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Class and Symbolic Violence in *The Remains of the Day*

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Abstract: Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* serves as a critical lens to examine the mechanisms of power asymmetry and internalized class stratification in interwar Britain. Through the unreliable narration of Stevens, an aging butler, the novel deconstructs aristocratic hegemony by analyzing three dimensions: hierarchical codification in linguistic rituals, dissonance between aristocratic and servant, and the political economy of domestic agency. Employing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence alongside Foucault's biopolitics and Spivak's subaltern studies, this study reveals how language, spatial politics, and performative compliance perpetuate power imbalances, and also reveals the persistence of hierarchical structures in modern societies.

Keywords: *The Remains of the Day*; Kazuo Ishiguro; symbolic violence

1. Introduction and theoretical framework

Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is a multilayered exploration of British aristocratic grandeur and the mechanisms of class subjugation in interwar Britain. Through the unreliable narration of Stevens, an aging butler on a West Country motoring trip, Ishiguro deconstructs the mythos of servitude and the internalized violence of class stratification. This study employs Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence to analyze the power dynamics in the novel, focusing on how hierarchical structures are naturalized and perpetuated through cultural and ideological means.

Symbolic violence, as conceptualized by Bourdieu, refers to the subtle mechanisms through which dominant groups maintain power by legitimizing societal hierarchies. In *The Remains of the Day*, this violence manifests in three key ways. First, linguistic rituals reinforce class boundaries. Stevens' unwavering use of honorifics like "Sir" and "his lordship" perpetuates Lord Darlington's aristocratic authority, transforming deference into a performative act that naturalizes social inequality.

Secondly, Stevens' professional ethos exemplifies the internalization of subordination. His pursuit of "dignity in vocation" reflects a transposition of the Protestant work ethic onto domestic service, where self-sacrifice and emotional repression are framed as virtues. This internalization reveals how the dominated come to view their subjugation as a moral imperative, sacrificing personal autonomy for the illusion of professional excellence.

Thirdly, the spatial politics of Darlington Hall illustrate the biopolitical control of domestic space. The segregation of servants' quarters from aristocratic areas renders working-class labor invisible and reinforces their expendability. This spatial hierarchy naturalizes the subaltern status of servants, further entrenching class divisions.

Contextualized within post-war British nostalgia for imperial glory, Ishiguro's narrative strategies expose the insidious ways in which power is perpetuated. By dissecting the linguistic, ethical, and spatial dimensions of symbolic violence, this study reveals how the novel critiques the internalized mechanisms of class subjugation, offering a profound commentary on the cultural and ideological foundations of power asymmetry. By examining these dimensions of symbolic violence, this study reveals how the novel critiques the internalized mechanisms of class subjugation, exposing the insidious ways in which power is perpetuated through cultural and ideological means.

2. The linguistic architecture of power and subjugation

The novel's onomastic patterns constitute a Foucauldian discourse of power, wherein language functions as a mechanism for producing and maintaining social hierarchies. Stevens' ritualistic deployment of honorifics—"Sir" and "his lordship"—operates as performative speech acts (Austin 5), continually reinscribing Lord Darlington's aristocratic capital. When Stevens declares, "his lordship has been exceptionally busy" (Ishiguro 72), the third-person nominalization also creates discursive distance, transforming Darlington into an institutional abstraction rather than an individual. Through Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*, these titular formulations reveal themselves as linguistic technologies for naturalizing class boundaries—the deferential language simultaneously acknowledges and perpetuates social hierarchy (*Of Grammatology* 65).

The ceremonial precision of Stevens' speech acts mirrors what Pierre Bourdieu terms "the economy of linguistic exchanges," wherein language operates as symbolic capital that reinforces existing power structures (*Language and Symbolic Power* 68). Each honorific utterance accumulates prestige for Stevens through his association with aristocratic authority, yet this verbal ritual demands constant self-surveillance. This is evident when Stevens corrects Miss Kenton: "It's 'his lordship, ' not 'Lord Darlington'" (Ishiguro 89). The grammatical policing exemplifies Michel Foucault's concept of panoptic discipline, wherein individuals internalize societal norms and regulate their own behavior without overt coercion (*Discipline and Punish* 201). Stevens' meticulous adherence to linguistic propriety reveals how power operates not through explicit domination but through the internalization of hierarchical values, rendering servants complicit in their own subjugation.

Lord Darlington's unmarked nominal references to Stevens exemplify Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, wherein individuals are constituted as subjects through ideological hailing (*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* 174). The absence of honorifics enacts what Gayatri Spivak terms the "symbolic annihilation" of servant subjectivity, reducing Stevens to "the subaltern without a language" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 104). This linguistic erasure is epitomized when Darlington commands, "Stevens, fetch the Lafite '07" (Ishiguro 156). The imperative syntax and casual nominalization construct the butler as an extension of aristocratic will, reinforcing his subaltern status. This asymmetrical naming ritual reflects Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, where aristocratic speech dominates the dialogic space, reducing servant utterances to mere "ventriloquized discourses" (Holquist 428).

The power dynamic reaches its zenith in the "banter" episode (Ishiguro 201). Darlington's forced informality—"Come now, Stevens, surely you can manage a joke"—perverts Jürgen Habermas' ideal speech situation, wherein communication strives for mutual understanding (*The Theory of Communicative Action* 25). The master's demand for egalitarian discourse paradoxically reinforces hierarchy by exposing its impossibility. Stevens' faltering attempts at humor reveal the violence underlying "voluntary" servitude, as his failure to perform informality underscores the rigidity of class boundaries.

3. Ethics of profession: Aristocracy VS. Service

Stevens' articulation of service as "dignity in vocation" (Ishiguro 116) exemplifies Max Weber's concept of the Protestant work ethic, transposed onto the realm of domestic labor. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber argues that the Calvinist emphasis on worldly asceticism transformed labor into a spiritual calling, a framework Stevens adopts to imbue his servitude with transcendent meaning (120). His fetishization of silver polishing as historical praxis—"the world's wheels turning" (Ishiguro 123)—reveals what Georg Lukács terms *false consciousness*, wherein the worker misrecognizes alienated labor as a form of teleological fulfillment (*History and Class Consciousness* 89). For Stevens, the meticulous execution of domestic tasks becomes a surrogate for historical agency, masking the exploitative nature of his role under the guise of professional pride. This misrecognition aligns with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *doxa*—the internalization of social hierarchies as natural and inevitable (*Outline of a Theory of Practice* 164). Stevens' paradigm of "greatness," measured through "the restraint and dignity with which one conducts oneself" (Ishiguro 43), exemplifies how aristocratic values are naturalized within the servant class, perpetuating their subjugation through self-imposed discipline.

This professional ethos also reaches pathological dimensions during the death of Stevens' father (Ishiguro 97-103). His insistence on maintaining service decorum—"I must return to the dining room" (Ishiguro 101)—transforms Weber's inner-worldly asceticism into what Theodor Adorno critiques as *identity thinking*: the substitution of ritual for authentic human response (*Negative Dialectics* 5). Stevens' prioritization of duty over familial grief reveals the extent to which his identity has been subsumed by the performative demands of servitude. The silver polishing metaphor, previously a symbol of historical agency, becomes literalized alienation as his hands move "of their own accord" (Ishiguro 101), signifying the complete erasure of individual agency under the weight of institutionalized labor. This moment encapsulates Marx's concept of alienation, wherein the worker becomes estranged from their own humanity, reduced to an appendage of the machinery they serve (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 74).

Stevens' pathological adherence to service rituals also underscores the insidious nature of symbolic violence. By internalizing aristocratic values as personal virtues, he perpetuates the very systems that deny him autonomy. Bourdieu's assertion that "the most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words" (*Language and Symbolic Power* 188) finds tragic resonance in Stevens' silent complicity. His transformation into an automaton of service reflects Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, wherein individuals internalize societal norms to the point of self-regulation (*Discipline and Punish* 138). Ultimately, Stevens' fetishization of duty and dignity reveals the psychological toll of class subjugation, as the pursuit of professional excellence becomes a mechanism of self-annihilation.

Lord Darlington's treatment of Stevens during the Prime Minister's visit exemplifies Marx's concept of labor commodification, where human agency is reduced to exchange value. Darlington's dismissal, "That'll be all" (Ishiguro 89), enacts Bourdieu's symbolic violence—naturalizing power imbalances through everyday practices (*Masculine Domination* 1). This exclusion demarcates the drawing room as an aristocratic preserve, relegating Stevens to the margins. Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial spatial hierarchies in *Black Skin, White Masks* par-

allels this: the drawing room becomes a "zone of being" for the elite, while servants' quarters are a "zone of non-being" (30). This segregation dehumanizes servants, rendering them invisible in sustaining aristocratic power.

The epistemic violence peaks in Darlington's Nazi appeasement activities. His assertion that "Stevens wouldn't understand these matters" (Ishiguro 215) reflects Gayatri Spivak's concept of "sanctioned ignorance," where the subaltern's intellectual capacity is denied to maintain hierarchy ("*Can the Subaltern Speak*?" 283). By conflating political and domestic spheres—"This is a house of gentlemen" (Ishiguro 224)—Darlington excludes Stevens from meaningful participation, reducing him to an instrument of aristocratic will. This erasure of servant subjectivity underscores how aristocratic capital depends on dehumanization.

Stevens' complicity illustrates the subtlety of symbolic violence. His silent acceptance of Darlington's edicts, even when they conflict with his ethics, exemplifies Bourdieu's claim that power operates through shaping desires and self-perceptions (*Language and Symbolic Power* 188). Foucault's disciplinary power further explains this, as Stevens' meticulous duty becomes self-regulation, perpetuating his subjugation (*Discipline and Punish* 138).

Ultimately, Darlington's manipulation of Stevens during the Prime Minister's visit and his subsequent dismissal of the butler's intellectual capacity reveal the intersection of class, space, and epistemology in sustaining aristocratic hegemony. The drawing room, as a site of exclusion, becomes a microcosm of broader colonial and capitalist systems that rely on the dehumanization of marginalized groups. Stevens' silent compliance, while tragic, also serves as a critique of the internalized mechanisms of oppression that enable such systems to persist. By exposing these dynamics, Ishiguro's novel challenges readers to interrogate the invisible structures of power that continue to shape contemporary social hierarchies.

4. Agency in domestic power

Language operates as both a mirror and a mold of social hierarchies, a dynamic vividly illustrated in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* through its meticulous attention to modes of address. The novel's protagonist, Stevens, embodies the performative rituals of servitude, his speech acts reinforcing the rigid class distinctions that underpin early 20th-century British society. This section interrogates how linguistic practices—specifically the asymmetrical use of honorifics and euphemistic rhetoric—codify power imbalances, perpetuating a social order where subservience is both enacted and internalized. Through a synthesis of Judith Butler's performativity theory and close textual analysis, this exploration reveals language not merely as a tool of communication but as a mechanism of ideological enforcement.

Lord Darlington's unilateral decision-making regarding Stevens' father epitomizes Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, wherein aristocratic authority extends beyond political governance to regulate the biological and social existence of subordinates. When Miss Kenton suggests alleviating the elder Stevens' workload due to his declining health, Darlington overrides her concerns with the paternalistic decree, "We must let his lordship decide" (Ishiguro 132). This performative utterance, as Foucault theorizes in *The History of Sexuality*, exemplifies how "power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies, and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes" (139). The demotion of Stevens' father from under-butler to footman constitutes both literal and metaphorical deskilling—his trembling hands, rendered inept for precise service, symbolize the disposability of aging labor under capitalist patriarchy. Here, Darlington's *noblesse oblige* masks what Bourdieu terms "the gentle, invisible form of violence" (*Masculine Domination* 1), as the aristocracy naturalizes its dominance through seemingly benevolent interventions in servants' corporeal lives.

The dismissal of Jewish maids further exposes the racialized biopolitics permeating domestic space. Darlington's edict—"We can't have that sort in this house" (Ishiguro 178)—reconfigures Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* paradigm, wherein sovereign power reduces certain lives to "bare life" excluded from legal and ethical consideration (*Homo Sacer* 8). By expelling the maids as racialized "exceptions," Darlington extends colonial logics into the household, transforming servants into expendable entities subject to aristocratic prerogative. Stevens' conflicted compliance—protesting "But sir…" before executing the order (Ishiguro 180)—exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of "the complicity of the dominated" (*Masculine Domination* 38). His internalization of servile habitus compels participation in his own subjugation, as he polices both the maids' exclusion and his father's humiliation. Foucault's observation that "power is exercised only over free subjects" ("*Subject and Power"* 221) finds tragic resonance here: Stevens' performative adherence to duty legitimizes the very hierarchies that annihilate his agency. These incidents collectively reveal how biopolitical control operates through intertwined mechanisms of spatial segregation, racialized exclusion, and the internalization of symbolic violence—processes that sustain aristocratic hegemony by rendering oppression invisible under the guise of tradition.

In Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *The Remains of the Day*, the character of Stevens embodies the complexities of Butlerian performative contradictions. Stevens' execution of the dismissal order is a prime example of this phenomenon. His initial momentary protest, "But sir..." (Ishiguro 180), is quickly followed by compliant action, which enacts Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry. This mimicry is characterized by the idea of being "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 1984: 127), ultimately reinforcing hierarchical structures. Stevens' subse-

quent rationalization, “It was not my place to object” (Ishiguro 180), further exemplifies false consciousness as adaptive preference formation, a concept explored by Elster (1983). In this case, oppression is reconfigured as a voluntary choice, highlighting the insidious nature of internalized subjugation.

The ultimate manifestation of constrained agency occurs in the novel’s framing narrative. Stevens’ motoring trip, which appears to be an act of self-determination, is, in reality, a pilgrimage to the altar of servitude. His final resolution to "practice bantering" (Ishiguro 245) with his new American employer, Mr. Farraday, completes the cycle of symbolic violence. This act serves as a poignant illustration of Bourdieu’s assertion that "the most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words" (Bourdieu 1977: 188). Through Stevens’ journey, Ishiguro masterfully exposes the ways in which individuals can become complicit in their own subjugation, even as they seek to assert their autonomy.

5. Conclusion

Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* unveils the insidious mechanisms of power asymmetry embedded within Britain’s post-imperial class hierarchy through the unreliable narration of Stevens, an aging butler. Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence illuminates Stevens’ pathological adherence to linguistic rituals (e.g., the obsessive repetition of “his lordship”) as a misrecognition of oppression disguised as professional “dignity.” This misrecognition, when viewed through Foucault’s biopolitical lens, manifests as corporeal discipline: the spatial segregation of Darlington Hall reduces servants to docile bodies, while the dismissal of Jewish maids exposes the homology between aristocratic power and colonial logic—both reliant on demarcating *homo sacer* (Agamben) to consolidate sovereignty.

Spivak’s assertion that “the subaltern cannot speak” finds paradoxical resonance in Stevens. He is simultaneously a prisoner of discourse (self-policing through servile language) and a complicit bystander (ignoring political atrocities), reflecting how imperial nostalgia operates as epistemic violence. By aestheticizing historical trauma into abstract virtues like “duty” or “loyalty,” the novel critiques the erasure of systemic inequities. Stevens’ final gaze at the twilight in Weymouth symbolizes the post-imperial predicament: the specters of hierarchy persist in neoliberalism, repackaged as “professionalism” that compels individuals to romanticize structural injustice.

This study demonstrates that *The Remains of the Day* is not just merely an elegy for a bygone era It reveals that the most enduring chains of subjugation are often forged by the subjugated themselves, gilded with idealism across generations. Ultimately, the novel challenges us to confront an uncomfortable truth: complicity in oppression often wears the benign mask of tradition.

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