The Remains of Empires in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of The Day*

Dawla Saeed Alamri  
Department of English,  
College of Languages and Translation, University of Jeddah  
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia  
Email: dalamri@uj.edu.sa

Received: 12/29/2021  
Accepted: 3/21/2022  
Published: 5/24/2022

**Abstract**  
This paper aims to explore how Kazuo Ishiguro has found a position of enunciation away from the conflicting sentiments of otherness between the deeply rooted traditions of both Japan and England. With a particular focus on Ishiguro’s third novel, *The Remains of the Day* (1989), the paper highlights the shift of the scene from Japan in his first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* and *An Artist of the Floating World* to a purely English setting in *The Remains of the Day*. Drawing on the postcolonial theoretical framework, the study examines Ishiguro’s literary production grapples with universal themes. It offers ways to question the ‘national greatness’ of both empires as represented through Japanese and British voices while narrating their personal histories and traumas. The main contribution of this study lies in extending arguments on the postcolonial engagement of Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, by focusing on his demythologization of both Eastern and Western Empires. The paper concludes that Ishiguro’s ‘fictional’ metamorphosis serves to subvert imperial landscapes, and convert them into mythical metaphors to approach universal themes and worlds, while simultaneously finding his own voice and territory.

**Keywords:** a pale view of hills, an artist of the floating world, contemporary British fiction, Kazuo Ishiguro, postcolonial theory, the remains of the day

**Cite as:** Alamri, D. S. (2022). The Remains of Empires in Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Remains of The Day. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies* 6 (2) 26-42.  
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol6no2.2
Introduction

In his speech at Nobel Banquet in 2017, Kazuo Ishiguro remembers vividly the face of a Western man with smoke and dust behind him from an explosion with white birds rising from the explosion, and climbing to the sky. He recalls the stories told by his mother about the inventor of this prize to promote peace and harmony or “heiwa” in Japanese. At that age, he did not feel hate or antagonism for this first world which devastated Japan and his city with the Nagasaki nuclear bomb, and the foreign governments for years. However, he feels “pride that comes from knowing that one of us has made a significant contribution to our human endeavour. The emotion around is a larger one, a unifying one,” standing in awe for being part of the Nobel Prize story (Ishiguro, 2017).

This paper aims to explore how the Japanese-born English novelist Kazuo Ishiguro (b. 1954) has found a position of enunciation away from the conflicting sentiments of otherness between the deeply rooted traditions of both Japan and England. With a particular focus on Ishiguro’s third novel, The Remains of the Day (1989), the paper highlights the shift of the scene from Japan in his first two novels, A Pale View of Hills (1982) and An Artist of the Floating World (1986) to a purely English setting in The Remains of the Day. The Remains of the Day occupies a particular position, not only in Ishiguro’s fiction but also in contemporary British fiction. Drawing on the postcolonial theoretical framework, the study examines Ishiguro’s literary production grapples with universal themes. It offers ways to question the ‘national greatness’ of both empires as represented through Japanese and British voices while narrating their personal histories and traumas. These voices are tortured by personal traumas related to their great sense of ‘Japaneseness’ and ‘Englishness’: service of duty, loyalty, and lost traditions; looking back to the past in guilt, shame, and uncertainty.

The main contribution of this study lies in extending arguments on the postcolonial engagement of Ishiguro’s The Remains of the Day, by focusing on his demythologization of both Eastern and Western Empires. The paper traces how Ishiguro’s ‘fictional’ metamorphosis in these three novels serves to subvert imperial landscapes and convert them into mythical metaphors in order to approach universal themes and worlds, while simultaneously finding his own voice and territory.

Review of Literature

Kazuo Ishiguro’s fiction has been studied with different areas of interest: postcoloniality, psychoanalysis, rewriting history, narratology, and multiculturalism. Liu (2021), for example, explored the ambivalence of cosmopolitanism in Ishiguro’s writing. Liu claimed that Ishiguro’s longing for subjectivity as an ambivalent cosmopolitan does not directly come from his cosmopolitan identity but a compromise as they are unwilling to wander on the edge of different cultures. This makes the cosmopolitan idea in Ishiguro’s novel an ambiguous one. Sloane (2018), on the other hand, examined An Artist of the Floating World and The Remains of the Day and argued that Ishiguro betrays an underestimated but distinct anti-American sentiment and willful political resistance to the postwar Americanization of Japan and Europe. Pai (2018) studied The Remains of the Day, focusing on the master-slave relations the protagonist encounters in his professional life and how the authority shifts make him a device of hybridity. Similarly, Nurkhasanah (2013) analyzed Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel, A Pale View of Hills, using a post-
colonialist perspective. Her finding showed that the novel produces ambivalent meanings as the main character suffers from alienation but surrenders to Western hegemony.

Bullen (2009) studied how Kazuo Ishiguro and Monica Ali address the issue of national identity. Bullen concluded that both writers’ settings explore their ideas of national and cultural identity, revealing much about the changing landscapes of the postcolonial world. Kráľová (2008) discussed how Ishiguro employs the Japanese culture in his early novels to subvert Western stereotypes about Japan and how he cleverly manipulates his characters’ speech filtered through perfect English diction. Sim (2002) drew attention to the operation of exilic themes in Ishiguro's fiction and cosmopolitan cultural production trajectory. Slabbert (1997) focused on Ishiguro’s biculturalism and the impact his mixed upbringing has had on his style and thematic concerns. McLeod (1995) studied the rewriting of history in four novelists: J. G. Farrell, Timothy Mo, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Salman Rushdie. He argued that each writer engages with postmodernist aesthetics often to produce critical histories that bear witness to the voices of those hitherto silenced in conventional historiography.

With a particular focus on the psychological aspect of trauma fiction, Duangfai (2018) argued that Ishiguro’s first-person narrative technique allows him to explore the themes of psychological disorder. Lalrinfeli (2012) examined aspects related to memory and identity and its thematic centrality in the first five novels of Kazuo Ishiguro with reference to how memory initiates the construction of identity. Teo (2009) discussed memory as the most important theme in Ishiguro’s works, claiming that the theme of memory is the dominant one in Ishiguro's first six novels which he frequently returns to examine in his work. Lang (2000) examined the relationship between history and memory in Ishiguro’s first five novels and how his main character struggles to reconcile his private memories with the public memories of the nation and his fellow citizens.

In general, most of these studies examined Ishiguro novels from different perspectives providing rich insights into the production of this cosmopolitan author. Most of the studies were concerned with postcolonial issues of hybridity and displacement, narrative techniques, narrating traumas, and rewriting history. Most of these studies analyzed the three texts individually or compared them to other exilic texts. The purpose of the present study and its main contribution is to extend arguments on the postcolonial engagement of Ishiguro’s masterpiece, *The Remains of the Day*, by focusing on his demythologization of both Eastern and Western Empires. The paper examines Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* as a pivotal turning point in his literary journey. In this novel, Ishiguro turns away from the post-World War II traumatized Japanese setting and characters of his first two novels to the very English landscape of the third novel. The paper traces that process of ‘fictional’ metamorphosis and how Ishiguro subverts all these landscapes into mythical metaphors to approach more universal themes and worlds, while simultaneously finding his own voice and territory.

**Methods**

Ishiguro’s literary engagement with the postcolonial concerns of cultural differences, exile, unhomeliness, and hybridity, offers material for exploration from a postcolonial perspective. One of the most interesting developments in postcolonial theory, as Tyson (2015) mentions, is the
worldwide spread of international culture and global economics that have affected all peoples, whether postcolonial or not. This cultural globalization with its worldwide spread of technologies, ideas, and products is caused largely by the globalization of economics and the worldwide spread of capitalism with minimal interference from national governments. Tyson explains that cultural productions have gone global due to the increasing global access to the Internet and other forms of technology. The same postcolonialism of political, cultural, and economic subjugation of vulnerable regions, according to Tyson, “occurs through different means, at the hands of the very multinational corporations […] which postcolonial critics call cultural imperialism and neocolonialism” (pp. 409-410).

Spatial studies is also one of the new fields created by postcolonialism. As explained by Guerin, Labor, Morgan, Reesman, and Willingham (2011), the field of Spatial studies analyzes the importance of human constructions of physical with mental spaces, especially in political contexts […] It challenges Western views of Third World spaces, examines how power interacts with geographical spaces, how nations map themselves onto colonized spaces. It examines borders, diasporas, refugees and immigrants, transnational spaces, and how the separation of workplace and home has alienated workers. (pp.366, 381)

In addition, double consciousness is another significant concept of postcolonialism which Tyson (2015) defines as:

[The] feeling of being caught between cultures, of belonging to neither rather than to both, of finding oneself arrested in a psychological limbo that results not merely from some individual psychological disorder but from the trauma of the cultural displacement within which one lives. (p.403)

These postcolonial perspectives of globalization, special studies, and double consciousness will be integrated in the analysis of Ishiguro’s texts to reveal how to examine his ‘fictional’ metamorphosis and how he subverts all these landscapes into mythical metaphors to approach more universal themes and worlds, while simultaneously finding his own voice and territory.

Analysis and discussion:

Ishiguro’s first three novels were set in post-World War II Japan and England, the remains of the two great empires, with aging protagonists suffering and struggling with their past histories. With these past histories, they were mistaken or led by misguided allegiances and false ideals of these pre-war imperialist periods. Ishiguro started this in his first novel, A Pale View of Hills (1982), developed with his second novel, An Artist of the Floating World (1986), then fully matured with his third novel, The Remains of the Day (1989). Ishiguro explains that he chose these imperial settings because they were potent for his themes. He was attracted to pre-war and post-war settings because he was interested in testing the values of people, having them “face up to the notion that their ideals weren't quite what they thought they were before the test came. In all three books, the Second World War is present” (Swift, 2008, p.36).
A Pale View of Hills, and An Artist of the Floating World: Japan as a landscape

His first two novels, A Pale View of Hills, and An Artist of the Floating World, were set in Japan though he left Japan when he was five years old and never returned except for a very short visit in 1989. The details portrayed in these novels give the impression he was in Nagasaki. He admits that he was taken away from Nagasaki and Japan at an early age, separated from the whole way of life, colors, textures, and scenery that he had remembered and was very attached to, and from people who were very close to him, like his grandparents. Still, he thought about Japan and believed he would return to it. Growing up in a Japanese-speaking house, with stories told by his parents, and books read about Japan, and his memories of his childhood there helped him to build “an imaginary world” in his head, “a mixture of imagination and memory and speculation” (Swaim, 2008, p.96).

However, he realized that this “very important place called Japan which was a mixture of memory, speculation, and imagination was fading with every year that went by” (Krider, 2008, p.129). The Japan he left then ‘recreated’ was a country, as the years passed, has become the ‘other country,’ but with which he has a strong emotional tie. In a different interview, he adds that he turned to writing novels because he wished to re-create this Japan, putting together all these memories and imaginary ideas about this landscape he called Japan. He adds that he wanted to make that Japan safe and preserve it in a book before fading away from his memory (Ishiguro & Oe, 2008). Thus, he started writing The Artist of the Floating World, to reconstruct that fading (hi)story in a narrative.

Ishiguro’s preservation of memory through narrating can be understood with reference to Homi Bhabha’s conception of symbolic citizenship and the myths of belonging as a means to achieve our national or communal identity in a global world. This communal identity is attained when we identify ourselves with the starting points of other national and international histories and geographies. However, revisioning history and culture might leave unsatisfaction with the writer in the larger flow of a transitional history. Bhabha (2004) explains that conceiving of minoritization and globalization is “a dynamic that goes beyond the polarizations of the local and the global, the center and the periphery, or, indeed the ‘citizen’ and the ‘stranger’” (pp. xx-xxi). That sense of being a stranger, or the condition of unhomeliness, is defined by Bhabha as:

[...] the intervention of the ‘beyond’ that establishes a boundary: a bridge, where ‘presencing’ begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of relocation of the home and the world- the unhomeliness…The recess of the domestic space becomes sites for history’s most intricate invasions.” (p.13)

That intervention of that territory or ‘the Third Space’ of enunciation, according to Bhabha, is created because symbols and meanings of cultures have no primordial unity or fixity, but can be translated, appropriated, “rehistorcized and read anew” (p.56). Bhabha notes that the Third Space, or that alien territory may open the way to conceptualize an international culture, not a diverse one, but as an articulation of cultures hybridity. Ishiguro, with the fading memories of his homeland is inventing his own territory in the new culture; a bridge to avoid feeling being estranged and dislocated.
Not knowing Japan very well, Ishiguro found himself forced to write in a more international way. He explains that his lack of authority and knowledge about Japan forced him to use his imagination and think of himself as a kind of “homeless writer” who does not belong. He elaborates that he “had no obvious social role,” because he was not a very English Englishman, and he was not a very Japanese either. He adds that he had “no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody's history seemed to be [his] history […] this did push me necessarily into trying to write in an international way” (Ishiguro & Oe, 2008, pp. 57-59). As a writer who did not actually belong and did not have a strong emotional tie with either Japanese history or British history, he started to use history consciously, looking for moments in history that would best serve his own fictional purposes.

*A Pale View of Hills* is Ishiguro’s first novel, published in 1982 is a story in the first-person narrative of Etsuko, a middle-aged Japanese woman living in an English country house in the 1980s. For most of the novel, Etsuko is indulged in memories of her past in the postwar devastated Nagasaki when she was pregnant with her first daughter Keiko. Her younger daughter Niki is the offspring of her second marriage to an English journalist who covered the Japanese war affairs. The novel opens with Niki visiting her mother months after Keiko’s hanging herself in her rented room in Manchester. These past reminiscences involve Jiro, her first husband, and his father, Ogata-San, a retired school teacher who attempts to rationalize his professional conduct prior to and during the war.

Ogata-San visits them after the offending article of Shigeo Matsuda, his ex-student, who has become a communist and accuses Ogata-San and his fellow men of being responsible for what happened to Japan. In Japan, as he says, children were taught terrible damaging lies; they were taught not to see or question, plunging the country into the worst disaster in history. Though Matsuda admits Ogata-San and his generation’s hard and sincere work, their energies were still spent leading the country in a misguided evil direction. Matsuda asks him to be honest with himself, and he shouldn’t be blamed for not realizing the true consequences of his actions. At that time, very few men could see where it was all leading, but those men were put in prison for saying what they thought. Now, they are free, and they will lead Japan to a new dawn. At the same time, he accuses Ogata-San of the sacking and imprisoning of the five teachers at Nishizaka in April of 1938. Ogata-San defends himself, saying that they “cared deeply for the country and worked hard to ensure the correct values were preserved and handed on. (Ishiguro, 1990, pp.147-148).

Nagasaki portrayed in the novel was the one devastated and suffered from the aftermath of the atomic bomb. There were numerous American soldiers, but there were days of calm and relief (p.11). The Nagasaki district where Etsuko used to go to visit her friend never failed to fill her with “a deep sense of loss” (p.23). A wasteground surrounded her apartment on the outskirts of Nagasaki; instincts and mosquitoes seemed everywhere. People complained, but the anger over the wasteground had become resigned and cynical over the years. People also were preoccupied that summer with the newspapers’ talks about the end of the occupation, the busy arguments in Tokyo, and the reports of child murders that were alarming Nagasaki at the time.
For some Japanese, like Ogata-San, Japan has radically changed. Their ‘divine and supreme nation created by the gods’ was once held together by the values of discipline and loyalty, sense of duty towards the family, the superiors, and the country. He is tormented to see the fall of that great empire with all its cultural, social, and educational values because of the radical, rapid changes that were sweeping the whole country. Things have changed, and people abandon obligations in the name of democracy. The Americans, according to him, not only destroyed that long-established educational system, replacing it with the American one, but also “never understood the way things were in Japan […] In Japan things are different, very different” (pp. 65-67).

On the other hand, Etsuko’s life is paralleled with the story of Sachiko and her abused daughter, Mariko. The dramatic scene by the end of the novel, using the third person ‘we,’ reveals the truth about Etsuko’s guilt of negligent childrearing of her first daughter Keiko. Mariko’s story is just a projected tale of Keiko’s abused childhood in Nagasaki and her troubled, unhappy life in Britain with her mother and step-father. Moreover, Sachiko's character reflects Etsuko’s repressed fears of motherhood and desires for more love and freedom. The story ends with Niki’s departure and her mother standing in the garden looking at her with a final recollection of a scene from that summer in Japan. The child Mariko runs from her when she tells her they will return to Japan if they do not like America. Etsuko believes that it is “pathetic when people just waste away their lives […] however, such things are in the past now, and there is little to be gained in going over them here” (pp. 90-94). The conflict is left unresolved; the only consolation for Etsuko is that she is purified by sharing these painful memories with her daughter who consoles her mother that it could not have been easy. She has to be proud of what she did with her life.

The dilemmas of both Etsuko and Ogata-San of looking back at the past and being responsible for one’s actions are echoed with the protagonist of Ishiguro’s second novel, An Artist of the Floating World, first published in 1986. The protagonist is Masuji Ono, a Japanese aging artist who, with his reputation declining, looks back over his long life and career between October 1948 and June 1950. His son and wife were killed as victims of Japan’s involvement in World War II. He struggles, irritated because of how his family members and society view his past as a member of the propaganda team in the 1930s. This team supported Japan’s nationalism and its expansion as an empire. Ono and his fellow men are accused of what they did in the past; some of them are no better than war criminals leading the country astray. Those men should acknowledge their responsibility, admit to their mistakes, and give their lives in apology. Ono defends himself as being one of those who fought and worked loyally for the country during the war, and they cannot be called war criminals. Suichi, Ono’s son-in-law, displays similar frequent signs of bitterness towards Ono and his generation, who were responsible for the deaths of many young brave Japanese for “stupid causes” (Ishiguro, 1989, p.58). He expresses his anger because those people are carrying on with their lives, and some are more successful than before as if they haven’t led the country to disaster.

His friend Masuda sheds light on the troubled political situation in Japan from his generation’s point of view. The Japanese are more desperate, and the little children die of malnutrition, while the corrupt politicians and businessmen get richer. Matsuda believes that Japan nowadays is a mighty nation and a giant in Asia, and it is the time, to build a powerful wealthy
empire. They just need “to discover the will,” and get rid of those corrupt businessmen and politicians; then, the military will be answerable only to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor (pp. 173-74). Though Matsuda expresses his discomfort with the situation in Japan, which is headed for a crisis, he is not a politician, and his solutions lie with the artists, the talented ones like Ono and the younger ones, to open their eyes “and produce work of genuine value for these difficult times” (p. 172). Ono wonders how art can play such a role because he believes that an “artist's concern is to capture beauty wherever he finds it” (p. 172). Skillful artists may have little influence on the sort of matters Matsuda talks of. Matsuda defends his concern for the role of art, saying:

We are the emerging generation. Together, it is within our capability to achieve something of real value […] The truth is, Ono, in times like these, when people are getting poorer, and children are growing more hungry and sick all around you, it is simply not enough for an artist to hide away somewhere, perfecting pictures of courtesans. (pp. 172-173)

The current situation in Japan is troubling and seems complicated, but there are optimistic people like Taro and his father, Dr. Saito, Ono’s old neighbor, and friend. The Americans introduced democracy in Japan, and people liked that but showed little understanding of that political practice. Taro admits that people have to learn how to handle the responsibility of democracy because the “country is like a young boy learning to walk and run”, but the underlying spirit is healthy (p. 120). The future of Japan and these sweeping changes are crucial issues to Ono since most of the elders are out of management. He discusses them with Taro, his son-in-law. Taro believes that a complete overhaul was called for, though youth alone will not always produce the best results. New leaders with a new approach appropriate to today’s world are needed. Ono is also concerned with the Americans’ impact on Japan and the Japanese hastiness in following the Americans “like a small child learning from a strange adult.” Taro assures him of his confidence in the positive aspects of the American change, especially those of democracy and individual rights (pp. 185-86).

Throughout the novel, Ono examines his past through conversations, flashbacks, and visits to his old friends. His friend and master Chishi Matsuda is proud of that political past and what both of them have achieved, asking him to ignore what people today are all saying. By the end of the novel, Ono admits his mistakes, defending himself that he acted in good faith to serve his fellow countrymen. Now, he is not afraid to admit he was mistaken. That declaration is painful because he finds that hard to admit responsibility for the past deed; very hard for a man who values his self-respect and his own dignity. However, there is certainly satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes one has made in one’s life. He believes that there is no great shame in mistakes made in the best of faith. More shameful is “to be unable or unwilling to acknowledge them” (p. 125).

By the end of the novel, Ono sits amidst the wild grass growing along the ridge, gazing at Mori-san’s villa, where he used to work, and watching the young office workers smilingly, wishing them well. He feels that “profound sense of happiness” where his efforts have been justified, the hard work is undertaken, and the doubts overcome. Everything he has achieved was worthwhile, of real value and distinction. He feels nostalgia for the past and his district, but he is genuinely glad to see how their city has been rebuilt and how things have recovered so rapidly over these
years. The nation has another chance to make future whatever mistakes it may have made in the past. As Ishiguro comments in one of his interviews, Ono’s world is over, with no part in the new world, being cornered, accepting, in the end, his own smallness in the world. Ishiguro adds that he “wanted to suggest that a person’s dignity isn't necessarily dependent on what he achieves in his life or in his career; that there is something dignified about Ono in the end that arises simply out of his being human” (Mason, 2008, p. 11).

In his first two novels, as he mentioned in several interviews, Ishiguro was not that concerned about the Japanese setting or the plot as much with the repressed memories and the emotional upheaval of the stories. He states that he used Japan as a metaphor, suggesting that this need to follow leaders and exercise power over subordinates is not a Japanese phenomenon but a human phenomenon (Mason, 2008, p. 11). He clarifies that he used this Japanese setting because of the physical backdrop and the kinds of characters and political situations he had access to. He was drawn to periods in history where societal values have undergone a sudden change, trying to find a cutting edge in those situations. As a writer, he is interested, as he says, in the process of how people evaluate their lives, clinging on to some sense of dignity when they are faced with the idea that perhaps they have wasted their lives. This applies to Japan after the war “when the very things that everyone had been told were the highest achievements suddenly turned out to contribute to a dreadful nightmare (Bigsby, 2008, pp. 20-21).

Though Ishiguro astonishingly and accurately portrayed time, places, and events he did not live through, he admits that he, as a novelist, is not interested in writing down details about the surface textures of places. He explains that he creates landscapes of the imagination that somehow express various themes and emotions he is obsessed with. He adds that he may use these settings that have enormous emotional reverberation for him. Still, he is not concerned about accurately reproducing these kinds of small surface details or building up a picture of what the country may look like. He is more concerned about the setting’s mood, atmosphere, and emotional intensities (Swaim, 2008).

**The Remains of the Day: England as a landscape**

Ishiguro believes that his interest in writing about universal themes was the driving force for his conscious decision to write the next book away from Japan, feeling a great sense of liberation. He wanted to test if he is accepted and appreciated worldwide as a novelist, not as a “mediator to Japanese culture” (Krider, 2008, p.129). Thus, he wrote his third novel, *The Remains of the Day*, first published in 1989. The dilemmas of the troubled past of the previous protagonist are well developed in this novel but in an English setting. The story takes place in England during the summer of 1959 at Lord Darlington Hall, lately owned by the American millionaire, Mr. Farraday. The story is a first-person narrative of Stevens, the butler, who is immersed in reminiscing his past and major incidents in Britain before and after the two World Wars.

Stevens served Lord Darlington as a butler for more than thirty-five years and wants to impress his new employer because he does not have anywhere else to go. Stevens keeps recalling his great old days with the former employer, Lord Darlington, and feels “uncertain,” “unsure,” and undecided” about his response to the American style of the new employer, Mr. Farraday, especially
his bantering (Ishiguro, 1993, p.14). As suggested by Mr. Farraday, he decides to go for a short trip around the country. He had traveled very little, restricted by his responsibility in the house. Only on such a trip, he has the chance to think about his long experience as a kind of self-exploration. Stevens is overwhelmed by the English landscape while riding around the English countryside. That English landscape at its finest possesses a quality that the landscapes of other nations inevitably fail to possess. He felt deeply satisfied “in the presence of greatness. We call this land of ours Great Britain” (p.28).

His thoughts about the greatness of the beautiful English landscape lead him to discuss the most debatable topic in his profession of defining ‘a great butler.’ Stevens strongly believes that this ‘dignity’ is something one can meaningfully strive for throughout one’s career, with years of self-training and the careful absorbing of experience. To him, his father was the embodiment of dignity; he so professionally carried out his duties and so well he used to hide his feelings even it was the death of his elder son. He believes that the great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to perform professionally; they are not shaken out by any external surprising or astonishing events. Their sense of professional responsibility drives them to better strive towards attaining dignity for themselves. Stevens also believes that great butlers are part of the English tradition because other countries have only manservants; an important advantage the English have over foreigners.

One of the moments his ‘professionalism’ was tested occurred with his father’s death, his great mentor. His father joined the Hall in 1922 as an under-butler after the death of his employer. He was in his seventies, and his health was deteriorating, but Miss Kenton, the housekeeper, used to take care of him. While they were preparing for the conference Lord Darlington held in March 1923 to discuss the Versailles treaty, his father suffered a stroke, and the lord asked Stevens to reduce his father’s duties, who got angry at the decision. His father passed away, but Stevens could not stop tending to the party hall. At the same time, Stevens considers his behavior that evening as “a large sense of triumph” recalling the ‘great butlers” (p.110). On his trip, Stevens recalls another compelling memory that shows how he maintains his professionalism in restraining his emotions. Once, he saw Miss Kenton crying in her room but he did not move, attending to his duties to the most powerful gentlemen of Europe who were conferring over the fate of the continent. That moment filled him with “a deep feeling of triumph” which started to well up within him, managing to preserve his dignity in keeping with his position (pp.227-28).

His loyalty to his first employer, Lord Darlington, was also tested. Despite the rumors about Lord Darlington’s involvement with the Nazis, Stevens recalls other memories and describes him as a truly good man and a gentleman of great moral stature. Today, Stevens is proud to have given Lord Darlington his best years of service. What the people say nowadays about Lord Darlington are foolish things. He refutes the talks and allegations linking the lord to the Nazis, the British Union of Fascists, or his anti-Semitism. Stevens is not ashamed of his association with Lord Darlington, and he regrets nothing. Looking back over his career thus far, Stevens’ chief satisfaction derives from what he achieved during those years, and he is “today nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege” (p.126).
Stevens has the chance to reflect on his long experience on the trip, and he is still optimistic about the future. That conflicting past, which is shameful to the people around him, is retrospected. He tells himself that “one should not be looking back to the past so much” (p.139). Still, he has more years of service, and Mr. Farraday is an excellent employer, he is an American gentleman he has a special duty to show all that is best about service in England. He just needs to focus on the present not thinking about the past. Stevens, who rarely has the chance to socialize and talk with people, meets the village hosts. Their talks test his own concept of dignity which he always associates with being a gentleman. Mr. Smith is not satisfied with what Stevens has said. Smith believes that dignity is not only for the gentlemen but for all the people in the country who fought Hitler to avoid being enslaved. They are born English, to be free, to express their opinion freely, and vote for their members in the parliament. Smith’s saying, “That's what dignity's really about […] You can't have dignity if you're a slave” (pp.185-86) shocks Stevens and shakes his concept of dignity.

Stevens feels discomfort with their idealistic and theoretical talks. Meanwhile, his narrative sheds light on the situation in England at that time. He recalls what once Lord Darlington said about the continuing crisis with ordinary, decent working people suffering terribly in Britain. The situation is regrettable year after year, and nothing gets better with the different committees, debates, and procrastination. On recalling these talks about politics, Stevens believes that this is a kind of ‘misguided idealism’ which affected many of his generations throughout the twenties and thirties. However, Stevens holds a different point of view that it is not the business of the butler to meddle in the great affairs of the nation, but his duty is to provide good service “to those great gentlemen in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies” (pp.199-201) if a butler is not supposed to formulate his own strong opinions on his employer's affairs. If he does, he is bound to lack the quality of loyalty essential in all good professionals. Stevens justifies his concept of loyalty, claiming that there is nothing ‘undignified’ in such attitude if the employer embodies what is noble, admirable, and wise, to bestow him the best of their energy and service.

Stevens starts for the first time to relate himself to Lord Darlington differently. He claims that he cannot be held to blame because the passage of time has shown that Lord Darlington's efforts were ‘misguided,’ or ‘foolish,’ Stevens simply confined himself quite properly to affairs within his own professional realm. He carried out his duties to the best of his abilities. If his lordship's life and work turned out to look “a sad waste,” Stevens should not feel any regret or shame on his own account. (p.201). This new realization brings to his mind an important talk with Mr. Cardinal, the journalist and the son of the Lord’s closest friend. Mr. Cardinal kept blaming Stevens for not realizing what was going on in Darlington’s Hall and the activities of the Lord, for not being ‘curious,’ suspicious,’ and for not caring about the Lord. He questioned Stevens’ loyalty to the Lord, and the Crown. Stevens defended himself that it was not his position to display curiosity about such matters, and he did not notice any development. Mr. Cardinal clarified that his lordship has probably been the single most useful pawn Herr Hitler had in Britain, establishing links between Berlin and over sixty of the most influential British citizens. What Stevens understood was his lordship’s strive “to aid better understanding between nations […] to ensure that peace will continue to prevail in Europe” (pp. 225). Stevens, could not, at that time, think of or question his lordship’s sound judgment.
Finally, Stevens meets Miss Kenton, now Mrs. Benn who has been married for more than twenty years. As they talk, he recognizes a weariness with life; the spark had gone, with sadness in her expressions. His heart ‘was breaking,’ and he realizes that it was a lost opportunity of a romantic relationship, or even to have her back in Darlington Hall. She is happy with her husband and they are expecting their first grandchild. When she asks him about his future, he replies, “I know I am not awaited by emptiness. There’s work, work and more work.” (pp.237, 239). He asks her if she is unhappy? She replies and justifies that she is grateful for what she has. Both realize the terrible mistakes they have made with their lives, but it is difficult for them to turn back the clock.

On the last day of the trip, Stevens meets a retired butler while sitting on the bench. Stevens praises Lord Darlington for admitting he had his own mistakes, and the path he chose was “a misguided one.” In contrast, Stevens cannot do that as he believes he was doing something “worthwhile” (p. 234). The other butler confronts him with the truth that his attitude is all ‘wrong,’ and asks him not to keep looking back all the time, but to keep looking forward and to enjoy himself for “the evening is the best part of the day” (p.244). The man leaves, but Stevens thinks of his advice that he should cease looking back so much and should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what ‘remains of his day.’ Stevens realizes that it is useless to look back and blame one’s self.

What is the point in worrying oneself too much about what one could or could not have done to control the course one’s life took? Surely it is enough that the likes of you and I at least try to make our small contribution count for something true and worthy. And if some of us are prepared to sacrifice much in life in order to pursue such aspirations, such that is in itself, whatever the outcome, cause for pride and contentment. (p. 244)

Sitting on the bench, Stevens observes closely the throngs of people laughing and chatting, families with children, couples, young and elderly, walking arm in arm, friends, and strangers laughing together merrily. He reflects on how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly. He expects that they have that skill of bantering, so he begins to look at the whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically; in bantering lies the key to human warmth. He will be practicing with a renewed effort to please and surprise his employer. Though Stevens started questioning and evaluating his past and concepts of dignity and loyalty, he fails to understand and liberate himself from that prison. Stevens’ realization at the end of the novel, as Ishiguro comments, “is not an achievement at all; it’s just cowardice, it’s just a way of running away from the really challenging, really scary part of being a human being” (Swaim, 2008,p.102).

Though The Remains of the Day is labeled by many as a British historical novel, Ishiguro claims that it is not that kind of nostalgic novel with the ongoing harmless nostalgia industry for a time that did not exist. He reworked a particular myth of that mythical landscape of England because he was not interested in giving specific details about specific societies (Vorda & Herzinger, 2008). At the same time, Ishiguro claims that he does not rewrite history but uses it as a technical device. He, and some of his British contemporaries, go to history looking for a period and a place where their stories could come to life. He adds that those young British writers were aware that many people worldwide were not interested in the modern British novel “as being very
inward-looking, obsessed with class.” Ishiguro relates this to “the fact that the British Empire had collapsed and that for many generations, British writers did not have to worry about being provincial” (Gallix, 2008, pp.140-41). He adds another reason that it is his generation’s responsibility to keep the memories of what happened earlier in the twentieth century. This generation is the distant link to the war through their parents and what their parents told them.

The England represented in *The Remains of the Day*, as Ishiguro claims, has very little resemblance to the England he grew up in or the England most of the English readers would recognize. He was “very conscious” of this paradox. The England of *The Remains of the Day* as he says:

is too English. I put together that England very consciously, it is a kind of mythical England. There is a nostalgia industry and to some extent I just wanted to play with those stereotypes, partly because it was enjoyable to recreate that world of Wodehouse, but also to subvert it, to turn that myth into something slightly different and to suggest that there was a dark side and a cold side to it. (p.143)

In *The Remains of the Day*, which did very well around the world, Ishiguro tuned not only the English landscape into a metaphor but also the Wodehouse butler. In some interviews, he mentioned that he implemented the metaphor of the butler for different reasons. First is the resemblance of that metaphor to our own lives. He explains that “we're rather like butlers” when we do our little jobs or work for an employer, an organization, or a political cause (Swaim, 2008, p.101). To Ishiguro, the butler is a figure of “emotional suppression, the tendency to mistake the tendency to equate expressing emotion with weakness, […] a trait very strong in English society and Japanese society” (Swaim, p.102). Ishiguro portrays this butler as a coward who “just retreats and hides from that arena of scary human emotions,” by pretending to be utterly professional, seeking out some sort of special dignity (Swaim, p.102). On the other hand, Ishiguro admits that Stevens, “misguidedly […] is so ambitious to achieve a certain ideal that he does so at a terrible cost. He actually loses a part of himself that is crucial: that is to say, his capacity to love” (Kelman, 2008, p.46). Stevens terribly struggles when he equates feelings with weakness, denying that emotional side that can love and that can suffer.

**Discussion**

In writing these three novels, Ishiguro was not writing history of the two imperial landscapes of Japan and England as many claimed. While exploring these settings, he was trying to find his own territory, not only the cultural one but also the literary fictional one. When he wrote *The Remains of the Day*, he started as he stated for the first time to be very conscious of his own style after reading and considering what the reviewers and critics pointed out about his style which “seemed to be unusually calm with all this kind of strange turmoil expressed underneath the calm” (Vorda & Herzinger, p.76). He started to question his own style, and his ‘natural voice’, trying to consciously explore the conflicting values of dignity and cowardice; an emotional arena which is “the scariest arena in life” (Vorda & Herzinger, p.77). He explains that this novel actually tackles the implications of that kind of style of the inner voice produced in the first two books on a thematic
level. With *The Remains of the Day*, Rushdie believed that Ishiguro was “capable of travel and metamorphosis” (2012).

Etsuko, Ono, and Stevens, the protagonists of these novels, have the passion and real urge to contribute to something greater and larger, driven to do it perfectly. They misused their talents and wasted their energies, lacking the insight and understanding of the world around them. Ishiguro stresses that their lives are wasted because they do not have any extraordinary insight into life. “They're not necessarily stupid, they're just ordinary” (Vorda & Herzinger, pp.86-87). He used Stevens, the Wodehouse butler, as a metaphor to stand for a greater human theme. He explains that we are like butlers when we have our little things in life, we learn, trying to do our best to offer a little contribution to somebody, or an organization, or a cause, or a country.

In these three novels, Ishiguro used the same material to cover the same territory. He was concerned with aged protagonists who look back over their lives, victimized by self-delusion and their capacity to lie to themselves. He was trying to refine what he did in each one of them. With *The Remains of the Day*, as he mentioned, he felt that he came to the end of that process, “closing in on some strange weird territory” as a writer conscious of his development (Vorda & Herzinger, pp. 84-85). The challenge he faced was trying to identify those things that “still mean something to you, that still feel unfathomed in some way, and that is the way that you close in further and further on this territory” (p. 85). He adds that *The Remains of the Day* was the end of that process and the last episode of the three novels where self-deception is dealt with differently; absurdly exaggerated. At that time, as he clarifies, he was interested in how people lie to themselves to make things palatable. He adds,

I was interested in how someone settles on a picture of himself and his life […] I wanted something that would reflect the uncertainty and chaos I started to feel […] I wanted to write a book not from the viewpoint of someone looking back and ordering his experience, but of someone in the midst of chaos, being pulled in different directions at once, and not realizing why. (Jaggi, 2008, p.117)

Ishiguro was frustrated with the British reception and readership of *The Remains of the Day* which labeled the novel as a book about a certain historical period in England. Some people, especially in Britain, thought it was about the fall of the empire, or the Suez Crisis, or the British appeasement of Nazi Germany. They did not read it, as he says, “as a parable or see it take off into a metaphorical role” (Vorda & Herzinger, p.84). In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro was not concerned with the government issues, or the Thatcher's glorification and mythification of England's Victorian heritage and morality. As he states, he was “conscious of the heritage industry and the English attitude towards Englishness.” Thus, he was trying to subvert that romanticized tourist vision of England” (Groes, 2011, p.250). When Ishiguro was asked about his relationship with politics as reflected in *The Remains of the Day*, and *An Artist of the Floating World*, he said that he had that “unease about the extent to which you can invest your own energies in some political cause” (Groes, p.250). His protagonists, Ono and Stevens, felt anxious to put their work to a political purpose rather than doing their jobs for the job’s sake as a butler and an artist. They go one step further by “serving a greater cause’, and that's where it starts to go wrong” (Groes, p.250).
Ishiguro believes that the stories of Ono and Stevens raises questions of how possible it is to contribute to the good of the world? Do these novels close on a hopeful note or not, particularly as Ono and Stevens discover that have not succeeded despite their best efforts? Ishiguro stresses that Japan and the younger generation of people coming up with the same sense of patriotism or idealism that Ono had, but living in different times can have a better chance of creating something worthwhile. “A new generation comes along; Japan can try again” (Shaffer, 2008, p. 170). So, Ishiguro intended that mixed hope at the end of the novel. For Stevens, the readers doubt if he can succeed in changing or becoming a new person in the remains of his life. His attempts to improve his bantering skill might be hopeless but Ishiguro believes that the fact of his self-discovery is an achievement and a sort of dignity in itself. There is something noble, even heroic in his ability to face up to those very painful things about himself. There is something positive about Stevens's triumph over that impasse, even though there is still something sad about him (Shaffer, 2008).

Conclusion

This paper has explored Ishiguro’s The Remains of the Day as a pivotal turning point in Ishiguro’s literary journey. In this novel, Ishiguro brilliantly and masterfully managed to turn away from the post-World War II traumatized Japanese setting and characters of his first two novels, to the very English landscape of the third novel. He subverted not only the Japanese landscape but also the British landscapes into mythical metaphors to approach more universal themes. Ishiguro estranged himself from the confinements of his precious county Japan, traveling the British landscape, the country that awarded him a knighthood in 2018 as forming part of “his big love affair” with the British culture, and for services to literature. He was ready to explore new landscapes in his subsequent novels.

The Remains of the Day was Ishiguro’s final episode and the end of a process to these settings and themes. He liberated himself from any internal national voices, to more unifying emotions: thinking beyond the dividing walls and struggling together as human beings, and being part of the story of international peace and harmony. Individuals, as well as great nations and empires, may struggle and suffer from shameful pasts. Nations and empires may fall, but chance is there for a dignified decent rising to restore justice and peace. With that process of metamorphosis, Ishiguro is like that ancient mythical bird ‘Fenghuang hōō’ or phoenix with its melodious cry. After a long life, and gathering all the ill-will, suffering, and other negative things of the world, the bird plunges itself into fire, sacrificing itself, then miraculously, a new phoenix springs from the ashes flying to the city of sun: the place that is blessed with utmost peace and prosperity and happiness. Kazuo Ishiguro is that great white bird rising from the smoke and dust of the explosion in his mother’s story, flying, and singing melodies of hope and peace to the whole world, for a new dawn and another brighter day.

About the author:
Dr. Dawla Saeed Alamri
Assistant Professor of English Literature at the University of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. She is a member in the Department of English, College of Languages and Translation, University Of Jeddah, Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Her research interests are in Feminism, Postmodern
Literature, Colonial and Post-Colonial Literature and Culture, Gender Studies, and Shakespeare. https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6428-7133

References


