Postcolonial Reading of "Englishness" in

The Remains of the Day[*]

LI Jingying, YAN Chunmei

Quzhou University, Quzhou, China

In *The Remains of the Day*, by depicting the protagonist Stevens' identity-seeking expedition and recollections of the past and portraying typical English images like manor and butler, Ishiguro reflects the identity crisis faced by British people and discusses the embodiment of "Englishness" during postwar era. Aiming at exploring "Englishness" in the novel with "the other" theory in postcolonialism, this paper tries to call for searching for self and looking forward to the future.

Keywords: Englishness, *The Remains of the Day*, identity, postcolonialism, "the other" theory

Introduction

As a British Japanese writer, Kazuo Ishiguro mainly concentrates on the memories and identity in most of his works due to the dual cultural background, which enables him to explore the embodiment of identity searching. In his Booker-winning work *The Remains of the Day,* Ishiguro calls upon the realization of identity through the portrayal of an English butler's expedition and his memories of the past. In the novel, Stevens, the butler, had dedicated his whole career to his workplace, the Darlington Hall. During his lifetime there, he always believed that a butler's value was best shown at serving the nobility. Therefore, after the death of his former employer Lord Darlington, he was hopeless and aimless. He spent a tough time adjusting himself under the employment of an American merchant. Nevertheless, to better adapt into a new working environment as well as to take a rest, Stevens took on a trip at the suggestion of his new employer. When feasting the views of the countryside during the trip, he reflected on his past experiences in the manor, and began questioning his values and started searching for his own "self". In this regard, being self-loss and self-doubting, Stevens could be categorized into the "the other" theory from the postcolonial perspective.

Meanwhile, the incarnation of "Englishness" is vividly revealed through typical English images like the Darlington Hall and Stevens the butler in the story, which makes it more accessible to analyze the epitome of "Englishness" during postwar era. The image of Stevens serves as an insinuation of British people undergoing identity crisis caused by the decline in national strength. And the portrayal of Darlington Hall is also a manifestation of Britain at that same period of time which was also going through agonizing transformations from domination to subordination in world power.

In addition, by describing Stevens' expedition as well as his memories, Ishiguro intends to inspire British people to embark on an identity-seeking journey to seek their own identity and reconstruct their own values. Under the circumstance of national identity loss, it is crucial to rouse people's joint consciousness to seek self-identity and to regain their faith on the country.

A Metaphorical Manor: Dilapidated Splendor of the British Empire

During Stevens' trip, his memories of the Darlington Hall played a crucial part in his own reflections. In this English manor, Stevens had witnessed its best times with the sense of triumph gained in his service to distinguished guests in Lord Darlington's time and also went through its declining periods with the loss of identity felt under the employment of the American merchant. It is apparent that the manor was of great importance in demonstrating the connections between plots and characters.

The story began with Stevens' dilemma about whether to take on Mr. Farraday's advice to travel or to stay in the manor. According to his own words, never had he had a chance to take a trip during his time there. But be that as it may, his response towards this suggestion was quite unexpecting— "It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 4). This is an interesting reply which expressed a polite refusal to the travel advice as well as a sense of pride for his service in the manor. It is a fair answer in Stevens' view, given that he had dedicated his career to Darlington Hall and considered it is an honor for him to work in this traditional English manor.

In traditional British culture, manor itself is an important symbol of cultural archetypal significance, and the British people have always valued the symbolic significance of manor, believing that "the manor is one of the greatest contributions to western civilization and the purest expression of British national talent" (Mandler, 1997, p. 401). Just as Germany has castle, France chateau, Italy villa, Britain is famous for the country house, for it is the cultural heritage of the British Empire (Wang, 2010). The manors have become a concentrated and strong British cultural landscape, a concise metaphor with some real "Englishness" (Mei, 2018).

Actually, with distinguished household and an owner of noble birth, the Darlington Hallstood as a stark reminder of distinct English features. In its old glory days, the manor had played host to guests from noble families with renowned status and served as a clandestine venue to hold gatherings for influential officials to discuss international issues. And in Stevens' opinion, since he had witnessed various significant conferences taken place in the manor, he gradually held the belief that international affairs should be resolved in the hands of the aristocracy. This was understandable from the perspective of Britain's political system, despite that the House of Commons had supreme powers over legislative affairs in politics, the aristocracy still actively participated in the country's political life and laid huge influence on political affairs. In the story, though Lord Darlington held no position in the ministry, he managed to have numerous dignitaries attending his conferences through his prominent status. Because of this, his manor gradually became the gathering place for those aristocracies. Therefore, the manor could be seen as a symbol of aristocratic traditions and gentry politics.

However, as time went by, when Lord Darlington became more concerned about German issues and stuck to Fascist totalitarian thought, his conferences shifted their emphasize on promoting the appeasement policy and thus inevitably became the pawn for the German Nazis. Consequently, when World War II broke out, harsh criticism was laid on Lord Darlington and his manor. The Darlington Hall finally met with its decline, and the age of gentry politics had come to an end. At that same period of time, Britain's declining power made it unable to maintain its hegemony over the world. The empire on which the sun never sets finally ushered in its sunset.

In *The Remains of the Day*, the history of the manor went with the flow of the British Empire: It had welcomed its highlight moment in the year of 1923 while the British Empire reached the peak of its territorial expansion at that same period of time; the implementation of the Appeasement Policy proposed by the British government was correspond to the pro German conferences held in the manor before the outbreak of the World War II. When the manor finally met its declining destiny, the empire also needed to accept the dilapidation of its past glamour.

A Wandering Future: Loss of Identity of the Britain

As revealed in the story, the fate of Darlington Hall and Stevens were closely related to that of the British Empire. Since the end of the World War II and the establishment of the Yalta System, Britain's power had been on the wane, resulting in the gap feeling and causing loss of identity nationwide.

At imperial age, with its territory accounting for a quarter of the world's total land area and the population of approximately 400 to 500 million, the Great Britain was regarded as the most powerful colonial hegemony worldwide. However, from 1960s to 1990s, there was a boom in the national liberation movement among countries in the empire's former colonies, which dealt a heavy blow to Britain in maintaining its colonial hegemony over the world. The decline in its national strength made Britain become concerned with its status and thus contributing to an identity crisis nationwide. Unable to accept the fact that the glorious time had gone forever, many people turned to the nostalgic sentiments for consolation. An example was the call of "return to the Victorian values" purposed by Thatcher. In respond to it, many literary works shifted their focus on presenting the unique characteristic of the Britain, namely "Englishness". Ironically, in the glorious days of the British Empire, the British generally did not question what "Englishness" is (Wang, 2010). However, with the decline of its power after World War II, "many features that have long been connected with British national identity either disappeared or experienced dramatic transformation" (Padley, 2006, p. 83). Consequently, nostalgia complex about the imperial age was evoked.

However, as criticism of history cannot be produced in nostalgic feelings, neither can the progress of the society be achieved in it. As a former world hegemon, Britain became a second-rate country in the postwar era with the process of otherization, which inexorably brought the gap feeling nationwide. With its weakening power, Britain had to put itself in the status of "the other", and examined its image from this perspective, which in turn brought discomfort and uneasiness. In postcolonialism, the term "the other" often refers to people in the colonies, while the westerners are often the representation of "the self". But under the condition of Britain's increasingly marginalized position in the world stage, it was bound to become the new "the other" with oppression from the new dominating powers like U.S. and the Soviet Union. When all the sense of superiority has gradually disappeared, when the British had serious doubts about their own status, they turned the mirror of introspection to themselves and began to think about the question of "who I am" (Zhou & Chen, 2020), and with the challenge of multiculturalism, the reconstruction of the national identity was looming ahead.

To reconstruct the national identity, the essence is to reconstruct the self-identity among people. And the formation of self-identity is a process of the integration of "the other" and "the self", that is, the process of identity absorbing the elements of "the other" to construct, to renew and develop "the self" (Li, 2007, p. 50). Therefore, in the era of global cultural collision, the old-fogyish view of connecting empiricism epistemology with the form of national identity which regarded other nations as "the other" was undesirable, the same applied

to over-indulgence in the past glories. Only by absorbing more cultures that were once excluded and marginalized, can the painful process of otherization be remolded and the identity within the Britain be rediscovered.

A Straying Butler: Drifting State of the British People

In the story, during Stevens' trip to West Country, he kept thinking about his past experiences in the Darlington Hall. And by recollecting his time there, Stevens gradually realized that he had lost himself throughout all these years in the manor.

As the butler of a distinguished household, Stevens spent his lifetime pursing the spirit of "dignity" and endeavored to become a great butler. In his opinion, "the factor distinguishes them from those butlers who are merely extremely competent is most closely captured by this word 'dignity'" and he believed strongly that "this 'dignity' is something one can strive for meaningfully throughout one's career" (Ishiguro, 2015, p. 34). Therefore, he considered his service to those distinguished gentlemen as an honor and a way to achieve the goal of the career dignity. As a result, when Lord Darlington passed away and the manor was taken over by an American merchant, Stevens immediately felt a sense of loss. Not only did this transfer marked an end to his thoughts about the aristocracy building the world, but also made him question about his own values in his career. An identity loss could naturally be perceived.

Facing this identity crisis, Stevens had no alternative but to take a time off. In this case, he accepted Mr. Farraday's advice and embarked on a journey. In literature, travel can be seen as a sign of self-identity reconstruction. Also, as Yuan (2018) pointed out, "The purpose of travel is to encounter differences, which provides a better way for individual identity construction" (p. 76). Therefore, this expedition was not merely a road to enjoy beautiful views of English countryside but a spiritual one for Stevens to search for self-identity.

Throughout the story, Stevens was the oppressed "the other" under the control of the dominating "self", i.e., his employers. In Lord Darlington's time, his embodiment of professional value was demonstrated on his engagements in those seemingly crucial "international affairs", while now was displayed on the ingratiation of Mr. Farraday's banter. Naturally, as the oppressed one under the control of his employers, Stevens' self-value was untraceable. As mentioned above, Stevens took an expedition at Mr. Farraday's suggestion, but this seemingly friendly suggestion was shrouded in a new strategy of cultural colonization which aimed to control "the other" ideologically. For example, when Mr. Farraday wanted Stevens to be comfortable with his banter, which seemed to be a channel for dialogue between the colonizer and the colonized, but in fact hid the power relations behind it (Y. Chen, 2012). It is a manifestation of the silent oppression of "the self" over "the other".

Meanwhile, as a typical English image showing particular "Englishness", the portrayal of Stevens in the story was in accordance with that of the British people at that time. As Britain gradually lost its hegemony over the world, the British people were experiencing a sense of loss about the relocations of their identity. With aristocracy leading the country building a career in the imperial age, British people found it difficult to face the decline in the national strength during postwar era, not to mention the painful process of otherization. Nevertheless, due to this circumstance, Ishiguro managed to take advantage of these very English images to imply his irony on the prevalent nostalgic feeling at that time and called on a new outlook to look upon on the future and thus constructing a better Britain.

Conclusion

In *The Remains of the Day*, both the characters and the images that typically represented "Englishness" all went through a process of identity loss. Whether it is the loss of national identity, or the self's oppression to the other, the theme to seek identity remained still. And when Stevens sat alone thinking about his future plans at the end of the story, his work enthusiasm was rekindled. Accordingly, Stevens' decision expressed Ishiguro's attitude in the construction of the identity of "Englishness". In present times, "Englishness" no longer represents a closed, exclusive and conservative form of national identity like the gentry tradition, but more an inclusive concept of historical consciousness of coexistence of traditional past and present, and to reconstruct the contemporary significance of joint national identity. And it is time to take a step ahead and embrace better future with the identity regained.

References

Chen, L. J. (2012). Englishness and imperialism in pastoral novels of Forster, Waugh and Ishiguro (Master's degree, Fudan University, Shanghai, 2012).

Chen, Y. J. (2012). A postcolonial interpretation of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day. Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition), 15*. Retrieved from https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFD2012&filename=CQGY201215039&v=cxQY3am lFZjryGOq2Hio7gzY2EGRey45OzxJTy7ftgISLQs8u6fDQR%25mmd2FZTvWRiiPt

Ishiguro, K. (2015). *The remains of the day.* London: Faber & Faber Limited.

Li, X. M. (2007). Postcolonial theory and China cultural identity (Doctoral thesis, Nanjing Normal University, 2007).

Mandler, P. (1997). *The fall and rise of the stately home.* New Heaven: Yale University Press.

Mei, L. (2018). The cultural dilemmas in Britain after World War II as reflected in *The Remains of the Day. Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages, 41*(1). Retrieved from https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2018&filename=JFJW201801003&v=YoJ Vanybpx%25mmd2F0%25mmd2BdW0ZlUi5cqNlfjr%25mmd2Fy2t89qT0TFfAFj4BxaU1Cn9aI7uHdOwcbMJ

Padley, S. (2006). *Key concepts in contemporary literature.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wang, W. X. (2010). On the politics of dress and adornment in *The Remains of the Day. Foreign Literature Review*, (1), 216-223.

Yuan, X. M. (2018). The other, self and truth: Studies of travel in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day. Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University*, (1). Retrieved from https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2018&filename=ZJJX201801010&v=O8w us2MHzFaPTwjBSGdDwe8jrjvXiDi7iLhVGcE6eCyuOPiftWyebRXV4YRAHKT9

Zhou, M., & Chen, B. (2020). Remembrance, fusion and return: An analysis of the development of "Englishness" in England Made Me and The Honerary Consul. *Journal of China University of Mining & Technology (Social Sciences), 22*(1). Retrieved from https://kns.cnki.net/kcms/detail/detail.aspx?dbcode=CJFD&dbname=CJFDLAST2020&filename=KDSK202001011&v=rI05 YtjKMB8OY1dXnLrxiF1%25mmd2FtrPi7at7LnxFgtEqGs5RMp6RWGE%25mmd2Fy192cKIrg1rk