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Locating the Subject in Postmodern State: A Critique of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract

A British novelist of Japanese origin, Kazuo Ishiguro explores the social and political atmosphere of England that unsettled the nation in the decade after World War I. He brings to notice the significant role of an individual's inner emotional dilemma of the professional self. This paper then offers a close reading of Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), exploring the discourse of the subject within a social, political and ideological framework that constructs the concept of selfhood. This play of socio-political ideologies includes subjects that are no more than cultural performances. Centring on Ishiguro's exploration of this decentred subject, this paper scrutinises the symbolic link between the protagonist Stevens's selfhood caused by self-deception or the ideological state apparatus and fictional world leaders' discourse on professionalism. From this viewpoint, the main objective of the paper is to uncover how Ishiguro's work dramatises the transformation of the modernist preconstituted subject into the postmodernist decentred subject.
Keywords: Kazuo Ishiguro, subject, subjectivity, postmodern, England

Introduction

The concept of the individual as an autonomous subject, capable of defending opinions, performing actions and taking responsibilities, has not always existed. In premodern or ancient societies, the individual is perceived as being subjected by collective consciousness, or by what Emile Durkheim calls 'mechanical solidarity': a solidarity grounded in the shared characteristics of all members belonging to a particular tribe (Zima 3). There was not much

space for individual autonomy, action and agency in premodern societies. Individual subjects in European feudalism tend to build identity within the norms of the particular tribe or group, making the individual a product of a vast religious community or the extended family. However, the individual emerges as a subject that has roots in Renaissance humanism, regarding the "individual subject as a unified self, with a central 'core' of identity unique to each individual, motivated primarily by the power of reason" (Sim 366). This process of 'disembedding' as Anthony Giddens points out that the liberation of each and every individual from the web of Western feudalism begins in the Renaissance, when Montaigne, in his *Essais*, "sets out to explore the apparently boundless realm of secular thought located beyond the collectively accepted doctrines of medieval scholasticism" (Zima 4). It was not until the twentieth-century market economy (i.e., free but profit-seeking entrepreneurs or exploited labourers) that the concept of the subject began to react against the privileging of selfhood's agency or individualism.

The imperative concept of the unified self or selfhood is not achievable in the postmodern theoretical discourse as it promotes unchanged and static identities. Enriched with the new potential for the ideological organisation of the subject, decentred subjects bypass the humanistic notions of a unified self and reassert into all manner of contexts, creating new possibilities of meanings and challenging the preconstituted subject in various discursively produced studies. Furthermore, the postmodern theoretical frameworks believe that human beings cannot form a collective subject. In this context, Louis Althusser argues in *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (1970) that the ruling class in the ideological structure tends to transform individuals into subjects through interpellation. This existence of 'ideological interpellation' or 'hailing' points to the individual as the subject within a power system, presupposing the existence of a distinctive and central other 'Subject,' in whose name "religious ideology interpellates all individuals as subjects" (Althusser 195). The individual is inherently born as a subject with a preexisting socio-cultural identity, making subjecthood through ideology. The postmodern questions this preconstituted human subject or subjectivity within ideological imperatives. As Jacques Derrida argues in his 1966 lecture, "The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it" (Derrida 271). And to position it, as postmodernism emphasises, is to acknowledge differences, which discursively reconstruct the narrative structure and bring forward marginalised voices to suggest alternative notions of subjectivity. It enables the subject to recognise a unique space that legitimises the discourse of

difference. Postmodernism endorses the idea that discourses do not exist in totality; it favours multiple points of view.

In this way, Michel Foucault located the concept of decentring the subject within socially constructed discourses. He focused on the institutionalisation of particular subjects (e.g., the ill, the mad, the sexual pervert, the criminal), produced as effects of discursive and power relations. According to Foucault, "power is exercised over free subjects — individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized" (790). Foucault further contends that discourse wields the power to determine the individuals' brains and autonomy, creating the possibilities of decentred subjects in various discursive produced studies. Henceforth, all forms of subjection, Foucault argues, "are derived phenomena that they are merely the consequences of other economic and social processes: forces of production, class struggle, and ideological structures which determine the form of subjectivity" (782).

Terry Eagleton asserts that the postmodern "does not mistake the disintegration of certain traditional ideologies of the subject for the subject's final disappearance" (qtd. in Hutcheon 159). What has vanished, according to Baumgartner, is the "subject as anticipation of reconciliation" or "the universal subject of the intellectual which has caused difficulties in other respects" (qtd. Zima 2). However, decentring the subject creates meanings when situated within the context of hegemonic power structures. M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham posit about the subject in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*:

> [P]oststructuralists tend to substitute "subject" because this word is divested of the connotation that it has originating or controlling power and instead suggests that the human being is "subjected to" the play of external forces; and also because the word suggests the grammatical term, the "subject" of a sentence, which is an empty slot, to be filled by whoever happens to be speaking at a particular time and place. (310)

This quote provides an in-depth reflection of the poststructuralist view on the ideological construction of the subject. The subject is in a continuous state of dissolution and reconstitution, demonstrating its lack of stability and constant evolution with power relations. Poststructuralists refuse the classical notion of the subject while stating that the dominant ruling class present hegemonic ideas as common sense to subordinates. According to Simon Malpas, the subject in the postmodern state is a "fragmented being with no essential core of identity and is to be regarded as a process in a continual state of dissolution rather than a fixed identity or self that endures unchanged over time" (367). This quote reflects the fragility of subjective or the subjecthood's autonomy and agency. The postmodernist theoretical works do not posit absolute

universal cause and effect, reflecting the belief that there is no universal truth. The cause and effect experienced by an individual mind are not the same for everyone, making unified entities impossible in this hyper-complicated world.

However, Kazuo Ishiguro has directed attention towards the ideological imperatives of an individual's identity in an era of unprecedented change and uncertainty. Ishiguro's earlier novels, for instance, set in post-war Japan – *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) – primarily dealt with the Japanese Emperor's ideology that denied people's distinctive free spirit. Meanwhile, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) is set in post-World War I and explores Stevens's obsession with controlling "every aspect of his life to the point where the emotional life gets stifled" (Jaggi 112). Ishiguro's novels, one way or another, grapple with the "business of values and ideals being tested, and people having to face up to the notion that their ideals weren't quite what they thought they were before the test came" (Swift and Ishiguro 22). These values are shaped by ideological positions, environmental adaptation, historical factors, and economic and social evolution. This nature brings forward the problem of a totalised self that needs to be deconstructed, representing another pre-mutation of the decentred subject. By addressing the ideological organisation of individual subjects within postmodern frameworks, *The Remains of the Day* provides an understanding of modern and postmodern subjects, which this paper seeks to unpack. The purpose of this paper is not to challenge the uniformisation of the decentred subject that the postmodern itself exists to contest but instead to reconstruct the idea of the subject as the ideological concept par excellence.

The Remains of the Day: An Overview

The novel *The Remains of the Day* begins in July 1956 with a first-person narrator named Stevens, a constant English butler at Darlington Hall in a fast-changing world. Having devoted his prime years in the service of Lord Darlington, he now faces the challenge of adapting to an American employer, Mr. Farraday, the new owner of Darlington Hall. Mr. Farraday encourages Stevens to take a break and explore some of the "finest countryside of England" (Ishiguro, *Remains* 1). Meanwhile, Stevens gets a letter from his former co-worker, the housekeeper Miss Kenton, detailing her life after marriage. He perceives a distinct suggestion in her letter, indicating her desire to return to Darlington Hall. Accordingly, he takes a trip to the West Country to meet her. During this trip in 1956, he reflects on his dedicated life in the loyal service of Lord Darlington. The conference took place at Darlington Hall in 1923, where renowned

figures such as foreign ministers and members of the House of Commons discussed the country's future in an effort to influence international affairs in the years leading up to the Second World War. Stevens is tasked with coordinating arrangements and tending to the needs of these individuals throughout their sojourn at Darlington Hall. Stevens harbours feelings for Miss Kenton but refuses to admit this sentiment, influenced by the notions of 'dignity' and what constitutes a 'great' butler. Nonetheless, Stevens meets Miss Kenton in 1956, who is married to Mr Ben and has a daughter, Catherine. Stevens grapples with the realisation that he should not feel proud of his unwavering devotion to Lord Darlington.

The Dual Nature of the Self: Subjectivity, Agency, and Self-Deception

The concept of subject deconstructs unreliable sources of information to unravel the layers of individual identity. In the novel *The Remains of the Day*, the subject or 'I' is the narrator, Stevens, an English butler at Darlington Hall, who thinks of living a perfect life in terms of placing things in order. This makes the novel tackles the reification of individual experience through unquestioning commitment to myth, illustrating how this process leads to self-objectification. The inherent influence of Stevens's subjectivity "leads him to take on the impossible task of self-objectification, a task which will result in a weakening or compromising of that very self" (Gehlawat 492). Stevens is aware of his professional identity as a butler but does not understand anything beyond the immediate concrete reality. It is quite obvious that he is unable to attain perfection, and consequently, he has been "responsible for a series of small errors in the carrying out of [his] duties" (Ishiguro, *Remains* 5). Ishiguro states in a 1989 interview with Graham Swift that he used the butler as a "metaphor for the relationship of very ordinary, small people to power" (22). Ishiguro's butler, the portrayal of Ishiguro's England and the idealised image of Stevens's butler are all in the process of being constructed; there are no foundational objects from which they emerge. Ishiguro further outlines his initial remarks about England in his 1989 interview with Suanne Kelman, "I feel I have to know the fictional landscape in which my novel takes place very well. That's the landscape I have to research, not any actual chunk of history or real country" (45). Later in the interview, he describes Stevens as a "kind of metaphor for something, and as such he's a kind of exaggeration. He's a kind of grotesque." (46). The quote in-depth delves into the notion that the setting of *The Remains of the Day* is fictional or idealised landscape being picture-perfect, wherein Ishiguro created an English myth concerning the 'great' butler. Stevens acts on the basis of this idealised butler as if it were real and has some concrete foundation in reality. This idealised kind of butler, which

Stevens seems to identify with, does not exist in ur-object from which he emerges. The world inhabited by Stevens, alongside our contemporary nostalgia industry, conveys a "critical truth about the impoverishment of subjective experience through a process of cultural reification" (Gehlawat 496). The quote reflects the butler and the kind of England that Ishiguro has created exists solely as a mythic abstraction.

The mythmaking of *The Remains of the Day* revolves around the question: 'What is a great butler?' Stevens's father tells the story about a butler in a parlour in India is another myth that passes from one generation to another, creating the figure of a butler who "noticed a tiger languishing beneath the dining table" and handled it with "no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence by that time" (37). Stevens's idealised butler in the story about the tiger tends to view the world as objectification to attain perfection. His formulation of this ideal comprises two fundamental principles: dignity and professionalism. The Hayes Society, which Stevens refers to while talking about dignity, claims to admit butlers "only the very first rank" that possess a "dignity in keeping with his position" (32,33). The statements recast the myth that exists only in cultural abstraction, illustrating the logic of cultural objectification. The denial of the human's emotions and feelings in Stevens — manifested in his embodiment of an abstraction — is dramatised in the novel as his primary act of self-deception, self-objectivation, self-cultivation and self-mastery. As a result, Stevens's version of truth and reality in the fictional landscape of England renders him a frozen butler who believes "dignity has to do with not showing your feelings, in fact he thinks dignity has to do with not having feelings" (Swift and Ishiguro 23). While discussing 'dignity' in the novel, Stevens makes the following claim about the notion of 'great' butler:

> The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of 'dignity.' (43)

This notion of a 'great' butler presupposes the existence of a central and unique figure that can be followed in the view to adapt to the preexisting mould. This model of the butler, which Stevens and his father ascribe to, has not existed except in England as Stevens states that other "continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of" (44). This understanding of Stevens follows this idealised butler, which he has never met. Since the 'great' butler is either unreal or

inherently unattainable, "this figure exists only as a mythic abstraction. An instrumental rationality ultimately lurks at the root of this myth, for no matter how Stevens may romanticize the role of a butler, in the end, he is simply a glorified servant" (Gehlawat 499). The closer this subject can resemble an object, the more effective it will be in its role.

However, the concept of the subject within a discourse undermines individual subjects by decentring or ex-centring the idea of the vital self, something that has not and cannot be relinquished in the case of Stevens. In simple terms, his ambition for self-mastery requires self-renunciation, a complex interplay wherein the pursuit of perfection demands the sacrifice of certain aspects of the self. He struggles to achieve success because, like any human, Stevens is prone to mistakes and errors. As a result, the subject is never constant; it changes based on power relations. The existence of minor errors in carrying out Stevens's work challenges the unified idea of the subject that strives for perfection. It is only the errors in human nature that are necessary for Stevens's survival and that of his life's work. Stevens reflects on the problem regarding the "series of very minor errors on [his] part", which he often refers to as "trivial errors" due to "straightforward staff shortage" (51). Stevens wants to be like an idealised butler in his master's house. His meticulous attention to minor mistakes may make him seem oblivious to what Lord Darlington intends: "These errors may be trivial in themselves, Stevens, but you must yourself realize their larger significance" (65). Lord Darlington constructs a discourse on professionalism wherein error leads to consequences on the whole course of Europe. The professional self is built so subjects adapt according to the available discourses. Mr Lewis, the American senator, says, "[Political leaders] here in Europe need professionals to run [their] affairs. If [they] don't realize that soon [they] are headed for disaster" (107). This quote emphasises the importance of professional skills in maintaining peace and justice leading up to World War II. Thus, the subject is constructed and constantly reconstituted within a particular discourse. When Stevens travels to the West Country in 1956, he realises:

> How can one possibly be held to blame in any sense because, say, the passage of time has shown that Lord Darlington's efforts were misguided, even foolish? It is hardly my fault if his lordship's life and work have turned out today to look, at best, a sad waste – and it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account. (211)

There is a rupture in time, reflected in how Stevens thinks about the past. Ishiguro, during a conversation with Graham Swift, mentions, "Memory is this terribly treacherous terrain, the very ambiguities of memory go to feed self-deception" (23). The narrator's mechanism is depicted in this statement, where the recollection of the past unveils certain deceptive ideas.

In this way, Stevens frequently links impressions with statements, showcasing the diversity and multiplicity of individual nature. Stevens describes Miss Kenton's visit to his room: "It was my impression that Miss Kenton's manner also underwent a sudden change" (175). This recollection of the event depicts the way Stevens projects his nostalgia. Stevens is an unreliable narrator who attaches his impression to the facts, changing the cause and effect. While thinking about Lord Darlington, Stevens reflects, "Whatever may be said about his lordship these days – and the great majority of it is, as I say, utter nonsense – I can declare that he was a truly good man at heart, a gentleman through and through, and one I am today proud to have given my best years of service to" (64). This quote reveals Stevens's self-deception concerning the figure of Lord Darlington, which he later realises that Darlington "chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one…You see, I *trusted*, I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him I trusted I was doing something worthwhile" (256). Stevens is a subject in the figure of an idealised butler, moulding his self that acknowledges his indefatigable subjectivity at work. His loyalty and devotion to Lord Darlington (which he should not be proud of) is the failure of the essential self that undermines its aspiration for self-objectivation. The concept of the subject assumes a vital role in the novel, which further problematises subjectivity within the discourse of postmodern theoretical frameworks.

Additionally, Stevens lives in a world wherein his ideas on dignity and being a 'great' butler are unreliable and untrustworthy. Ishiguro has been able to restructure our perception of self in alignment with the myths that "circulate around us as culture (or nostalgia); the process of objectification occurs because these myths do not allow for forms of difference or disembedded subjectivity" (Gehlawat 513). This quote delves into the notion of self-deception from which Stevens suffers. There is no perfect butler or England that Ishiguro has tried creating it. Stevens keeps identifying with the idealised butler — which does not exist anywhere except Ishiguro's imaginary British landscape — creating a sense of alienation or isolation among individuals. Stevens loses his authenticated self in objectification and creates self-alienation in the urge to become the 'great' butler. He embraces self-deception and the abstract logic that makes him unable to improvisation, at least consciously, because acknowledging this would be admitting a fundamental ambivalence within himself. He avoids delving into this subjectivity as it would hinder his path to becoming a 'great' butler. Further, Ishiguro says in a 1991 interview with Allan Vorda and Kim Herzinger, "[Stevens] thinks beauty and greatness lie in being able to be this kind of cold, frozen, butler who isn't demonstrative and who hides emotions in much the way he's saying that the British landscape does with its surface calm: the ability to keep down

turmoil and emotion" (141). In this way, Stevens is unable to make a demarcation in his personal and professional experience. Ishiguro establishes a potent interplay of agency at the core of *The Remains of the Day,* shaping Stevens as both voice and image, subject and object of critique.

Conclusion

By depicting the British landscape leading up to World War II, Ishiguro highlights, to a certain extent, the role of the English 'great' butler — whose political function was to serve Lord Darlington. The construction of this butler has been a historical process of identity-making, shaping the self or selfhood agency. Stevens's dialectic of agency as a 'great' butler becomes a myth at the heart of *The Remains of the Day*. Ishiguro challenges the concept of the unified subject, depicting identity as fragmented and multiple. The subject, intricately woven within discourse, becomes evident as, over the last century, individuals have bestowed upon themselves gender, name, and identity through particular discourse. Thus, within the postmodern theoretical frameworks, where universality is exposed as a myth and delusion, the concept of the subject undergoes shifts with the identification of new perceptions. The subject emerges as undeterminable and unknowable, further disrupting the idea of a coherent self or selfhood.

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