



“Tradition in Transition: Examining Class Conflict and Social Evolution in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*”

Mr. Jeron¹, Dr. Vidyadass²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, RVS College of Arts and Science (Autonomous),
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

²Associate Professor, Department of English, RVS College of Arts and Science (Autonomous),
Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract:

This paper explores the class and social changes in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* focusing on how it shows the problems in the British class system. The novel is set in a large English house that is slowly losing its importance after World War II and it shows how the power of rich and noble families becomes weaker over time. Through the character of Stevens, the butler, the writer shows how servants were expected to be loyal and obedient. When a new American owner takes control of the house, Stevens finds it hard to adjust. This shows the big social changes happening in Britain after the war. Overall, the novel talks about class, social change, and how old traditions slowly disappear. The findings highlight that the British class system was slowly breaking down, aristocracy were declining, people struggled to accept social change and traditional master-servant relationships were no longer strong or respected.

Key Words:

Social, Cultural, Loyalty, Butler, Aristocratic, Transformation, Professional

Introduction

English Literature reflects human life, culture, and society through imaginative and creative writing across different periods. Contemporary literary works reflect current issues, modern life, and diverse perspectives. Kazuo Ishiguro is one of the most significant contemporary writers whose works explore themes of memory, identity, and human emotion. He written many novels some of them are *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), *The Remains of the Day* (1989). He won the Booker Prize in the year 1989 for his novel *The Remains of the Day* and he won Nobel Prize in the year 2017. Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* explores the themes of class and social change, duty and professionalism, regret and missed opportunities. Ishiguro left Japan at the age of five and moved to England. Ishiguro also faced social and cultural changes in his life from the small age that was expressed in this novel.

This paper examines how tradition suppresses Stevens's emotional and personal desires and how social and class changes lead him to regret missed opportunities in *The Remains of the Day*. For centuries, England and its people followed long-established traditions before World War II. The butler tradition in England was an important part of the aristocratic household system, especially from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. Stevens, the protagonist of the novel, serves as a butler under aristocratic employers. In Day Two of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, Lord Darlington says, "We're always the last, Stevens. Always the last to be clinging on to outmoded systems" (39). This reflects Lord Darlington's awareness that British society is slow to adapt the changing times, especially with regard to aristocratic traditions. This old tradition makes Stevens believe that true greatness in a butler's life comes from professional dignity and loyalty. Stevens admires Lord Darlington not only as his employer but as a symbol of English tradition.

As Stevens believes in traditional social order he follows his father's professionalism. "Butlers of my father's generation, I would say, tended to see the world in terms of a ladder - the houses of royalty, dukes and the lords from the oldest families placed at the top..." (79). His father's generation, butlers had the high social hierarchy in their professions and they are placed 3rd from the top by royal houses, dukes and lords.

Stevens's father served as butler in the Darlington Hall that inspires Stevens. He admired his father and had the ambition to become a butler and served several aristocratic families and also served Lord Darlington Hall. In Day One of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, "It was my firm conviction that at the peak of his career at Loughborough House, my father was indeed the embodiment of 'dignity'" (23). His father served the Lord Darlington even though he was gravely ill, as the epitome of dignity and professionalism. Stevens's father symbolizes England's traditional devotion to one's master and old English order. Stevens believes a true butler must never remove his professional suit, even under emotional strain and remain calm, controlled, and impassive. That reflects when his father died ill during a meeting, he remains calm and controlled with his emotion, responding with composure: "I'm very busy just now, Miss Kenton. In a little while perhaps." "In that case, Mr Stevens, will you permit me to close his eyes?" "I would be most grateful if you would, Miss Kenton" (74).

In Day Two of *The Remains of the Day*, Lord Darlington's political work reveals his complexity. By the turn of 1922, his lordship was working with a clear goal in mind. This was to gather under the very roof of Darlington Hall the most influential of the gentlemen whose support had been won with a view to conducting an 'unofficial' international conference - a conference that would discuss the means by which the harshest terms of the Versailles treaty could be revised" (51).

Lord Darlington takes part in meetings with important people and tries to influence international politics. Sometimes his actions seem morally doubtful or confusing. Although he appears modest and also with a side of secretive and controlling. Stevens also thinks about the criticism Lord Darlington received for his political views. He feels that many people misunderstood him. However, even if Lord Darlington's political decisions were questionable, Stevens believes he acted according to what he thought was right. Throughout the novel Stevens insists that Lord Darlington was a gentleman and feels no shame in having served him. Stevens consistently defends Lord Darlington, insisting that he was "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" (41). Stevens's repeated assertion of his respect and admiration about Darlington's true goodness highlight his unquestioning loyalty.

In addition to his loyalty, it is rooted in his professional and personal respect let him to overlook any moral flaws in his employer. After Darlington's death, Stevens refuses to acknowledge his employer's moral errors. He insists repeatedly that Lord Darlington was a gentleman and feels no shame in having served him. These kind of loyalty of butlers are seen in England before the modern age and also portrayed in many authors. In Act One the play *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the butler Lane says: "I believe it is a very pleasant state, sir. I have had very little experience of it myself up to the

present” (10). Lane does not argue with Algernon about marriage. Even though Algernon speaks casually and cynically about Marriage, Lane replies politely and respectfully. Lane’s reply shows his loyalty as a servant because he maintains respect and proper manners while speaking to his master. He does not challenge Algernon’s views but answers in a controlled and humble way, showing professional discipline. In Chapter One of *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, The butler Betteredge says:

I went with the bride to the bride's husband's house and lands down here... ‘Sir John,’ she says, ‘I can't do without Gabriel Betteredge.’ ‘My lady,’ says Sir John, ‘I can't do without him, either.’... It was all one to me where I went, so long as my mistress and I were together. (13)

The deep trust between master and servant is evident from above quotation. Lady Verinder declares that she can’t do without Betteredge, and his husband Sir John also agrees. This mutual dependence reflects the stable hierarchical structure of Victorian society, where loyal servants were considered part of the household. These represents the traditional Victorian ideal loyalty of a butler, who remains attached to one family for life. But this traditional character of the butlers starts to change after the World War- II. These changes were clearly portrayed in the novel *Remains of the Day*.

After the World War II England faced the decline of empire and aristocratic power. Mr. Farraday owned the Darlington Hall after the death of Lord Darlington, it made a huge difference in his life. Mr. Farraday change all things according to his taste. The traditional way of running the house were changed. Mr. Farraday represents a modern and informal attitude toward service, which sharply contrasts with Lord Darlington’s traditional expectations. Unlike the aristocratic belief in lifelong devotion, Farraday encourages Stevens to take personal time. In the preface of the novel “You realize, Stevens, I don’t expect you to be locked up here in this house all the time I’m away. Why don’t you take the car and drive off somewhere for a few days? You look like you could make good use of a break” (4). This statement reveals Farraday’s practical and humane outlook. He sees Stevens as an employee who deserves rest, not as a servant whose identity is entirely tied to the house.

Mr. Farraday’s modern way of approach in managing the servants is differs from Lord Darlington. Darlington maintained large number of staff to reflect aristocratic grandeur. Stevens asked for regular staff plan but Farraday focuses on efficiency and cost. Contrastingly Stevens recalls that Farraday mentioned that an additional servant could be hired if necessary which was not so earlier. “...were it to prove necessary, then an additional member of staff could be hired. But he would be much obliged... if I could ‘give it a go with four’.” (21). This statement reveals Farraday’s business-oriented thinking. The house is no longer a symbol of prestige but a property to be managed practically, and Stevens’s profession is reduced to functional service rather than nobility.

The traditional change Stevens experience the friendly way of attitude from Mr. Farraday. When Stevens mentions Miss Kenton, Farraday jokes, “My, my, Stevens. A lady-friend. And at your age” (16). This remark would have been unthinkable under Lord Darlington, who maintained strict professional boundaries. Farraday’s teasing reflects a shift from the traditional aristocratic employer-servant relationship to a more casual, American style of interaction. However, this informality makes Stevens uncomfortable, as it challenges his belief in dignity and emotional restraint. Moreover, Farraday expects friendliness and humour. Farraday says, “You’re not going to start weeping on me, are you, Stevens? I don’t mind telling you, Stevens, this house could do with a little more bantering” (14). The cultural difference between the traditional English butlers ideology and the relaxed American employer-employee relationship is highlighted.

The traditional English aristocratic world declined and is clearly expressed through Mr. Farraday's observation, "You realize, Stevens, this is probably the last of the great English houses" (72). Darlington Hall no longer represent political power or social grandeur. Farraday's remark highlights the historical shift from the age of aristocratic influence to a modern world in which such institutions are fading. The comment emphasizes the end of the grand butler tradition that Stevens continues to uphold.

Ryan S. Trimm argues that Stevens represents the decline of traditional British society, "Stevens's role as servant signals an outdated order and a superseded Britain" (Trimm 3). This idea highlights how the novel portrays the collapse of the aristocratic system and the changing social structure of post-war England. The decline of the traditional servant system and the butler class is reflected in several literary and visual works that portray social change in Britain. In *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh, the narrative illustrates how the long-established aristocratic order begins to break down during the twentieth century. Wealthy aristocratic families gradually lose power and influence, and maintaining large country estates with numerous servants becomes increasingly difficult. As a result, traditional servant roles such as butlers begin to disappear, reflecting the broader decline of Britain's rigid class hierarchy.

A similar theme appears in *The Shooting Party* by Isabel Colegate, which portrays the final moments of the aristocratic lifestyle just before the outbreak of World War I. The grand estate and the carefully organized shooting event symbolize a social order that is about to fade. Historical developments such as industrialization, the growth of democracy, and the rise of the middle class contribute to the weakening of aristocratic authority and the decline of the servant system, including the role of the butler.

Similarly, the television series *Downton Abbey*, created by Julian Fellowes, manifest the way the number of servants who gradually decreased because maintenance large estates become expensive and impractical in the long run. Younger members of the working class increasingly pursue new opportunities rather than remaining in lifelong domestic service. Together, these works demonstrate how social, economic, and historical changes in twentieth-century England led to the gradual decline of the traditional butler and servant class.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the life of Stevens as butler before World War I is the symbol of discipline, loyalty and the hierarchical structure of aristocratic households. After the World War the rise of middle class, industrialization, and social transformation weakened the power of the aristocracy. Stevens life under Farraday clearly portrays the traditional change. The works such as *The Importance of Being Ernest* and *The Moonstone* clearly portray the life of butler in the Britain before the World War and the novels *The Shooting Party*, *Brideshead Revisited* and *Downton Abbey* portray the traditional aristocratic class distinctions are diminishing, influenced by imperial decline and globalization, the novel illustrates both the personal and societal impacts of these shifts.

Work Cited:

1. Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Remains of the Day*. Faber and Faber, 1989.
2. Wild, Oscar. *The Importance of Being Ernest*. Penguin Books, 2000.
3. Collins, Wilkie. *The Moonstone*. Notion Press, 2019
4. Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*. Penguin Classics, 2000.
5. Loncraine, Richard, director. *The Shooting Party*. EMI Films, 1985.
6. Fellowes, Julian, creator. *Downton Abbey*. ITV Studios, 2010–2015.
7. Trimm, Ryan S. “Inside Job: Professionalism and Post-Imperial Identity in *The Remains of the Day*.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 16, Issue. 2, 2005, pp. 135 –166. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10436920590946796>

