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## **MR STEVENS, THE PRODUCT AND PRODUCER OF HISTORY: HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY* (1989)**

Magically clad in a beguiling wrapping, Kazuo Ishiguro's *magnum opus* is a profound and heart-rending evocation of the Britain's greatness gone with the days of yore. The fifteen-hundred-year-old map of His Majesty's dominions, on which the sun used to never set, was abruptly cut to shreds in the first fifty years of the twentieth century. The British Empire, and everything it stood for, was brought to its knees by the pandemonium of the First World War, and it was eventually and forever finished off by the Second. The country became a cold, ugly, divided, tired, clapped-out, post-imperial, post-industrial slag-heap. Moreover, empire-intoxicated Victorians and their children just could not come to terms with a bloodbath of reality and, out of the blue, the great nation became the lost generation of the Modern Age "wastelanders." They lost everything – lives, dreams and hopes – in the service of hollow ideas and ideals of the world predominance, ignoring the curse of misery and ruin thrust upon all who dared to attempt the same.

**Key words:** Kazuo Ishiguro, British Empire, First and Second World War, lost generation

*The Remains of the Day* is everything but a straightforward historical novel. One should undergo a gruelling effort in order to seek and pinpoint a single direct fact of wider historical scale in the book. Due to Ishiguro's narrative mastery, the past which reverberates through centuries and peoples is not given from the viewpoint of winners, or those who actively participate in the spinning of the course of events. He focuses on rather limited and insignificant individuals who regularly fall victim to grand schemes of internal and foreign affairs. Ishiguro inhabits the minds and hearts of anti-heroes in quest for their personal interpretation of the national and global history. As suspected and expected, memories and flashbacks of such kind provide unreliable, biased and twisted portrayal of the past days. Moreover, all the characters have stumbled to a halt at which they need to look back in search for the reasons and causes of their own misspent lives. The scanning of personal failures and losses

takes place within a wider social, national, and political context, which itself is being delineated by this intimate and subjective process.

The common thread between those who are, loosely or firmly, labelled as postmodernists – from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, from Nietzsche to Derrida, from arts and science to communication and technology, from Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard to Michael Foucault and Nancy Scheper-Hughes – is a radical “anti-essentialism and anti-foundationalism”.<sup>(1)</sup><sup>1</sup> They have unanimously proclaimed the death of all theoretical universals by denying their prerogative to hold general truths. From a postmodernist perspective, there are no so-called Grand, Trans, Supra, or even Meta concepts which transcend particular events and immediate participants. We cannot talk about the theory of any social and cultural phenomena (such as history, science, etc.) because they cannot stand for themselves and by themselves. These generalised interpretations (often referred to as “Grand Narratives”) become hollow words if we shove aside the fact that they were ultimately made by individuals. Since an individual is perceived in postmodernism as the epitome of the otherness, the uniqueness, and the singularity, any written or spoken account coming from such a source must be highly subjective and unreliable. Consequently, we could say that there is no truth in postmodernism but as many interpretations of the concept as there are people in the world—billions and billions. This nihilistic agnosticism has eventually corroded all value orientations of the modern man. Contemporary legions of alienated and overloaded ignoramuses are left with little reason to believe that meaning of any kind is attainable. Even worse, whoever lives in the futile pursuit of the revelatory meaning dies for the meaning without having lived at all. Ishiguro’s novel displays so vividly what mortal coil can befall the one who bows unconditionally to the master plan of the global history. *The Remains of the Day* is sooner a “Mini Narrative” than a “Grand” one because it focuses on a small life of a small man who got voluntarily liquidised in a blender of great affairs. Even though the story of Mr Stevens is mainly situational and provisional claiming nothing of the universal, the postmodernist wisdom hidden behind the backdrop of the foregrounded text comprises the gist of the character himself and just maybe the Holy Grail of defining postmodernism – “The world is meaningless as a whole, but my world, and your world, and everybody’s world in its unique particular mean the whole world.”

1 [www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/index.html](http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/index.html); 5.10.2007

***“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”<sup>2</sup>***

At many levels this novel is an account of the historical precariousness and its ruinous aftereffect on the lives of ordinary people. The presence and absence of global and individual course of events rely upon each other in moulding the story and characters involved. Every aspect of personal life is defined in terms of general society, but matters of global importance are reflected through the eyes of an individual. Therefore, Mr Stevens is entirely the product of the Victorian times in which he was born and bred. The unveiling of his background is comprehensively helpful and crucial in the attempt to understand the character himself.

Alexandrina Victoria (1819-1901) was the Queen of the United Kingdom (1837-1901) and the Empress of India (1876-1901) throughout the eventful period of 63 years. Her reign was the longest of any monarch in the British history and it came to be widely known as the Victorian era. Queen Victoria was the official head of the state not only of the UK but also of the growing worldwide empire, which included Canada, Australia, India, New Zealand, and large parts of Africa. The British Colossus was so far-flung that it overshadowed almost a quarter of the Earth inhabited with a quarter of the entire 19th century world's population. Those truly were the days when “the Great Mother Empire stood splendidly isolated in Europe and the rest of the world.”<sup>3</sup>(3)

As the personal avatar of her kingdom, Victoria was zealously eager to ensure that her country was held in high esteem throughout the world as an economically and military powerful state. Scientific and technological breakthroughs had transformed.

Britain into a highly industrialised trading centre.

The underlying belief of the Victorian society was in progress and the nationwide stance that things were better than ever before and could be made better still. It was the age of railroads, cameras, steam-powered ships, childbirth anesthetics, and compulsory elementary education. On the other hand, it was also the age of pauperism, child labour, intolerable working conditions, poor public health, and jerry-built slums. The belligerent foreign policy and self-complacent arrogance incurred the anti-British atmosphere among the native peoples of the colonies.

The economic relationship between the colonies and the mother country turned gradually into political relationship known as imperialism. The empire involved an effort to rule native peoples by importing British institutions and values. White man had to endure “sacrifice” in

2 Angela Partington, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford New York, 1993, no. 7, 144.

3 Ibid, no. 18, 318.

order to bestow Christianity and higher culture to those who had been worshipping the wrong gods and living according to the wrong ways. Devoted family life, public and private respectability, rigid moral puritanism, business earnestness, and obedience to the laws of the state and commandments of the church were the desirable ideals.

As Queen Victoria took great pride in her role as formal head of the world's largest multiracial and multireligious empire, she did all in her power to be an exemplar of honesty, patriotism, and morality. The popularity of the British Monarchy underwent both ups and downs, but it ultimately increased because of Victoria's personal identification with the empire. However, such imperial chauvinism was endemically contagious and it maimed for life everybody who had even the slightest taste of it, let alone those who suckled its poisonous milk in the childhood like Mr Stevens.

He was in title the under-butler of Darlington Hall, one of the Grand Houses of England, for decades. In the July of 1956 he witnessed changes which had taken this house out of the hands of the Darlington family after two centuries. The new landlord was Mr Farraday, a gentleman from the United States. Though a genuine gentleman in every meaning of the word, he was, to emphasise, predominantly an American. Mr Stevens, fighting against his inborn reserve, scepticism and xenophobia, tried to start this new business partnership on the right foot. However, when Mr Stevens asked Mr Farraday if a certain gentleman expected at the house was likely to be accompanied by his wife, Mr Farraday suggested that, in case he was, Mr Stevens should "take her to the back stables and keep her entertained for as long as possible".<sup>4</sup>

Comments like these were regarded completely out of place and out of manners by Mr Stevens. A harmless banter was one thing, but a public display of racy, salacious and downright lascivious innuendoes was something that he just could not abide with equanimity. The Victorian "art of handling" implied private and especially public respectability. The sexual taboo was the most exacting of the many, and, when ever broached in public even in a jocular manner, it provoked a besetting despise. Moreover, Queen Victoria herself did not quite believe in laughter because she allegedly gave a "We are not amused"<sup>5</sup> comment on a joke uttered in her presence. Therefore, Victorians strongly believed that people must not do things for fun because there was no reference to fun in any Act of Parliament.

4 Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1989, 15.

5 Partington, op.cit, no. 12, 206.

Like the entire Victorian society, Mr Stevens believed in perpetual progress which could be achieved through individual and collective betterment. One had to strive after perfection in every aspect of the personal life, especially in the field of professional duty. However, the duty was the one to consume Mr Stevens' whole life. He had a role to serve and he was willing to do the job no matter how inferior or unimportant it might seem. By doing so, he felt as if he was contributing to the greatness of Darlington Hall and the British Empire as a whole. His life was willingly devoted to serving Lord Darlington because he believed that it was his obligation to let people of higher rank make decisions for him and the nation. Mr Stevens voluntarily accepted such restricted role of not having any public or political responsibility because he trusted Lord Darlington to be a gentleman of impeccable judgement. The vicarious life through the words and deeds of such a gentleman would have been a true honour. Therefore, even when some newspapers, after The World War II, made claims that his employer was a Nazi sympathiser and a traitor to England, Mr Stevens had stood by Lord Darlington until the very end of his lord's sanity.

When new landlord, Mr Farraday, bought the Manor House, Mr Stevens noticed that his daily duties suffered some unintentional setbacks and minor errors. The new employer paid no attention to few trays which were untimely delivered, and silverware which was not polished as often as it used to be. However, errors, no matter how small, in the field of untainted perfection marked the beginning of a struggle against futility. Mr Stevens was forced to open his eyes and realise that he was so consumed with incessant professionalism that he did not even notice when he became a species on the verge of extinction. Polishing silver, a symbol of his profession, was becoming obsolete and it was placed very low on most people's list of priorities because the days of manor house galas were over. Those moments of being "unprofessional" urged Mr Stevens to admit that his only concrete contribution to the course of history would be polished silver. The rude-awakening recognition inspired him to accept the offered holiday which he had never had or wanted prior to Mr Farraday's proposal. He agreed to take a motoring trip through the countryside under the pretext of reemployment of a former worker, Miss Kenton. An old master of deception managed to trick himself once more for believing that the reunion with the only woman he ever loved would be a professional meeting. Although she was married for twenty years and even a mother to a daughter, she was still Miss Kenton, instead of Miss Benn, in Mr Stevens' memories and flashbacks. He held onto an unexplicable glimmer of hope in the ageing heart which sprung the idea that there was still a chance for the two of them.

As he left Darlington Hall behind, Mr Stevens was immediately awestruck by the views of the English countryside. He identified himself with the greatness of the landscape which lacked any drama and which was beautiful in its sense of restraint. Though very beautiful and only a few minutes' drive from Darlington Hall, the scenery he was so amazed by appeared to be completely unfamiliar. His world was so confined at the Manor House that he knew nothing of the world outside the estate gates. The discovery of nature pitched him forward into the introspective analysis which brought the rediscovery of the true nature of his relationship with Miss Kenton. Stripping all the layers of self-deception off, he could clearly see that she was the right one for him always and forever. However, he was the one to reject and send her away years ago because she posed an obstacle in the way of his professional duty.

The relationship between Mr Stevens and Miss Kenton, upon her marriage Mrs Benn, portrays microscopically the Victorian emotional and sexual obscurity. Throughout his entire life Mr Stevens fought against true love and instinctive sexual desire as if they were the emanation of evil and impurity. The wants of the feeble flesh had to be uprooted or at least deeply suppressed in order to preserve the harmony of his employer's household. He was a crafty pretender who chose not to see Miss Kenton's love. He convinced himself that feelings were mere sensuous deceptions not to be trusted. During all those years which they had spent working together, the thought of marriage never crossed his mind because he held marriage to be a business agreement in which two parties were obliged to create posterity. He loved Miss Kenton too dearly to marry her, and he was convinced that such risky enterprise would be destroyed by the power of their emotions. Moreover, he was already married to his job.

Miss Kenton's growing frustration was crowned by the acceptance of the marriage proposal made by her acquaintance, Mr Benn. All she ever wanted was a husband and a family, and she was tired of waiting for Mr Stevens to figure that out. When she informed him about the decision she had made, Mr Stevens offered his brief congratulations accompanied by vacuous countenance and the air of indifference. He did not even blink when she ran off into an unhappy marriage which would later on turn into an unhappy life.

*"Waste of blood, and waste of tears, waste of youth's most precious years, waste of ways the saints have trod, waste of glory, waste of god, war!"<sup>6</sup>*

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6 Ibid. no. 1, 312.

The beginning of the 20th century seemed to release a bottled spirit of change which had been blurring the panorama of the conservative Victorian era. When Victoria died in 1901, her son Edward ascended the throne. The Edwardian period (1901-1910) was the final age of aristocratic excess. The nobility's lavish spending, carefree lifestyle and amoral debauchery only accentuated the problems of the working classes and the poor, which made nearly one-third of the population. While dealing with a potential civil war in Ireland and ever-widening gaps between social strata, Britain was completely unaware of the balancing on the precipice of its greatest catastrophe, the First World War.

The Great War (1914-1918) had changed the British society like no event since the Industrial Revolution. It lasted longer than anyone had predicted and it was more dreadful than anyone could have dared to dream of. More than six million British men joined the service for the king and the country. This consequently led to the final toll of roughly 3 million casualties, and large number of veterans with disabilities who returned to live in every corner of the British Isles. Although triumphant, the country became an indebted, financially exhausted, and industrially collapsed waste land. The United States, whose active participation in the war began in 1917– i.e. the penultimate year of the war, came out of it with economy stronger than ever, and far stronger than Britain's. A former ally and a friend wanted to collect the war debts, made by Britain in a form of loans, through the overtake of high political positions in the world and commercial supremacy in overseas market. Unfortunately, Britain had no will or strength to fight again. Colonies which no longer wished to be ruled by British monarchs caused a ripple effect of dismemberment. By 1939, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Egypt became independent countries. The strongly-centralised empire transformed into the British Commonwealth, a loose confederation of nations and political entities with historic ties to Britain.

In the wake of the First World War, the blatant military buildup by Germany, under the Nazi Party, was met in Britain with public disinterest and government evasion. When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, the country was forced to enter the Second World War (1939-1945). Led by Winston Churchill, in the finest hour of the national history, the peoples of Great Britain fought back, helped again by American "generous" financial aid. American loans allowed the country to import much-needed food and war material. Nevertheless, they were so unfavourable that the victorious Britain was sapped of its financial and industrial reserves in a futile attempt to settle the scores in the following years. It was estimated that the war wiped out more than a quarter of the

wealth of the entire nation, and yet another quarter was needed to pay the Americans back. For the first time since the 18th century, the country became a debtor state. Abundant colonial resources were irreversibly lost since Sir Winston Churchill, with his back against the wall, was forced (buy his allies Americans) to sign the Atlantic Charter in 1941, which recognised the right of self-determination to British colonies after the war. One by one, the colonies proclaimed independence and, in a flash, the British Empire was no more.

The subtle American neocolonisation of Britain came through the Marshall Plan which officially was a four-year economic recovery program. All of a sudden, American moneyed investors appeared as saviors buying everything worth buying. Although some truly came with a business plan, the others made their purchases on an extravagant whim without even knowing, or caring to know, a thing about the long and proud history of bought houses and estates. When Mr Farraday acquired Darlington Hall, he was totally ignorant of the mansion's past importance. For him, it was a show-off prize of a good bargain which carried no value at all unless friends from the States visited and admired it. For Mr Stevens, it was everything; it was his life. The lost grandure of the place would be forever remembered because the images would never cease to haunt him, not until the very end.

Darlington Hall was the mute witness of the abrupt imperial decay. This Grand House of England was a venue of several international conferences, and many more other events of equal gravity, concerning the future of Europe and the rest of the world. To Mr Stevens, then, the world was "a wheel, revolving with these great houses at the hub, their mighty decisions emanating out to all else, rich and poor, who revolved around them."<sup>7</sup> The conference of March 1923 was the first of them, and it was aimed at rectifying the pitiful position of the post-war Germany. Though Lord Darlington was not initially preoccupied with the peace treaty designating the end of the Great War, his interest was increased by the friendship with Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann, a German diplomat and former ambassador to England. After returning from the first trip to Berlin, he was shocked by the appalling state of the country and people. Lord Darlington was convinced that no defeated enemy had ever deserved such abysmal treatment, not even as retribution, and that the improvement of the matter was an issue of winner countries' honour.

Lord Darlington was a true Victorian gentleman and his desire to see an end to injustice and suffering was deeply ingrained in his nature. He wanted to give his contribution to resolving the horrid crisis in Ger-

<sup>7</sup> Ishiguro, op.cit, 126.



many where people were virtually driven back to savagery by starvation. Diplomats, political persons of high rank, clergymen, and military officials became regular visitors to the house because their voice would be heard and they were in the position to make a much needed change. Mr Stevens had a role to welcome and serve each and every of them. This gave him a unique opportunity to listen and observe, from a distance of a passive onlooker, all the trickery and dishonesty in agreements reached and breached both aboveboard and under-the-table. Lord Darlington, due to his manners and good-heartedness, stood no chance against such Machiavellian con-artists of international political class.

Unfortunately, it took years and the hindsight of World War II to comprehend which kind of disaster was closing in on Europe. In 1956, when Darlington Hall stood empty for the first time since the day it was built, everyone knew that his lordship's friend and business associate Herr Ribbentrop was a trickster with a sole mission to deceive England for as long as possible concerning Hitler's true intentions. However, Americans, who were thoroughly informed about the secret German preparations for the New World War, did not care to share the secret with their European partners. All they needed was "another all-out war in Europe to nourish the rich Old Lady on her deathbed."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Lord Darlington lived and died believing that Herr Ribbentrop was an honourable German gentleman; the same as millions of others believed that Americans helped Britain fight Hitler off for free.

### *Seize the Remains of the Day*

The final chapter of the novel was symbolically set in the afterglow of the descending sun. The author wanted to make a parallel between the end of the best part of the day and the fading life of an ageing butler which required a closure. Far away from Darlington Hall, Mr Stevens was at last ready to admit to himself that he had given his very best to Lord Darlington, instead of Miss Kenton who will remain lawfully married to the wrong man, Mr Benn. He had trusted his whole life in his lordship's wisdom without trying to make the one of his own with the only woman he has ever loved. Without family, friends or anything else to look back and forward to, he was lost just like his entire generation, living in a land of wasted dreams, hopes, and geniuses. When the title 'Mr' was finally discarded and when he stopped pretending to be somebody else, Stevens realised that the "human warmth" was the secret ingredient of bantering. Strangely, but something he fought against all that time appeared

<sup>8</sup> Partington, op.cit. 76.

to be the only reason which made life worth living for and the ultimate power of humanity as a whole.

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## **ГОСПОДИН СТИВЕНС, ТВОРАЦ И ПРОИЗВОД ИСТОРИЈЕ: ИСТОРИЈСКЕ ОКОЛНОСТИ У КАЗУО ИШИГУРИНОМ РОМАНУ ОСТАЦИ ДАНА**

Резиме

Овај рад је настао са намером да се објасни, ако не одбрани, наизглед катаклизмична и дефетистичка визија света и Велике Британије у роману *Остаци дана* Казуо Ишигуро, из перспективе постмодернистичког сазнајног ништавила и радикалног превредновања свих вредности, констатује „сумрак идола” општељудске мисли и, на сва звона, објављује смрт историје. Узвишени теоријски судови, тзв. појмови над појмовима (научни, историјски, филозофски, религиозни, итд.), који су вековима били догматизовани аксиоми, нестају са устоличењем појединца као мерила свега што постоји и свега што се икада десило. Стога, Господин Стивенс, кроз сузне очи залудно протраћеног живота, портретише историјске догађаје који су довели до коначног краја Британске империје. Овај трагични мали човек је живео по илузорним мерилима друштвене прихватљивости и политичке коректности служећи тобожњим поправљачима човечанства до крајњег и неповратног губитка себе.