

# Narrative Technique and the Postmodern Turn in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*

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**ABSTRACT :** *The postmodern novel, it is argued tends to be “subversive” of the very literary tradition to which it professes to belong. The juxtaposition of the two terms ‘postmodern’ and ‘novel’ and their relationship is considered ironic, because undermining of the genre of the novel, is a stated function of the postmodern. Literary critics have commented on how in the postmodern age, the novel mutates and adapts itself anew by breaking with the earlier narrative techniques. It preoccupies itself with presenting the inner world of the characters, their insecurities, anxieties and dilemmas. Temporally, it no longer follows the linear chronology of traditional narratives. Mirroring the deeply alienated and fragmented self, emerging out of the calamitous events of history in the twentieth century and the dehumanizing effect brought about by rapid technological advancements (Bauman, Liquid Modernity), a certain element of strangeness is evident in the postmodern novel. Almost everything, i.e., right from the plot structure to character delineation seems to be radically altered and the reader has no way of understanding in what conditions of the real world the characters have been conditioned or shaped by or what standards of rationality or values, they are departing from. Thus, the conventions of realism and sanity, (which presupposed the universality of human condition) are subverted. Individuals are often manifested as structure-less beings, continuously mutating, while their actions and behavior appear arbitrary and self-contradictory, and hence extremely baffling to the readers. Fiction thus, becomes a metaphor of fragmentation and postmodern disorientation. The paper will discuss how Kazuo Ishiguro deploys all these elements of metafiction in *The Remains of the Day*. The novel reveals the fragmented self that is essentially preoccupied with the ontological recollection. No particular time frame is evident to understand the story line in a chronological order. There is a tension of temporal distortion throughout the text and characters.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Postmodern, fragmented self, narrative technique, unreliable narrator,*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of the English novel in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, concomitant with the rise of an educated middle class and an explosion in printing, provided early proponents of the new genre like Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, a widened canvas to entertain and inform their readers. Supplanting the romance of the earlier era, the new form sought its expression in realism in attempting to present readers with “a slice of life” (Nicol, 2008, 18). In his authorial preface

to *Moll Flanders*, Daniel Defoe informs his readers that his character, Moll Flanders was real and very much identifiable in contemporary England. The realists strived for verisimilitude, as they aim to create an image of the world, similar to their own, so that the two would be indistinguishable.

Modernism, an avant-garde movement, that gained ascendancy in arts and humanities, around first World War, came to oppose the realism of nineteenth century with its claim of presenting “the unadorned facts of the world around.” As a reaction to realism, modernists like D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf refused to subscribe to the methods adopted by the realists of depicting everyday actions of quotidian life. They did not think it was possible to depict real life without first focusing on a character’s subconscious. Influenced by the new understanding from developments in philosophy, cognitive science and psychology, these twentieth century writers felt that the individual psyche is always subject to unknown forces and hence the reality captured can never be free of bias or alteration (Galens 181). They sought to present the world by concentrating largely on human experience, i.e., through exploration of the subconscious. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* with its narrative technique of stream-of-consciousness is a representative text of Modernism.

In a typical realist novel, the narrator often adopts an omniscient stance and assumes the role of a “mediator,” to frame the fictional world with a degree of verisimilitude (Nicol 2008), in order to make the readers relate to it. On the other hand, the modern novelists directly immerse the readers into the fictional world with a little or no guidance from the author (Galens, 19). The modernists strive to record the thoughts of the characters through self-told stories by protagonists, which become an important tool to share their beliefs and values. The modern novel, therefore marks a shift from the external reality to the internal universe of the characters. In order to represent the subjectivity of the characters, the modern novelists start to experiment with creative literary devices for focalization like the narrative voice and point of view. They experiment with the fragmented narrative structure, and the “interior monologue” or the “stream of consciousness,” technique to delve into the psyche of a character and represent the predicament of the modern man.

Postmodernism that gained ascendancy soon after, unlike the preceding modernist movement does not lament the idea of fragmentation or incoherence of the self, in fact it celebrates it. In an editorial preface to the book, *Narrative Fiction* (2003) Terence Hawkes opines that the second half of the twentieth century was ‘a time of rapid and radical social change’ (Kenan, 2005 ix) which lead to the questioning and erosion of many assumptions and presuppositions in the study of literature. Postmodern philosophers, like Jean Francois Lyotard and Linda Hutcheon, point out that the age of meta narratives is finally over and truth in its absoluteness is contested. All grand narratives, which tend to universalise human experience get refuted and ‘scepticism’ becomes the order of the day. Confounding versions of reality, which in turn get represented through a myriad “micro-narratives” that question the authority of received wisdom begin to come into existence. In her 1988 book, Hutcheon explains postmodernism as a contradictory enterprise, with its own art forms, that tend to install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, often quite self-consciously pointing to its own inherent paradoxes (*Postmodernism*, 23). The postmodernists come to negate most of the cultural certainties on which life in the West came to be structured since the age of enlightenment.

Kazuo Ishiguro, in his 1989 novel, *The Remains of The Day*, makes a skilful use of this negative space, to create a special kind of effect by expressing what he wishes to convey rather implicitly. By manipulating the two key elements of the narrative; the narrator's perspective and identity, Ishiguro strives to strike a balance between the positive and negative spaces of the novel. Typical of most post-world war fiction, *The Remains of The Day*, embodies characteristics like fragmented self, paradox, unreliable narrator etc.

### **A Micro-narrative**

Structured in first person, the narrative provides a rather restrained memoir of the key character, James Stevens' career as a butler at Darlington Hall. The novel opens with Stevens undertaking an important expedition, which frames the story, and introduces the recurring theme of the story, i.e., of confinement. This opening of the novel towards the end of the character's long and evidently exemplary career, becomes a narrative hook for the readers early on, and Stevens' expedition into the English countryside serves as the framing device for the story. The journey becomes metaphorical as it provides Stevens with a space to break out of the quotidian routine of the Darlington Hall, and ruminate on the past events of his life, and get a perspective on it.

For good part of his life, Stevens has lead a circumscribed life within the four walls of the Darlington Hall, which he, however does not consider as confinement at all. Being placed "in a house where the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land gathered" (*The Remains of The Day*, 4) with important matters at hand, he feels that he has seen more of England than most people, as it allows him a glimpse into the affairs of the upper class. Stevens believes that great butlers are stalwarts of English society and to maintain one's professional façade, one must at all times, regardless of one's circumstances stand upright and unflinching whatever may be life's situations. He obsesses over his appearance, always dressing immaculately to uphold his personal dignity. He boasts that he possesses "a number of splendid suits." It reveals to us that Stevens places too much importance on his professional role which includes his sartorial elegance. Stevens maintains his sobriety at all times, and suppresses every emotion, which he considers to be a sign of weakness.

Whilst grappling to interpret Steven's personality, the readers keep guessing on the authorial intention, whether it is to be a study of Steven's personality, English class or culture. It is evident that Ishiguro considers the individual, his protagonist, to be the most interesting subject. Readers become aware of the authorial manipulation, the way Ishiguro uses names to illustrate Stevens' vocation and show how his ideals underpin his selfhood. The milieu of the novel is pre-World War II England, when class stratification was an integral aspect of English society, when names bore a direct reflection of one's social status. Being a butler at Darlington Hall, Stevens prides himself in serving some of the most influential figures of England, that required him to follow protocols in use of titles, bearing in mind the correlation between names and dignity. The daily address of titles, reinforces to him the class hierarchy, that he was subordinate to the lords and other personages whom he serves. Readers are led to ponder over the notion of dignity, made to examine Stevens beliefs and his resolution to become a great and dignified butler. Dignity, for him, lies in conducting himself imperturbably in all situations. This excessive importance, Stevens gives to maintain his

professionalism, however effects his life greatly. It places him under social constraints, as he is compelled to preserve his dignity even at the cost of normal human emotion. Even on the day his father dies, Stevens is busy overseeing the banquet arrangements that his master, Lord Darlington was hosting for his German delegates. He does not take the time to mourn for his father (a matter he later recollects with great pride). Also, he cannot bring himself to reciprocate to Miss Kenton's expression of feelings, as to do so would mean compromising on his dignity. Besides, married life he thought was incompatible with loyal service to his master.

Being emotionally stunted, Stevens has a problem building rapport with his new American master, Mr. Faraday, who unlike Lord Darlington adopts an informal and casual way of interacting with his employees. He realizes the importance of banter, only at the end of the novel, when he meets a retired butler, with whom he starts a conversation. The man advises him to enjoy his old age. Sitting on a pier, Stevens starts paying attention to the chatter around him. Feeling positively predisposed, he begins to appreciate how banter is indeed "the key to human warmth" (*The Remains of The Day*, 245).

### **The Postmodern Turn**

In true postmodern vein, Ishiguro suggests that being human implies always being in transit, while being simultaneously involved in the cognitive process of making sense of the world. Self-narration becomes a form of communication ideally suited to cope with this transition. Such a transition often engenders the acts of remembering, forgetting and finally readjusting one's identity. Like in his other novels, here also Ishiguro applies the memory-identity analogy according to which an individual is best defined by the sum of his recollections. The narrative is developed by presenting a minute and analytic exposition of the character's mental life. This is effected through a temporal disruption of the traditional narrative.

Like other postmodernists, Ishiguro is a self-conscious artist, who is more preoccupied with the internal world of his protagonist. Ishiguro is aware that society expects art to perform a certain 'function' and as society's 'requirements' change, the artist also endeavours to fulfil that functional shift. Both the writer and his readers are now operating out of this new 'mental schema'. Moreover, Ishiguro manipulates the narrative to create a certain distancing effect between Stevens, the narrator, and his readers. Using a technique that Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Technique" (1917) refers to as 'defamiliarisation', Ishiguro chooses an everyday subject or object and presents it with a perspective, that makes it oddly unfamiliar, so that the readers can see it and experience it in an entirely new way. Ishiguro affects this, by creating not a regular butler serving his lordship, but the caricature of a butler, who is driven by an exaggerated sense of propriety and professional decorum. This prevents the readers from identifying with the character and the distance enables them, in an unfettered and cool manner to scrutinize Stevens' actions.

Ishiguro's authorial intent becomes clear, from the way in which Stevens communicates to the reader. Readers are never allowed to forget that, Stevens here, is both the protagonist and the narrator. In the course of his motor trip, and concomitantly his ruminations, Stevens' self-deception and subsequent disillusionment emanating from his concocted ideal becomes

evident. The readers get an insight into the subjectivity of the character, when Stevens self-consciously dwells on aspects of his self, his name, his room and his attire. This helps to convey subtly Stevens' unarticulated desires and regrets, however polished or restrained language he may use. It becomes evident that by suppressing his emotions, Stevens starts to lose sight of his true self. Ishiguro seems to caution, how excessive propriety and restraint (values prized by the English) bereft of human warmth, and affection can only lead to a deterioration of one's identity. Stevens strives his entire life to become a perfect butler by prioritizing his duty over everything in his life. Prioritizing duty over life and happiness prevents him from forging friendships or loving relationships in life. As an exemplary butler, he has been conditioned into thinking that duty comes before happiness, and perhaps that is what makes him lose his drive and sense of purpose in later life. Eventually, his own insecurities and his low self-esteem leads him to believe that his banal life as a butler was the only thing he was truly capable of becoming successful at. The readers follow his dilemmas, his regrets and disappointments which have haunting effect on them.

As the novel progresses, the readers learn that Stevens' though he feigns nonchalance towards Miss Kenton, has suppressed his true feelings for her, a source of great emotional distress to him, because it has prevented him from revealing his heart to the one woman he had loved. It becomes clear, quite early on in Stevens recounting of his past life, that he is an unreliable narrator. His lack of transparency, and his resorting to elaborate subterfuge in carefully guarding the contours of his life. Stevens seems psychologically invested in preserving the façade of his persona. by maintaining a consistent narrative. However, there are slippages. Through his meandering narrative, we as readers slowly begin to detect an attempt at inner surveillance required to protect the self-image. Ishiguro provides authorial clues to the readers, to understand Stevens' true desires in his life.

The most crucial moment in the novel, occurs only at the end of the book, when the sad reality of his wasted life dawns on Stevens as an epiphany. The tragic implication of everything that has occurred in Stevens' life, begins to fall into a proper pattern for the reader. Ishiguro reveals this by sequencing events within the timeline of the gradual revelation that dawns on the protagonist. It is revealed to Stevens, that he has been leading a life of quiet desperation. His inability to act upon his own emotions and his intellect has kept him, frozen in time, virtually untouched through all the momentous changes that have taken place in British society, since the early part of the 20th century. His impeccable social manners, his commitment to duty, unswerving loyalty to his master, and uncritical acceptance of the social mores and tradition has resulted in his becoming old-fashioned, an anachronism in the changed post war world. It has robbed him even of his initiative to act, as time has passed him by.

The timeline reveals to Stevens that his master, Lord Darlington indeed possessed feet of clay, as his anti-Semitism stands exposed. Besides, Stevens loses the only woman he had ever loved, who is now married to another. Thus Ishiguro situates the most critical moment in Stevens' life, a devastating climax in such a way that it is experienced by both the reader and the character simultaneously, which transforms Ishiguro's simple butler into a tragic character.

### **Narrative Technique**

The novel, starts with, and mobilizes events within the syntagmatic space of the story's sequence. There are two broad threads in the story, one of Steven's possible self-realisation, i.e., of his wasted life and another, the disclosure of his master, Lord Darlington's anti-Semitic predilection. All the other events in the story only serve to advance or amplify the sequence of events leading to the denouement of the story. The concatenation of minor events works to widen the space between the opening and the ending, leading to the realization of a possible outcome. Ishiguro delineates this space, to facilitate the temporal movement from one event to another, so that the story sequence moves towards a closure, yet seems to postpone it, presenting to the readers an enigma while delaying its resolution

It isn't until Stevens departs from Darlington Hall for a temporary respite into the countryside and looks back at his career spent in the service of Hall that he remembers he had indeed heard stories, subtly hinting at his master's culpability in allying himself with the German side, but had refused to give credence to them; avoided pondering over it back then. This aspect of revising the past is critical to the development of Steven's narrative, as it indicates how even small events, which he had overlooked in his life could have a significant impact on his future life.

The narrative voice adopts a ruminative style, conveying specific postmodernist elements like the use of flashback and fragmented recollections by Stevens. By alluding to real historical and fictional events in the novel, Ishiguro attempts to highlight, how the past had an impact not only on his protagonist's life in the novel, but also in general on the society which was struggling to come to terms with World War II and the uncertainty that the future held for them.

Stevens social setting to a large extent shapes and determines his consciousness, which determines the nature of his interactions with others, including Miss Kenton, whose consciousness is contrary to Stevens, causing her to fracture Stevens narrative, running as an undercurrent to expose the supposed truth of Lord Darlington's anti-Semitism and Stevens blind loyalty to his master. It exposes the hollowness of Stevens claims of dignity and professional integrity and the hypocrisy and unreliability of Stevens narration.

The narrative language of *The Remains of the Day* is reflective, with constant reference to the past, as the readers find Stevens referring to his former master, Lord Darlington, his father and Miss Kenton. The novel's narrative technique enables the recounting of these experiences, creating a ruminative space for Stevens to reflect on, and piece together the information that he receives from different sources regarding Lord Darlington's complicity in the German affair leading up to World War-II, in order to make sense of what happened in the past and its consequence for the future. Ultimately, Stevens ethical positioning presents a challenge to the readers, as there is a considerable distance between his ethical assumptions and those of the readers. This gap remains unbridged till the end of the novel.

### **Memory and Psychological Realism**

In one of his interviews, Ishiguro talks about his abiding interest in first-person narrators and their use of memory. Ishiguro says that he has special interest in how one uses memory for

one's own purpose and one's own end. Summarising the key theme of the novel, *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro in one of his interviews says, it is “following somebody's thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves” (as reported in Wall, 1994). Structural devices of memory are deployed to provide a narratorial perspective, as events from the past are recollected and presented from the point of view of the ageing Stevens. During the course of his narration, Stevens sometimes acknowledges the inaccuracy of his recollections, which raises questions of his reliability as a narrator.

Ishiguro's novel manifests a central preoccupation with a highly reflexive self, that ruminates and reveals itself through an unfolding narrative, while inviting readers to meditate on the relative importance of memory and forgetfulness in both individual and communal life. This aspect of reflexivity typical of most postmodern narratives, makes the contemplative self, a curious object of interest. Stevens here draws close attention upon his own thoughts, values, feelings, actions and finally his identity.

There is something askew in the manner in which Stevens relates to his own past and present experiences. It creates a certain bewildering effect on the reader. As the narrator, Stevens must unravel himself by traveling back in time. This unravelling becomes the focal point of his narrative. Quite early in the text, the readers get a fair inkling on what Stevens is able to understand only partially with the denouement of his narrative. It is evident, Ishiguro's interest lies in showing not what the readers will stumble on but rather in showing what Stevens would discover, and how the discovery would finally affect him.

The continuing gap between what the readers are able to discern and Steven's strained and limited understanding, is what contributes to the meaning of the novel. It is what distinguishes Ishiguro's narrative technique from the other proponents of the psychologically realist tradition. Mapping Steven's extensive journey into the English countryside, the novel configures a spatial disposition of events, where we, as readers are exposed to the several dimensions of Steven's character. The paratactical temporal overlaps, rather than linear narration of events in time, helps the readers to follow Steven's train of thought as it keeps switching between anticipation and retrospection. It enables the readers to get a grasp on Steven's ethical dilemmas attendant on his transition from naivety to self-awareness, however partial it might be. Through a careful control of the distance between the narrator, Stevens and the readers, Ishiguro's makes the readers speculate on Steven's truth in retrospect. This distance is achieved through a subtle manipulation of the narrative voice that resonates with the people of his time (Matthews & Groes, 2009).

Steven's skewed perspective on his values, profession and life are exposed, not through an intrusion of the authorial voice but through the temporal manipulation of the narrative, and having Stevens' version conflict with the perspectives and accounts shared by the other characters in the novel like Miss Kenton and Reginald Cardinal.

Verisimilitude is maintained in the novel to help the reader familiarize themselves with the landscape, the character, and the behavior of the character. In that sense, realism, in the conventional sense is evident in Ishiguro's novels. Ishiguro's narrative technique enables the readers to recognize the characters in terms of their national attributes. The sense of Englishness is conveyed through the description of Stevens' master, a typical British aristocrat, and Steven himself a typical English butler, detailed description of Darlington Hall, a large mansion of the British aristocracy, British landscape, and its weather and misty landscape, all of which Ishiguro's descriptions appear to be realistic while also creating a sense of defamiliarisation, as the reader is unable to connect to this idyllic setting that

vanished long ago. Despite the fidelity with which Ishiguro describes the details of English countryside and life at the Darlington mansion, there is something elusive about the protagonist, Stevens, as he is not able to engage with the outside world but is found turning inwards, into his own mind. The schism in Stevens' character is evident, as his façade, i.e., his public persona is at variance with his private self. The narrator says:

“But what is the sense in forever speculating what might have happened had such and such a moment turned out differently? while it is all very well to talk of 'turning points,' one can surely only recognize such moments in retrospect. Naturally, when one looks back to such instances today, they may indeed take the appearance of being crucial, precious moments in one's life; but of course, at the time, this was not the impression one had . . . There was surely nothing to indicate at the time that such small incidents would render whole dreams forever irredeemable” (Ishiguro 130).

### **The Un-representability of truth**

Stevens is not always rational; readers can see his error of judgment. His narration is gradually revelatory. As the novel progresses there is some inclination of truth, however there is no conclusive truth as such. Only by reading in between through some slippages in the narration do the readers sense that Stevens has changed his perception about his master. Stevens says:

“Perhaps, then, there is something to his advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day. After all, what can we ever gain in forever looking back and blaming ourselves if our lives have not turned out quite as we might have wished? The hard reality is, surely, that for the likes of you and me, there is little choice other than to leave our fate, ultimately, in the hands of those great gentlemen at the hub of this world who employ our services. 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 to pursue such aspirations, surely that is in itself, whatever the outcome, cause for pride and contentment”. (Ishiguro 177).

Though he does not admit openly that his master was a traitor in joining hands with the Nazis, nevertheless by the end of the novel, the reader by following the stream of thought is able to detect the slight shift in Stevens thinking. There is an altered vision in the way in which he seeing things of the past. In that sense, he has evolved as a character that reveals the aspect of fluid identity. Stevens no longer feels that his Lord was a noble master or that he had served a noble cause. The narrative technique is very discursive and incidental. There is no 180-degree shift in the narrative perspective as Steven only expresses a hint of doubt. But the reader can discern the truth.

There is a dialectic between the public and the private self, they seem to be at war:

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. One has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that? (Ishiguro 176).



Thus, in Ishiguro's novel, there is the narrating self, i.e., the public persona and the analyzing self, i.e., the private self. The public persona is going through the emotions of the everyday world with certain ideals and prejudices and bias and the private self is the rational self. This is where Ishiguro's psychological realism is evident. Analyzing Stevens' character, the readers can see that in his case, the Freudian superego is always in control. The public persona is that of a butler that needs control. Stevens cannot display emotion, he suppresses his emotions and fantasies. Hence no sympathy develops between him and Miss Kenton.

## 2. CONCLUSION

These distinctive features of the novel are quite characteristic and representative of the Ishiguro's fiction. The selected novel *The Remains of the Day* thus can be read as a post-modern narrative because it adopts a mode of narration which departs from the traditional style of storytelling of the realistic and the modern novel form to a non-absolute form of narration.

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