war-monger alongside Churchill. The whole idea that Darlington Hall is always full with people who were thought to have much larger influence on the discourse of history is shattered. Here, there is no special technique that was used to do that. It is simply the effect of the direction and story. Kazuo Ishiguro in the post-screening discussion on *The Remains of the Day* with TIFF Bell Lighthouse (organizer) draws a parallel and asks that “aren't we all like Butlers?” He used the idea of the English butler as a trope where everyone is far removed from the reality.

Lord Darlington's godson Charlie, who went on to become a journalist, agrees with American Congressman Lewis' idea of 'Realpolitik', the politics of reality. Charlie believes that Lord Darlington is in illusion by the idea of peace with the very same reasons that Lord Darlington used to believe on the contrary. It gives shape to the politics which has been distanced from the reality. The conception of England where order and tradition still prevail is somewhere broken. All the high standards of English society fall flat. People don't like Lord Darlington now; he is the one who throws England (The Great Britain) on the path of war. But he wasn't alone. The utopian world was also shattered because of war which is also reflected in the material and psychological changes as:

... many shared Kuroiwa's regret that the past was slipping away. Some blamed these changes on the influence of the media, and its hourly bombardment of every British home with images of alternative (usually Americanised) lifestyles. Even Merchant-Ivory movies such as *A Room With a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987) and *The Remains of the Day* – despite their apparent glorification of the days of tea, butlers and gentlemanly golf – have helped to erode the national character. (Lewis 74)

It is Stevens' self-denial and emotional repression which is just there with him. Perhaps because of the moral values, being imprisoned within the idea of dignity, "... this was why the war was fought" (Lewis 88). For Darlington Hall is the symbolic prison which Stevens cannot escape from. It is just like the power structure which we have in the contemporary world. We all live in Darlington Hall today and believe in the façade around us. *The Remains of the Day*, surely exemplify such failures of the modern human world.

When we say that Darlington Hall is a microcosm we are implying it culturally. Darlington Hall becomes a cultural map of meaning and behavior which we see in the narrative and characters throughout the adaptation. It is a local space which is now going to affect the global meanings altering every social arrangement and set of relationships. It is this contrast between characters and their dilemmas which made this adaptation a film which has achieved its objective.

During war times, the impenetrable becomes porous. The straight idea of being 'Great' for Britain now gets wrinkled. What it does is, it enhances the effect of the film. At the same time the global order is getting displaced and is not in control. Similarly, Darlington Hall also gets displaced culturally when American Congressman Lewis starts living there. Although it is in the memory of the 'change' during war times that Lewis keeps Darlington Hall intact but it also shows the supremacy and superimposition of two different cultures and is also culturally feudalistic in nature. This memory which is gradually altered because of the war also reiterates that the physical space in itself doesn't have any meaning. As Ishiguro says in his interview with the *Guardian*:

I was very consciously trying to write for an international audience," Kazuo Ishiguro says of *The Remains of the Day* in his Paris Review

interview (["The Art of Fiction," No. 196](#)). "One of the ways I thought I could do this was to take a myth of England that was known internationally – in this case, the English butler. (Guardian)

Here, Stevens gives meaning to Darlington Hall like the myth of England. It is he who maintains the balance in the place during war times. It is Stevens who takes care of the most important meeting, which was bound to alter the course of history. What remains is the reminiscence of that conference. In the very end when Lewis asks Stevens if he remembers anything that was said during the conference, Stevens is blank in memory. What is remarkable is that even Lewis himself don't recall anything, although he was a part of it. The meaning of culture changes significantly. Especially when we refer to the period during which the film was produced. "For historian David Cannadine, it plays a paradoxical or 'non-reasoning' role in the national cultural milieu. It says in effect that 'the only paradise we seek to regain is he one which was never ours to lose in the first place'" (Sim 157).

In the polarized world, Darlington Hall has many meanings. It might also be a souvenir for someone if Germany had won the war. But it is now a memory which is not very prominent. Its meaning is associated with the life of Lord Darlington, for whatever he did. Another meaning which can be brought to light is from the angle of capitalism. *The Remains of the Day* is able to bring us to the juncture of post-war world because here capitalism is "more than simply 'economic' models for they are said to constitute the organizing principles and cultural relations of an entire social formation" (Barker 156).

But it is also a memory which replicates in the mind of the audience creating distinct forms of meaning in different cultures. Ishiguro, a Japanese by origin, shatters the idea of world power. It originates poignantly in the film itself. As a symbolic message which is transformed into aural visual, it is the image which leaves the audience in a lurch. Stuart Hall in his essay 'Encoding Decoding', talks about the production, circulation, consumption and reproduction of meanings. The dominant hegemonic position of nation creating the meanings is now undermined. Instead it is lowest strata of the society which influence it the most.

Exit of Lord Darlington left a socio-political vacuum at Darlington Hall. And instead of someone from Britain itself, an American occupies the *unclaimed* place. It gives rise to a new hegemonic power discourse which have its origin in the times of war. The movie channels Darlington Hall as a very distant object and which is isolated from the society. But the visual scene of the conference demarcates a clear boundary between the power and powerless, haves and haves not, wealthy and poor. It goes on to explicitly deny the participation of any kind by Stevens, who neglects the death of his father and couldn't even close his eyes after he passed away.

Stevens is also the only one who can alter the discourse if he wants but he is not in power. He is not a part of discourse because he chooses not to be. Is it only loyalty? Which brings us to Foucault's idea of power and control. Stevens' mind space is also being controlled by the statute of Lord Darlington. He is also taking his own father as an idol to serve, no matter what. The ethical dilemma of Stevens also keeps him away from Miss Kenton leading to emotional crisis in his life which he fails to acknowledge.

The film can also be seen in the form of "world film." Early nineties were the era of globalization in India, but its presence was already there throughout the globe. It essentially leads to the outlook of diaspora being merged with the post-modern novelist approach of Ishiguro brought out in 60 fps silver screen. The early nineties along with the ruptures of war in between and displacement of people because of wars consequently lead to a different genre of film as illustrated below:

In the closing years of the twentieth century, thought, filmmakers began to explore the experience of migration, the sense of floating among cultures, speaking minority languages, being shut off from the mainstream, and living divided social lives. The result was films of dispersion and displacement, a cinema of diaspora. (Thompson 715)

But here, it is not only the people who are migrating. Ishiguro himself is a diaspora. He is nostalgic and so does his characters of Lord Darlington and Stevens are. Direction by James Ivory bring forth the last moments of Lord Darlington where he passed away pondering over the mistake which he had committed unknowingly and his nostalgia for the idea of nation. Stevens on the

other hand is too afraid to admit his severed ties and that Darlington Hall is not the same.

What cannot be ignored are the subtle proximities of female characters in the film. Miss Kenton and German Ambassador to UK in the times after Treaty of Versailles both play a crucial role at local and global level. Unfortunately, both are negated when it comes to realization of goals. Miss Kenton is left deprived of Stevens and German Ambassador words of friendship and peace fall like a house of card in the aftermath. Treatment of women in political and emotional space is shadowed by the larger narrative of the aftermath of war. Further, commenting on the narrative of history as represented through cinema:

As Robert Rosenstone writes, 'it is possible that such history on the screen is the history of the future. Perhaps in a visual culture, the truth of the individual fact is less important than the overall truth of the metaphors we create to help us understand the past. . . The visual media may represent a major shift in consciousness about how we think about our past'.
(Bourgoyne 233)

Ishiguro is trying to make his statement in the field of history. But whose history is it actually? Because Stevens is the protagonist, a butler. Post-world war I world have multiple histories that can be told by the insignificant people who were not asked any question before they were thrown in chaos. *The Pianist* directed by Roman Polanski gives us insight in war times and trauma which is relatively in the background in *The Remains of the Day*. But the question remains about the unclaimed possessions of the memory that have originated because of the trauma and legacy which lingers on in the society on the minds of the few individuals who are unable to translate the undercurrent of this socio-political and personal state. While understanding the recreated perception of society through cinema and translating the microcosm of Stevens' Darlington Hall, it is necessary that these unclaimed possessions are owned and understood with the audience. Further, while concluding it is necessary to realize the magnitude of the microcosm that Stevens' had and extend the horizon of this microcosm to macrocosm for permeability and acceptability of unforgotten memories.

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