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Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*: Facing the Truth between the Lines of History

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Abstract

The credibility of history has been a subject of debate since Aristotle. While countries have official histories to explain, honor or justify their past, what makes a certain history acceptable is connected with authority. Thus, official histories lack diversity similar to the rewritten histories of the colonized countries by colonizers. However, silenced stories of individuals lost between the lines of official histories come to the surface over time like the ones people face after the colonizers' departure. This paper, therefore, attempts to analyze the story of Stevens who faces the truth as a result of the changes in politics and his life. Ishiguro discusses the matter in individual terms of Stevens, yet he draws a parallelism between him and the once colonized countries, which make it worth to deal whether facing the truth is a relief for Stevens or for the once colonized nations.

Keywords

Ishiguro; History; Colonization; Multiple Histories.

There is always, however, more than one story to tell.

(Eagleton 2006)

Introduction

Since Aristotle, history has been a subject of debate among critics. They have suggested various and mostly opposing ideas on the credibility, objectivity and perspectives of history. Although Aristotle claimed in his *Poetics* that “poetry is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history” since history “relates what has happened, the other what may happen” (Aristotle 17), today it is a challenging question whether history actually deals with what has happened. If “the one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it” (Wilde 50), the question turns into another. That is, it is worth discussing who writes history, what those with never heard stories feel when they face the truth behind it and whether learning the truth compensates for being mistaken sometimes for a lifetime.

As clearly put forward by the famous African proverb; “until the lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter” (<http://www.famous-quotes.com>), history is the exclusive possession of the ruling nations, races, classes or gender. Therefore, the answer to the question of who writes history is obvious. Writing history and justifying the past is one of the great indicators of having power and domination over other groups. Although claimed by Aristotle as superior or inferior to each other, in the postmodern world both literature and history come to equal terms in creating “facts”:

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the

past (“exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination”). In other words, the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past “events” into present historical “facts”. (Hutcheon 89)

It is granted that while these “facts” are artificially constructed, their ignorance or denial of the truth creates a story on behalf of the authoritative voices, which distorts reality. The victims of distortion are often silenced by the authority. This sometimes happens even despite their full knowledge which may end in their coming and going between rebellion and acceptance. On the other hand, most of them find conformity in denial of the truth which eventually results in disappointment, regret, discredit and displacement. In this paper, silenced, ignored and never heard voice of the victims of history will be treated in *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro. The paper mainly focuses on Stevens as the protagonist who closes his eyes to reality to believe an artificial history, and it also refers to his relationships with people around him.

Stevens and Facing the Truth

Stevens is the ageing butler of Darlington Hall, who continues his father’s profession. He would probably have a trivial part such as welcoming people at the door if this was his master’s story. However, Ishiguro puts Stevens, his never told experiences and thoughts in the centre. He draws parallelism between Stevens’ relationship with his masters and colonized countries relationships with Great Britain. Thus Ishiguro attacks and questions the so called objective history of Britain written on behalf of the colonized countries as well. Looking from Stevens’ perspective, Ishiguro tells “his story” which even Stevens himself hardly admits. Finally, he portrays Stevens as a man of regret and disappointment whose obedience and unquestioning devotedness is tricked by the changing trends of history. His story is a small version of the long silenced or ignored histories of the colonized

countries and his feelings reflect these countries' atmosphere after Britain's departure following its long colonizing period.

Working for his former master, Lord Darlington, for a long time, Stevens is a man of loyalty who strongly believes that "justice in this world' lay at the heart of all his [master's] actions" (Ishiguro 76). His devotion to Lord Darlington is significant for Stevens for it means the seriousness and dignity of his job as well. He suggests that "dignity' has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits. Lesser butlers will abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation" (Ishiguro 43). Thus, his total devotion to his master is an inseparable part of his devotion to his work, which together constitutes his whole world.

Despite Stevens' confession to "have a reluctance to change too much of the old ways" (Ishiguro 7), the world around him changes. The story opens with Lord Darlington dead and Stevens with his new American master. He is already sold together with Darlington Hall as "a genuine old fashioned English butler to go with it" (Tamaya 45). Thus, Darlington Hall and Stevens in it become the luxurious furniture to show off among American friends for Mr. Farraday for whom a butler is "a kind of performing monkey at a house party" to ask "random questions of the order of, say, who had won the Derby in such and such a year, rather as one might to a Memory Man at the music hall" (Ishiguro 36).

Del Ivan Janik quotes "there are no haunted houses.... Only haunted people.... Haunted by their own past or that of others. Haunted by everything" (176). Stevens is one of those people haunted both by his own personal history and the history in general both of which eventually let him down. After Lord Darlington's death and towards his old age, he feels necessity to question his life and is convinced by his new master to take a one week journey in British countryside. The date Stevens starts his journey is July 1956 "when President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, thus heralding the end of

Britain's long reign as the world's foremost colonial power" and as put by Tamaya it is "not so coincidental" for the date symbolizes Stevens' "recover[ing] the tragic truth of his past, a truth inextricably bound up with the history of his country" (45). Like the once colonized countries, Stevens goes deep into his world and faces his past while narrating his part of the story.

Stevens' questioning his past and facing it is not willingly but because of some dishonorable rumors about his former master. As a result of the changing balances in the world of politics, once a reputable man, Lord Darlington now becomes the subject of dark claims. People speak about his close relationship with Herr Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador of the time, and claim that he has part in helping and supporting the Nazis in Britain. Stevens answers these rumors by accepting that "Herr Ribbentrop was a trickster: that it was Hitler's plan throughout those years to deceive England for as long as possible concerning his true intentions, and that Herr Ribbentrop's sole mission in our country was to orchestrate this deception" (Ishiguro 144). At the same time, in defense of Lord Darlington he adds: "It is, however, rather irksome to have to hear people talking today as though they were never taken in by Herr Ribbentrop-as though Lord Darlington was alone in believing Herr Ribbentrop an honorable gentleman and developing a working relationship with him" (Ishiguro 144).

Stevens admits that Lord Darlington received hospitality from the Nazis on his trips to Germany but tries to acquit Lord Darlington from claims about Anti-Semitism and denies his association with the British Union of Fascists by calling all "nonsense" (Ishiguro 145). Yet, he ignores the fact that Lord Darlington dismissed two Jewish maids for he decided that they "cannot have Jews on the staff here at Darlington Hall" and rationalizes his decision as for being "for the good of this house" (Ishiguro 155).

It seems that Stevens has no "idea what sort of place the world is becoming around [him]" (Ishiguro 106). What he calls honor is now called

amateurism. Still, instead of trying to be more curious about the truth, Stevens tries to see Lord Darlington as a man totally mistaken by others but a good man by himself and asks “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?” (Ishiguro 211). Lord Darlington’s friend Mr. Cardinal makes the claims clear for Stevens and asks:

Haven’t you ever had a suspicion? The smallest suspicion that Herr Hitler, through our dear friend Herr Ribbentrop, has been manoeuvring his lordship like a pawn, just as easily as he manoeuvres any of his other pawns back in Berlin?...Well, we’re friends and so I’ll put it to you frankly. Over the last few years, his lordship has probably been the single most useful pawn Herr Hitler has had in this country for his propaganda tricks. All the better because he’s sincere and honourable and doesn’t recognize the true nature of what he’s doing. (Ishiguro 233-235)

Stevens has nothing to tell Mr. Cardinal for he has never been interested in the things around him except his job. As an answer to Mr. Cardinal’s insistent questions, he eventually tells that he has “every trust in his lordship’s good judgment” (Ishiguro 236), which is exactly his biggest mistake in his life. Namely; he never has his own initiative. Instead, he prefers to depend on and trust others’ decisions by giving almost no importance to his own choices and ideas. It may be an honorable thing for a man to deal with his own business to make it in the best way he can, however, as Mr. Cardinal puts it “today’s world is too foul a place for fine and noble instincts” (Ishiguro 234).

Stevens is right in emphasizing the fact that Lord Darlington was not alone in his friendship with the Nazis. He protests his once praised actions to be harshly criticized today. The matter about Lord Darlington and his destroyed reputation prove that so called historical facts have the potential of changeability over time. To be more precise, when the probability of the victory

and reign of Nazis is concerned, things could have turned out to be different. Lord Darlington blamed for supporting Nazis today would probably be a hero in this changing circumstances which would be written by Nazi historians. However, one thing would remain the same and it is what Stevens abstain from admitting: he believes that millions like himself were saved from becoming slaves with the defeat of the Nazis as many others but he is reluctant to think over his constant position as a butler/slave no matter who the master is:

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. (Ishiguro 196)

Actually, Stevens' unchanging position as a servant for gentlemen reveals the nature of power relations in history. Making and writing history is always in close relationship with power and authority. However, those without power have always an inferior position in front of this authority, silenced by it and told from its point of view.

Although Stevens does not want to face this fact, still he wonders what dignity his life and job have from time to time. Having an American master now, it is clear that though masters change, there is no choice except being the butler for him. Grasping the fact about the lack of dignity in his profession, Stevens loses everything he has and this fact becomes the source of his disappointment. His wasted life has no difference from his brother's, who fought and died for nothing. Stevens remembers that his father would feel comfort if his son was killed honorably for his king and country. Yet, discovering that he "had perished in a particularly infamous manoeuvre...irresponsibly commanded with several floutings of elementary military precautions" (Ishiguro 41), Stevens remembers how his whole family felt being deceived by the stories of heroism. He knows that his brother's death

is the consequence of the ambitions, foolishness and imprudence of gentlemen for whom Stevens has spent his life in another way.

Stevens feels regretful not only for his professional life but also for his private life and relations. He certainly shares his disappointment with his father and Miss Kenton, the former having more experience and the later once his work-mate and now a sad memory for him. Despite having performed his work during a whole lifetime in the best way a butler could, Stevens' father feels no satisfaction but sorrow in his death bed probably as a result of being more experienced compared with Stevens himself. That is, he understands how futile it is to waste a life for the gentlemen's praises and he looks for some warmth from his son just before he dies. No matter how hard he tries and how many times he says that he hopes to "have been a good father for [him] (Ishiguro 101), he cannot get a word of confirmation from Stevens' mouth but only formal and distanced good wishes. Stevens is not present in his room at his moment of death, but is looking for fresh bandages for the aching feet of a gentleman guest sincerely believing that his father "would have wished [him] to carry on (Ishiguro 111). As lifetime butlers, both Stevens and his father "believe that they can best fulfill themselves by identifying totally with their master's ambitions" which draws parallelism once again between Stevens and the colonized natives who "were misled into identifying with the colonizers' interests" (Tamaya 49). It is only possible for his father to see the illusion at the end of his life while it takes some more time for Stevens.

As for Miss Kenton, with whom he could have his only chance for a romantic relationship, Stevens never does what he should do to take their friendship a step further. After the dismissal of two Jewish maids, Miss Kenton is heartbroken, yet helpless. After some time, she confesses Stevens how she felt about living and working in Darlington Hall:

Had I been anyone worthy of any respect at all, I dare say I would have left Darlington Hall long ago...It was cowardice, Mr Stevens.

Simple cowardice. Where could I have gone? I have no family...I was so frightened, Mr Stevens. Whenever I thought of leaving, I just saw myself going out there and finding nobody who knew or cared about me. There, that's all my high principles amount to. I feel so ashamed of myself. (Ishiguro 161)

Without a doubt, she waits for an attempt from Stevens. When she understands that Stevens will not take that step, she declares her intention of marriage with another man. However, all she gets is Stevens' wishes to "have a pleasant evening" despite her insistent emphasize on "still giving the matter some thought" (Ishiguro 225).

Visiting Miss Kenton many years after her departure from Darlington Hall and marriage, Stevens observes something like sadness over her. He also realizes that her marriage is not as good as she wrote in her letters several times. Miss Kenton confesses how unhappy she was in her marriage especially at the beginning and how regretful she feels from time to time. She admits her faults and says "What a terrible mistake I've made with my life" (Ishiguro 251), which Stevens answers by declaring that "it is too late to turn back the clock" (Ishiguro 252). Although Miss Kenton understands Stevens' hidden sorrow, their meeting ends only with some good wishes of Stevens both for her and her husband, children and grandchildren on the way.

Leaving his old days with Darlington, his father and Miss Kenton behind, Stevens faces his whole life and mistakes; what is remained at the end of his time. He now knows that his father was aware of what he could not see at that time. He knows that Lord Darlington was a gentleman whose fine and noble intentions were turned into something else. He remembers how regretful Lord Darlington was some time after dismissing those maids and how he struggled to clean his good name, but was unsuccessful. He is bitter because he understands the fact that he covers only a little part both in his master's life and the course of history. He thinks about a life together with Miss Kenton in

which both could be happier. However, “what is the sense in forever speculating what might have happened had such and such a moment turned out differently?...In any case, while it is all very well to talk of ‘turning points’, one can surely only recognize such moments in retrospect” (Ishiguro 188). Still, he is regretful for taking no risks and never trying for something else in his life. He even compares himself with Lord Darlington:

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. Really-one has to ask oneself-what dignity is there in that? (Ishiguro 255)

Finding relief in history both created for him and fed by him in return for many years, Stevens finally criticizes himself harshly. His disappointment for this false story he believed in so long is parallel with the histories of the colonized nations, which were written by the colonizer; Great Britain. Concerning the fact that The Suez Canal Crisis in 1956, “when the USA forced Britain to abandon its attack on Egypt” (Sinfield 105), marked the decline of British power all around the world, the old colonized and new free countries must have felt the same way as Stevens does. They believed, trusted and followed their masters, yet with the departure of the colonizers' they have to face the truth even if they do not like it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, since “history is a construct, like theater: a human creation that intensifies (but thereby inevitably falsifies) experience” (Janik

180), having multiple stories behind the official history, which sound never heard stories of individuals, is inevitable. When Stevens claims that “history could well be made under this roof” (Ishiguro 81), he points to the misleading potential of history ironically. It is ironical since despite his being right about the nature of history, some stories told by some people in a particular way, he is totally unaware of the answers of the questions: by who and how? It is obvious that the most significant determining factor in writing history is to be powerful in every way. In other words, writing history “is not simply a repository of facts, but instead a politically charged and ongoing process of presenting certain events and persons in light of divergent national interests” (Lang 211). What happens to the individual lives around during this process and how they feel when they are forced to face the truth is the subject of discussion in this paper. Stevens, who is stuck between “two histories which oppose and contradict one another” (Maiti 2382), almost struggles to deceive even himself with the standardized fictional truths about what happened. He shares the emotions of many others deceived and let down by the course of history; the feeling of discomfort about what they have experienced and that is why he struggles to find a suitable place for it in his mind. However what are left to him is only regret, bitterness, disappointment and feeling of loss and he laments for what is gone forever no matter which story is told.

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