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THE SPACES OF MYTH IN KAZUO ISHIGURO'S *THE REMAINS OF THE DAY*: EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONS OF MEMORY AND HISTORY

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Abstract:

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) reconstructs the experiences of an ageing butler, Stevens, trapped within the confined space of the house he has served in for many years. The contours of memory are drawn along the spatial dimensions of the house which serve as a space of contestation between traditional values and emergent cultural beliefs in the post-war period. Physical modifications on the architecture produce continuities and alterations within the subject, who inhabits the space. This paper seeks to explore the dynamics of remembering and forgetting which are determined by the sites of memory and which trace historical changes as well as shifts in identity politics in Ishiguro's novel. The paper critically assesses the idea of space, its functional dimension and mythic commemoration in relation to a symbolic historical past. It examines the development of subjectivity through the expansion of memory embodied in material form and the complex relationship between history and myth-making, which complicates individual identity. This paper further proposes that these spatio-temporal expressions can be understood as not only confined to the individual but may be extended to the domain of public memory and contextualized in a post-war British cultural politics of grief.

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The aim of this paper is to examine the fertile, contested and surprising intersection between space, memory and identity in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989). The paper begins with an elaboration on Darlington Hall, the site of memory and desire and the focal point around which the narrative develops. The architectural significance of the house is brought out through the discussion in order to demonstrate the engineering of space, where experience is contained and controlled. The historical context occurs as a palimpsest and the paper attempts to read space in terms of the historical, socio-cultural changes of the post-war period in which the novel is set. The paper attempts to investigate the complex interplay between the material conditions of space and the processes of commemoration. The need to territorialize memory is primarily for the purpose of uncovering a personal history of loss and to trace the development of subjectivity. My focus will be on exploring the spatial pattern in the novel that builds inconspicuous and involuntary places of memory.

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The paper relies on spatial criticism and memory studies as a critical tool to examine the idea of space and its underlying mechanisms in shaping cultural history, the relation between past and present, and the construction of identity in Ishiguro's novel. In this study of the text, I have referred to Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974) and Pierre Nora's *Realms of Memory* (1996) to provide a framework of critical analysis. The emergence of memory studies as an important field of scholarship in recent years has prompted the search of new issues and texts to expand research in the arena of contemporary social sciences. The paper will trace the internal structures of historicism in the novel through their representations as ideas, fantasies and effects of memory, time and space.

British estate novels with their lush green world, close knit rural communities and conspicuous manor houses are given to a romantic view of the picturesque English countryside. A house which is greatly admired would typically be situated in the middle of an extensive flower garden, with large quarters or apartments, pillared halls, ballrooms, long interconnected corridors, grand staircases and ancient libraries. The painting of "Tabley House in Cheshire" by Richard Wilson (1713-1782) presents an impressive image of the English country house. It evokes the local topography and attributes a centripetal force to the grand mansion which dominates the consciousness. Mark Girouard in his anthology, *A Country House Companion* (1987), argues that there is a mythology surrounding English country houses that extols them as magical places and their owners as wise custodians who tend the land, look after their tenants and servants, devote their lives to public service, fill their galleries with beautiful pictures and their libraries with rare books, and are unfailingly hospitable to friends and guests. The continuing attraction of the English country house to the artistic and literary imagination has been confirmed through novels such as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and Sarah Waters's *The Little Stranger* (2009) to list a few. The recent production of the massively successful TV series by Julian Fellowes, *Downton Abbey* (2010 – 2015) has also created a flurry of interest in country house fiction and the lives of its illustrious residents.

Decorated with rich carpets and tapestry, its niches filled with expensive china ware, the interior of the house would open up to the view outside through large windows raised to a certain height from the ground to lend an airy coolness, draped with delicately embroidered curtains fluttering nonchalantly in the air, overlooking lily ponds, with tea laid out in a quaint shadowy garden spot. The English manor house held a quiet yet assertive elegance and a magisterial capacity, commanding the labour and the tribute of the neighbouring villages. The lavishness of the house reflected the tastes of those who inhabited them. These small rulers- holders of property, rank, and title, enjoyed the taxes from the land in a largely agrarian society and with the emergence of a capitalist system, the profits from the ownership of local industry.

The surplus beyond that necessary for maintaining the retinue of servants and attendants, who would oversee the proper functioning of the house, contributed to an extravagance, which although characteristically muted as per the English temperament was distinctly elitist. The grand manor house with multiple structures and sections was more like a small community consisting of family and staff members moving in its insular orbit. Observers looking in from the outside imagined an idealized coherence and a stasis which was sharply disintegrating in a post war modern society. Physically imposing and tangible as these grand mansions were, until the early twentieth century, their power and influence could be traced even beyond the immediate surroundings of the house. However, the historical changes in Europe since the event of the war, led to a spatial turn which could be observed through a localized perspective. The crisis of the war delivered the final blow to the order and stability emblemized by the Western civilization. The

Third Reich represented the apogee of political radicalism in Europe and was countered by the facile policies of appeasement drafted by the Conservatives in order to prevent an inevitable war. Even at its end, with the imminent victory of the Allies and the hopes of survival and recovery, the war eventually came to be recognized as a metaphor for collective failure. The totality of the Second World War slowly led to a general impoverishment of English society and a withering away of Britain's prominence despite the optimism of Churchill. Straddling the devastation of lives and property and a sharp decline in the national economy due to the escalating costs of war and loss of colonies, England's condition was critical. The victory of the Allies and the end of totalitarianism in Europe was only a poor compensation for the pervasive sense of trauma and guilt which accompanied the Holocaust.

The loss of cultural capital also created a sense of psychological malaise which was difficult to overcome. Although Britain had emerged as the victor, its own fate had been hanging by a thread until the involvement of the United States of America had assured a decisive end to the Axis threat. The emergence of the United States as a super power in world politics in the years following the war, further cornered Britain's role in international affairs and policy making. In Britain, the changing socio-political map was also rapidly modifying the physical and cultural landscape which was dominated by the presence of symbolic monuments of pride, owned by the erstwhile aristocracy. The ruin of the great English manor houses was a slow and painful process much like the gradual decay and death of European society in the years of the war. The genteel custodians of culture were now faced with a moral, intellectual and financial bankruptcy. Their wealth greatly expended and their estate dysfunctional the members of the gentry were forced to renounce their power and control. The loss of aristocratic iconography including the rich collections of art, everything from fine furniture and paintings to books and manuscripts was irreversible, as the old order faced a hard and bitter economic crisis. Their estates, the 'miniature cities', were splintered to form more compact houses for the nouveau riche and tenement houses for the ordinary working classes.

The great houses of Britain caught in their twilight years echoed with a sense of spiritual isolation, anguish and loneliness. Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *The Remains of the Day* is laid on the nostalgic foundations of Darlington Hall where the spectral motions of a butler's daily life are used to evoke the structural magnificence of a great house. Darlington Hall is recalled by the butler through the poignant imagery of "those summer evenings" (Ishiguro, 2005, p.56) when climbing onto the second landing on the great staircase one encountered a series of orange shafts from the sunset breaking the gloom of the corridor where each bedroom door stood ajar. The correspondence between light and gloom traces the difficult relationship between the illusory greatness of cultural heritage and the grim reality of capitalist commodification which occurs profoundly with the house passing onto the hands of Mr. Farraday, an American businessman.

The architectural aspects, which provide definition to the grand house, are rarely mentioned by Stevens except the passing references to the darkened corners of the smoking room where Lord Darlington sat deep in conversation with his German friend, the banqueting hall where he took his meals and the summerhouse across the lawn where Lord Darlington entertained his guests at tea. The parts, which are remembered through fragments of memory, constitute the whole structure of the house which depends entirely on the readers' imagination for its physical appearance. In the 1993 film based on Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson, a number of locations were picturized in order to recreate the physical environment of Darlington Hall. Among them were the impressive locales of Dyrham Park,

Powderham Castle and Corsham Court. The cumulative effect distinctly creates an imposing structure for the fictitious Darlington Hall, which might have been difficult to produce otherwise.

With its rightful owner displaced and most of the house 'under wraps', Stevens is left, "recalling a time when I had had a staff of seventeen under me, and knowing how not so long ago a staff of twenty-eight had been employed here at Darlington Hall" (Ishiguro, 2005, p.7).

Once the house has ceased to be great and Lord Darlington has been dismissed, it becomes an object of fetishism for a rich American who treats it as an occasional holiday retreat. A vague semblance of the old order is maintained by employing a skeleton staff and Stevens, whose role as a butler is greatly diminished is forced to keep up his own importance by imagining serious problems in the 'staff plan' which require his close attention and scrutiny. The associative power of his words reveals the physical space of the great house by relating it to the rich social life which is now lost. He remembers fondly Lord Darlington's days, when ladies and gentlemen would often visit for many days on end and the servant halls would come alive with a sense of "true camaraderie" (Ishiguro, 2005, p.18) among his peers.

The conceived monumentality of the house is partially connected to a larger invisible ideological framework that imposes an undeniable field of control over the butler. An imperialist sensibility operates strongly in Stevens as he imagines the house as a cultural capital signifying the superiority of British enterprise. In many ways critical to this argument is the idea of space as an arena of power and how space is tied up with ideology. In this context, the unilateral understanding of time and space may be revised by thinking of space through the logic of imperialist power. The spatializing description of discursive realities gives on to the analysis of the related effects of power. The essentialism which Stevens attributes to Darlington Hall projects the representation of an imperialist culture as dominant and privileges the power of an exploitative economy which has directly or indirectly influenced the construction of the house.

The production of space and meaning in the context of the novel may further be understood through a close scrutiny of the politics of modernity. Henri Lefebvre in his seminal work, *The Production of Space* (1974) describes the discursive practises which determine the construction of spatial categories in western European culture. He states, "Not so long ago, the word 'space' had a strictly geometrical meaning: the idea it evoked was simply of an empty area...and the general feeling was that the concept of space was ultimately a mathematical one" (p.1). Lefebvre argues that modernity introduces fundamental epistemological changes in terms of the traditional conception of space. It leads to the understanding of space as an 'abstract' idea, determined by individual and collective processes of representation.

Lefebvre conceives of space not as an 'a priori' or ontological entity, but rather focuses on the strategies of producing space. For ontologizing space and spatiality symptomatically replicates, in the realm of thought, the domination of linear time over lived time already occurring more generally in modern society, inscribing the alienation of the rhythms of everyday life in what Lefebvre called 'abstract space'. The lived space which is associated with everyday life entails a contradictory realm of alienation and liberation. For Lefebvre, it is possible to extricate the promising aspects from this contradictory realm of lived space by reassembling and transforming fragments of life, not reifying existing separations of modernity as forms of absolute simultaneity or separate spatialities.

The idea of space which develops through the eyes of Stevens reveals continuing anxieties of loss and belonging, of alienation and liberation. The diminution of space, with parts of the house

wrapped up to avoid the labour of regular cleaning due to the lack of staff, is regarded by Stevens as a useful strategy. Yet, underlying his practicality and the transformative possibility of space is an erasure of the everyday life patterns which accompany the restriction of space. While Lefebvre's spatial writing discussed the processes of 'modernising the city' and 'urbanising space' which enabled an understanding of the notion of 'abstract space', Lefebvre also gave considerable weight to the materiality of space and the dialectics between the macro-order of society and the micro-realities of everyday life. Stevens' everyday life in Darlington Hall captures the contradictions of reality and possibility. He constantly struggles to measure the largeness of space against the reduction of its status, the process of expansion and contraction is synchronized. His private internal world collides sharply with external realities and Stevens is caught in the problematic of everyday life, which he refuses to relinquish. The residualized habits of everyday life appear petty in the face of the momentous political changes and emergent social formations outside, yet Stevens conceives of the space as an absolute, mythic, indivisible entity.

In *The Remains of the Day*, spatial thinking is not confined to a particular time or within the boundary of a particular space. Ishiguro tends to destabilize fixities of fact and truth by rendering Stevens as an unreliable narrator, and creating a complex network of spatial networks over wide expanses of historical time. The mapping of space is expansive and the subject is seen constantly resizing or re-negotiating with these shifting notions of space and time through memory. The imaginative topography of Ishiguro's Darlington Hall changes as swiftly as Stevens' mental state which moves from pure idealism to disillusionment and confusion.

The description of the architectural and spatial makeup of the house is sparse because although Darlington Hall is a monumental English space in imagination, it is only a shadow of the past in reality. It represents the lost totality of the pre-modern conception of space which forces of capitalism and modernity have changed. It is now substituted with a chaotic, unstructured, ephemeral idea of space that Stevens finds difficult to accommodate within his absolute view of the old house. Stevens however fails to realise that he is a product of both the 'now' and 'then'. He is bound to the social institutions he serves and his conception of 'dignity' is complicated by the fact that it collides with a complete surrender of self-autonomy to meet the demands of Lord Darlington, to whom he owes his obedience. While he regrets the long drawn out period of perceived transition from a servant keeping to a servant-less English society, he cannot help but privately entertain the thought that his life might have taken a very different, even happy turn if he had allowed his relationship with Miss Kenton the chance to move beyond its professional limits, that is if he had released himself from the obligation of 'duty' and adapted to the emerging liberal, democratic ethos of a modern age. Instead, he is caught in an 'idealised historical time' which emerges through the discursive processes of individual memory.

It is evident through Stevens' narration that the space of Darlington Hall, whether localised or universalised has become a part of his being. His self is fastened onto the space he inhabits, which itself is caught in the gap between form and flux. While the extraneous details of decor and dimension are rendered irrelevant due to their dysfunctional quality in the context of the empty house, Stevens forms its structural core and lends the house a sense of materiality through his presence. The actual house is masked by the discourse within the novel. It is positioned as a monument in the text without ever fulfilling that role, existing only as a conceptual space.

Oddly, despite his attachment to the house Stevens feels an exhilarating sense of release upon leaving Darlington Hall to embark on a road trip. He remarks:

But then eventually the surroundings grew unrecognizable and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries. I have heard people describe the moment, when setting sail in a ship, when one finally loses sight of the land. I imagine the experience of unease mixed with exhilaration often described in connection with this moment is very similar to what I felt in the Ford as the surroundings grew strange around me...The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 24).

In the 1993 film adaptation, directed by James Ivory and its screenplay written by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, this moment of departure is framed as a turning point in the plot. Iconographic memorabilia associated with the house and its period style blend with snatches of music and other cultural references to produce a kind of mediation as Stevens remembers the house over a passage of time. Time is viewed as a fusion of past and present encapsulated in a single, apocryphal moment; the final encounter with Miss Kenton. Stevens ironically remembers the young Miss Kenton he knew during their period of service as he is led on by his anticipation to meet her at the end of the journey. A relentless forward momentum and the dream-like slow-motion are used to project a self-indulgent, backward look at an idealised, lost culture and way of life.

The transition of time and space is connected with memory, which is a crucial part of the development of narrative language. The flashback, for example, one of the most basic and familiar devices for articulating memory in fiction, plays a fundamental role in establishing character, and in narrative exposition. Given the scope and complexity of the role of memory in helping us to understand Stevens' world, it is important to note the dissonances it creates in the narrative. The physical distance from Darlington Hall affords the butler the leisure to think about the past. Removed from his daily duties, Stevens is able to recollect with singular focus and re-evaluate with close attention the characters associated with the house: Miss Kenton, Lord Darlington, and his father, the elder Mr. Stevens.

Ishiguro presents these characters on the brink of momentous social and personal change, they express uncertainty and hesitation about moving forward into a brave new world, and use memory to articulate that anxiety. Stevens' father suffers due to his growing infirmity and finds it difficult to reconcile his own view of dignity with the emerging secular, democratic idea of labour. In the years leading up to the war, Britain struggled with continuing austerity and the domestic economy was in an uncertain condition, hence, the move to a bright, prosperous future seemed a very long way off. Stevens' father insists on duty, which he fails to acknowledge as a form of servitude. He imparts this false idea of dignity to his son who views the dismissal of the Jewish maid as justified in the light of Lord Darlington's emerging diplomatic relationship with the German ambassador. Miss Kenton mildly protests against Stevens' xenophobia but she is unable to remove herself from the job due to her fear of being "left alone" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 156).

Eventually Miss Kenton seeks a life of her own and moves to the West country to settle as Mrs. Benn but in the chapter titled, "Salisbury", Stevens reports that her marriage had failed to bring her the kind of domestic fulfilment she had expected and her present desolation was chiefly the cause of her wish to return to Darlington Hall. Stevens categorically states, "Of course, Miss Kenton cannot hope by returning at this stage ever to retrieve those lost years, and it will be my first duty to impress this upon her when we meet" (Ishiguro, 2005, p.50).

Stevens looks to the past to find a vision for the future. Perhaps Miss Kenton's return will solve the staffing problem and Stevens "cannot see why the option of her returning to Darlington Hall and seeing out her working years there should not offer a genuine consolation to a life that has come to be so dominated by a sense of waste" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 51). What seems to be going on in *The Remains of the Day* is a deliberate collapsing of boundaries between past and present to the

extent that it is impossible to determine the veracity or order of the memories recollected. As Pierre Nora (1996) argues in his essay, *Between Memory and History*, "Memory, being a phenomenon of emotion and magic, accommodates only those facts that suit it. It thrives on vague, telescoping reminiscences, on hazy general impressions or specific symbolic details. It is vulnerable to transferences, screen memories, censorings, and projections of all kinds" (p.13). In the film, this occurs more profoundly through scenes which develop a form of dreamscape centred on jilted love and desire. Stevens and Miss Kenton, the roles played by Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson project a fantasy of the past and this is conveyed through frequent close-ups on the character's face or eyes, suggesting that we are entering their head or thoughts. The film develops through a swift series of moving images or scenes which represent their recollection of something that happened to them in the past instead of building on their present or future relationship.

Stevens slowly mourns the passing of a space and time, associated with his middle-class notion of Englishness. At the same time, he employs memory in a self-conscious, ironic manner through which Ishiguro implies that this lost grandeur is all a façade. Thus, it is possible to see *The Remains of the Day* as an ironic commentary on the very Englishness it seems to celebrate. This oscillation or tension between the search for authenticity of place and the creation of placelessness is central to the novel's aesthetics, which attempts to construct a fiction of 'home' that is acknowledged to be unrecoverable in reality. The tension between longing and loss is present in the novel too, and seems to be a key element in nostalgia. While it may be claimed that Stevens' version of past events is completely credible from an individual point of view, his emotional perspective clouds the exact use of memory to accurately recall past events. His feelings of loss and disillusionment which characterize his subjective narration, complicates the veracity or reliability of his account.

Stevens indulges in myth making as a means of reconstructing and indeed revising the past: a prelapsarian state of being before the war and its resultant moral crisis. For Stevens, this mythopoeia is not a voluntary, conscious project but an inescapable condition. His compulsive myth-making about the 'greatness' of Britain and the ideal of the 'great butler' serve not only as a counterpoint to life but encompasses life itself. All his living values are determined by the myth.

Stevens' notion of greatness is associated with the idea of dignity. As Stevens explains, "In a word, 'dignity' is beyond such persons. We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 44). It is interesting to note that Stevens' self perception of his role as a 'great butler' is formed on the basis of the tradition which he embodies and which he believes he is responsible for preserving. The 'greatness' of his profession as he has learnt from his father, the elder Mr. Stevens is the quiet observance of duty, discipline, and loyalty. The dignity of the butler is epitomized in his father, who narrates the story of an English butler in India, who had calmly shot down a tiger in the dining hall and disposed of the remains just in time for dinner to be served. The apocryphal story represents a real ideal for Stevens, who aspires towards this mythic greatness. Thus, the archaic, culturally prestigious past which is resuscitated through memory becomes integral to Steven's subjectivity.

This tradition of Englishness which defines the 'great butler' is again related to the space he occupies. The private myth of the butler extends to the nation at large and myth making may be understood as a mode of world creation. In Salisbury, Stevens contemplates the charming view of the countryside which he had encountered in the morning, "It is, I believe, a quality that will mark out the English landscape to any objective observer as the most deeply satisfying in the world, and this quality is probably best summed up in the term 'greatness'" (Ishiguro, 2005, p. 28).

Stevens further attributes the greatness of Britain to the “lack of obvious drama or spectacle” (p.29) that sets the beauty of the land apart. Stevens’ vision of ‘Great Britain’ reaffirms his relentless need for optimism, to re-establish a pre-war England, rooted in tradition, firm in its political beliefs, and at the helm of international affairs. This residual attachment for a lost country sharply contrasts the disillusionment of the war, the ambivalent vogue for America, the discomfort brought on by the advent of a liberal democracy with stronger labour rights and a booming capitalist economy beyond the control of erstwhile elites such as Lord Darlington. Britain’s loss of prestige is accompanied by a crippling sense of anxiety for Stevens, who is faced with new, ambiguous forms of individualism and employment rights. The idea of British nationhood is engendered by a nostalgic reflection, articulated through the disjunctive remembrance of things past. Stevens participates in the post-war British cultural politics of grief but his mourning is not particularly directed at the calamity of the war but the realization that the old symbols of power and cultural value no longer arouse militant conviction or passionate participation. The vestiges of parochial loyalties in a society that was busily effacing all parochialisms is embodied by Stevens, like many others of the older generation who could not perceive of a new nation that had supplanted a conservative history with a progressive liberal ideology.

The concept of space is significant to the reading of memory in the novel and in the post-Holocaust era. Towards the end of the Second World War, as the atrocities of the Nazi regime had begun to come to light, the issue of memory, and of coming to terms with trauma, took on a greater importance. While testimony and private histories were uncovered in the process of the Nuremberg trials, memory remained a contested territory in historical and legal discourse. Britain, like many other European countries, embarked on a process of drawing cultural associative maps which could help explain the catastrophe of the war and suggest modes of reparation and recovery for the devastated civilization. Places were chosen and embraced for memorial purposes and ‘sites of memory’ emerged to commemorate the trauma of the past. Pierre Nora (1996) defines “sites of memory” as “At once natural and artificial, simple and ambiguous, concrete and abstract, they are *lieux*—places, sites, causes—in three senses: material, symbolic, and functional.” (p.14). In this respect, Darlington Hall emerges as a foremost site of memory in the novel, as an archive containing artefacts of the past, including Stevens himself. Nora (1996) further elaborates, “The *lieux* (place) of which I speak are hybrid places, mutants in a sense, composed of life and death, of the temporal and the eternal. They are like Mobius strips, endless rounds of the collective and the individual, the prosaic and the sacred, the immutable and the fleeting...” (p.15).

Darlington Hall remains as one of the lost monuments of the past and leads to a creation of a realm of memory. The creation of realms of memory according to Nora (1996) is a result of inability to live within real memory, the consecration of a ‘realm of memory’ takes place because real environments of memory have disappeared. It therefore represents society’s need to conserve that which has been ostensibly lost. The most striking aspect of this practise stems from the manner in which temporality and spatiality intersperse in cultural memory. In modern societies, the historical past is retained through disembodied memories since it is no longer authentically lived by people. The present mode of historical perception is derived from an imaginative form of consciousness based more on myths than on facts.

While the particular memory of the past is often not entirely congruent with or contingent on these ‘sites’ or ‘realms’, nonetheless, space enables the creation of both personal and cultural myths. As generations move further away from the trauma of the war, the historical epoch remains enshrined through these mythic spaces. These spaces combine the cognitive, moral and the aesthetic and enable us to know truths which escape discursive experience. The cultural process of myth-making

thus facilitates a form of self grounding and stability for the Western civilization which is caught in the kinesis between remembering and forgetting. The myth evoked through space represents more precisely a lost unity- real or imaginary which preceded the modern catastrophe of the Second Great War.

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