

## Stevens' "Unhomely" Home

— Profession as Home in Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* —

大 薮 加 奈

### 論文要旨

本論は、カズオ・イシグロの『日の名残り』において主人公の母親が描かれていないことの不自然さに注目し、フロイトの Unheimlich に基づく Homi Baba の Unhomely という概念を用いることによって、Stevens の「家庭」の意識が「仕事」と相対するものではなく、母なき彼にとっては仕事の間こそが「家庭」であったということを、綿密な検証によって明らかにし、この作品を、その Unhomely な Home から主人公が開放される過程を描いた小説である、と結論づけている。

Talking about Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World* and *The Remains of the Day*, Kenzaburo Oe has pointed out that both novels begin with the descriptions of large houses, and the reader enters the world of novels through these buildings.<sup>1</sup> Ishiguro's houses are indeed central to his novels in terms of the metaphorical meanings they carry within the novels<sup>2</sup>. However, readers are never made to feel "at home" in Ishiguro's houses of fiction, where the characters themselves are feeling ill at ease in their literal or imaginary dwelling places. Etsuko in *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) is thinking about selling up her "English country house" which reminds her of her daughter's suicide, and moving into a smaller place.<sup>3</sup> Masuji Ono in *An Artist of the Floating World* (1987) lives in what used to be his

pride and joy of a house, which is now an empty damaged property where even his memories of the glorious past is fading away. Pianist Ryder in *The Unconsoled* (1995) cannot recognize the places that he is supposed to have been before, including the flat where his “wife” and “son” are. And Christopher Banks’ painful and elusive search for his childhood home in *When We Were Orphans* (2002) leads to altered and possibly unconnected houses.

Such a sense of dislocation and displacement demonstrated in Ishiguro’s writing made Barry Lewis suggest that Ishiguro’s writing can be seen as the literature of the “homeless.”<sup>4</sup> The word “homeless” has been taken from Ishiguro’s own description of himself as “a kind of homeless writer.” In above conversation with Oe, Ishiguro says, “ I had no obvious social role, because I wasn’t a very English Englishman and I wasn’t a very Japanese Japanese either. And so I had no clear role, no society or country to speak for or write about. Nobody’s history seemed to be my history.”<sup>5</sup> Lewis connects this word with Peter Berger’s definition of a “homeless mind”, which is the state of “migratory, ever-changing, mobile” individuals created by the “pluralistic structures of modern society.”<sup>6</sup> Here a unique condition of Ishiguro is taken as a modern human condition.

Whereas “the optic of displacement”<sup>7</sup> is useful in examining Ishiguro’s writings, the word “homeless” seem to put, in my view, too much emphasis on the state of “lacking” home<sup>8</sup>. When we look at Ishiguro’s main characters, none is actually suffering from homelessness in its usual sense. On the contrary, they all have rather grand dwelling places.<sup>9</sup> What is characteristic of these dwelling places is that the places main characters wish to be their homes, or the place they thought to be their homes had somehow revealed unhomely aspects and shaken the foundation of the character’s precarious sense of security.

Here, I would like to introduce the notion of “unhomeliness” discussed by Homi Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha has considered the state of “unhomeliness” as “the condition of extra-territorial and crosscultural initiations”.<sup>10</sup> Of course, the term “unhomeliness” has a theoretical predecessor in the form of

Sigmund Freud's "unheimlich".<sup>11</sup> Developing Freud's notion of "unheimlich", for which Bhabha uses the literal translation of "unhomely" rather than the standard translation of "uncanny",<sup>12</sup> Bhabha argues that

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the "unhomely" be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres.<sup>13</sup>

For Bhabha, it seems, "unhomely" is a Derrida-like negation of "homely," where the notion of "homely" remains visible and significant<sup>14</sup>. It is the pre-established notion of home and homeliness which "unhomely" seeks to deconstruct, thus, profoundly different from the state of not having home from the beginning. Unlike the idea of "homelessness", "unhomeliness" exists when the very idea of "home" is transformed by the unexpected invasion of things other than home.

In this paper, I would like to look at Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, which seems to possess above sense of "unhomeliness" in its description of the main character/narrator Stevens' words. By focusing on Stevens' mother, who is conspicuous by her absence, I would like to look at the way Stevens' world is constructed through his lopsided sense of "home" which does not contain Mother at its centre. Rather than dividing Stevens' world into that of public and private spheres, which has been the approaches taken by most critics so far, and seeing the text as the battle between the two opposing interests, I would like to argue that this lopsided sense of home and the unease created by the invasion of other notions of home are the key to understand Stevens' sexual and emotional repression

### **Stevens' absent mother**

Kazuo Ishiguro is an author whose writing fits both Freudian idea of "unheimlich" and Bhabha's definition of "unhomely". Infanticide and suicide, torture and persecution, emotional and sexual impotence mingle with memories and dreams within the narrative of Ishiguro's novels. What narrators reveal seemingly unawares are the things "that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden." Talking about *The*

*Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro has said that,

Deep down he (Stevens) knows which things he has to avoid....Why he says certain things, why he brings up certain topics at certain moments, is not random. It's controlled by the things that he doesn't say. That's what motivates the narrative.<sup>15</sup>

Majority of reviewers and critics have considered the failed love-story of Stevens the butler and Miss Kenton (Mrs Benn) the former house-keeper as the thing which Stevens is trying, unsuccessfully, to hide. However, when one looks at the text closely, there are plenty descriptions about his feelings towards Miss Kenton. It is true that most of his feelings are carefully placed by Stevens in the context of "professional matters,"<sup>16</sup> and I would like to address this point later. However, Stevens' description of himself perusing a book about Cornwall "whenever I (he) had an odd moment .... to gain some sense of the sort of place Miss Kenton had gone to live her married life" (12), for instance, indicates that Stevens is capable of addressing his "unprofessional" feelings at least to himself (or to the unnamed listener) in his own narrative from the beginning of the novel. Compared to abundant description of Miss Kenton, the description of Stevens' mother is conspicuous by its unexplained lack.

Nowhere in the narrative does Stevens mention his mother.<sup>17</sup> This is in a stark contrast with the description of his father, of whom he relates often. In several episodes, Stevens' narrative reveals his respect for his father, whom he regards as one of the greatest butlers of his time (34). Another member of the family who is mentioned by Steve, is Leonard, his elder brother who died during South Africa War when Stevens was still a boy. (41) This brief information about his brother forms a part of an episode depicting his father's dignified professionalism even in the face of a detestable man responsible for his son's death. Although Stevens talks about his father's wounds of bereavement, there is no mentioning of a mother mourning this son, nor any sign of her in any part of Stevens' narrative. Further more, there is no explanation of her absence, nor any sense of yearning for the absent mother. Such an

omission has led me to conclude that Stevens indeed avoids talking about his mother, and this is what he is hiding in his narrative.

What kind of person could Stevens' mother be? And what could have happened to her? When one reads Stevens' narrative closely, one becomes aware of certain moments of raw emotion which is at odds with Stevens' seemingly non-demonstrative narrative. On explaining the background to the arrival of Miss Kenton and his father to Darlington Hall, for instance, Stevens talks about the love-affair between the previous house-keeper and his under-butler:

Of course, if two members of staff happen to fall in love and decide to marry, it would be churlish to be apportioning blame; what I find a major irritation are those persons—and housekeepers are particularly guilty here—who have no genuine commitment to their profession and who are essentially going from post to post looking for romance.

This sort of person is a blight on good professionalism. (53)

Why does Stevens name housekeepers as “particularly guilty here”? There is no explanation in Stevens' words for any specific reason why the female party should be blamed more. “A blight on good professionalism” is indeed strong words. His next sentence, “But let me say immediately I do not have Miss Kenton in mind at all when I say this” (53) suggests that Stevens have certain other housekeeper or housekeepers in mind. He does not say who this could be. However, there must have been a person who showed no commitment, and who had been going after romance, of whom Stevens cannot dismiss from his mind without having his emotions raised.

Above few sentences may be too slight an evidence to support an argument I wish to advance in this paper, namely, Stevens' mother must have been such a woman, possibly even a housekeeper who went away with another man. However, this argument has an advantage in supplying a convincing explanation to Stevens' emotional repression. Many critics take Stevens' repression as given, without examining the psychological makeup of this main character. Using the idea of the absent

mother, we can understand Stevens' idea of "home" more easily, and the text's subtle characterization of Stevens can be explained effectively.

### **Stevens' Home**

In this section, I would like to examine Stevens' sense of "home", by looking at other moments of high emotion Stevens display in his narrative.

Twice in his narrative, Stevens talks about the "sense of triumph" (115,239) he felt concerning particularly "trying" evenings of his service. The first evening was when his father passed away during an unofficial international conference in March 1923, and the second evening was when Miss Kenton informed him of her intention to leave Darlington Hall to be married with another man during an unofficial meeting between Prime Minister and German Ambassador. On both occasions, Stevens is reluctant to remain at the scene. He insists that he should "return" (108,229), and leaves his father's bedside in the first instance, and Miss Kenton in the second instance for his work.

Critics have seen this as a conflict between his duty and his private life, where, as Laura Hall has concluded, "the belief in his duty to his employer has outweighed all personal considerations."<sup>18</sup> For those critics who take this view, Stevens' sense of triumph can be interpreted as a sense of victory felt by the professional self who conquered the personal self. However, when one looks at the scenes following Stevens' "return" closely, one is struck by a curious discrepancy between Stevens' eagerness to go back to serve and the apparent lack of urgency at his place of service. Stevens insists on "returning" immediately, even though there is no pressing incidence that requires his service urgently. Following this observation, I would like to argue below that it is Stevens' personal wish that makes him return to the place of service rather than the call of duty.

Let me look at the first instance when Stevens insisted on "returning". By the time Stevens left the dining room, the dinner was at its close, and gentlemen are giving speeches. As Stevens' words to his father (101) and a comment by the German

countess (112) suggest, serving dinner is regarded to be a major operation by those who understand butler's works. The fact that the dinner was "executed without any significant difficulty" (102) in Stevens' words, and that "the cook, you (Stevens), and your(his) team did well" (112) in the countess' words, make it clear that the major operation has now been completed. By the time Stevens came back from his father's room, the gentlemen were proceeding to the smoking room, where there is a much more relaxed atmosphere. If one remembers the occasion when Lord Darlington and Mr. Cardinal retire to the smoking room (227), when Stevens' service was not required at all, one hardly expects the service in the smoking room to be so demanding even during the international conference.<sup>19</sup> It should not be anything Stevens' team cannot manage given his thorough preparation which included various "contingency plans" (81). In fact, he seems to spend much time in the smoking room having light conversation with Mr. Cardinal (110, 112, 113). Stevens says elsewhere that achieving the "balance between attentiveness and the illusion of absence" (75) is essential to good waiting. If we use this criterion, Stevens' way of "wend (ing) his way past the gentlemen" in the "relatively small room" (111), and making Mr. Cardinal and Lord Darlington notice his expression and ask him whether he is unwell or crying (109,110) should hardly be what is expected of him in the relaxed and convivial smoking room. There is little reason why he should insist on serving the gentlemen there personally rather than overseeing the operation other than his own wish to do so.

This is also the case in the second instance. During the meeting between the Prime Minister and German Ambassador, Stevens spent most of the time standing in the hall near the entrance arch (228). All he did for the distinguished guests were to take refreshments in at the beginning of the meeting, and bring in a bottle of port towards the end of the meeting. Although Stevens insists that he should cut short Miss Kenton's painful talk about her departure in order to return to his place of duty, strictly confidential nature of the Prime Minister's visit means that Stevens is not required to be in and around the drawing room when the Prime Minister and German

Ambassador is having a discussion. Furthermore, any duties he was called to carry out could easily be executed without having to be on duty in the hall all the time. In fact, he was talking with Mr. Cardinal in the library when the bell rang for port, and his being in the library did not cause any problem in carrying out his duty. As one of the critics has pointed out, Stevens was actually dismissed by Lord Darlington after he brought in port, but he kept on standing in the hall, and it is then he felt the sense of triumph again.

Before considering Stevens' curious sense of triumph, I would like to think about the reason why Stevens is so eager to return to his place of service. My argument is that, for Stevens, the place of service is where he wants to be when faced with distressing incidents. Just like a child running back to his/her mother, Stevens rushes back to the place of service. This is apparent from the way he expresses his wish to "return" immediately after the events that are distressing for him. For example, after seeing his father becoming very ill, he says, "This is most distressing. Nevertheless, I must now return downstairs" (108). The place of service is not where Stevens has to go despite his personal needs, rather it is where he can get comfort, and where he can actually express his feeling of distress, as observed by Mr. Cardinal and Lord Darlington (109, 110).

Stevens' brief description of childhood, boyhood, and early adulthood shows that listening to his father's talk about the service is the only memory Stevens is prepared to include in his narrative (36). If "home" is "an origin, a base, a shelter, a returning point, ... where you feel comfortable, and ... where you want to be when things go wrong,"<sup>20</sup> it seems there is no other place than the place of service described by father which Stevens can call his "home".

What Stevens' father talked fondly when Stevens was young, was the story of a butler who followed his master to India, and who did not show any sign of disturbance even when he had to deal with a tiger under a dining table. In Stevens' view, his father "has striven throughout his years ... to *become* that butler of his story" (37), and Stevens, in turn, tries to become a "professional" butler similar to the one in his

father's favorite stories, so that he can be "worthy" of his father (133). If one is to understand that being "professional" is the only way he can be close to his father, one can understand that the word "professional" actually has a homely ring to Stevens' ears. Instead of a warm family with mother at its centre, Stevens finds comfort in the "professional" world with the ideals of his father at its heart. Being "professional" is actually being nearer to the human warmth in Stevens' lopsided sense of home. Therefore, every time Stevens insists on carrying out some "professional" matters, and it is the expression he uses in abundance when referring to matters related to Miss Kenton, one can say that he is expressing his inner most wish to have homely relationship with her.

Thus, when Miss Kenton has lost her aunt, the only living relative, Stevens tries to engage her in "a little professional discussion" about a new recruit, rather than offering her the words of condolences. (185-186) However, Miss Kenton cannot communicate in this lopsided language in the midst of her distress. Even though Miss Kenton has lost all her blood relatives, and had no other home than that of her workplace as well, she could not share Stevens' lopsided sense of home in the end. As Mr Graham suggests to Stevens, Miss Kenton cannot dwell in the professional world for ever. (179) She chose to leave Darlington Hall, marry, and have a child.

The choice of having a family is bared for Stevens who sees anything other than a professional relationship "inappropriate" (178). He does recognize the possibility of entering into other relationship with Miss Kenton, when for instance, he felt "a peculiar change" in "the atmosphere ... as though the two of us (Stevens and Miss Kenton) had been suddenly thrust on to some other plane of being altogether." (175) However, his only thought was "resolving to set about re-establishing our(his and Miss Kenton's) relationship on a more proper basis." (178) One can interpret his fear of such "inappropriate" relationship as his fear of experiencing the loss of his mother again. If one can say that any relationship within the professional sphere reminds him of the loss of her mother, one can also make sense of his sense of triumph which he was to feel when he heard Miss Kenton's intension to leave Darlington Hall. By her

departure, Stevens could escape the danger of falling into the inappropriate relationship---the relationship which may cause real emotional distress such as a betrayal, a breakup or a departure of a mother.

Above, I have examined the second instance when Stevens felt a sense of triumph. Let me turn to Stevens' first experience of the triumphant emotion now. In understanding this emotion, one can consider the way Ishiguro introduces Stevens' father and Miss Kenton into the novel. According to Stevens, Miss Kenton and his father arrived at Darlington Hall "at more or less the same time" (53). One can read this as an introduction of two different possibilities Stevens is to have at Darlington Hall. He could be like his father, dying on duty surrounded by professional colleagues, or he could take what Miss Kenton offers, namely, bringing in warmth and colours into Stevens' life, as she tried to do at several occasions when she brought in flowers to Stevens' pantry from the garden.

Here, I would like to look at Stevens' relationship with his father once more. For Stevens and his father, family conversation consists of talks about professional butlership. The father, who knows about services, told the stories, and the son listened to them. If this was the set pattern, one can understand why Stevens came to "converse less and less" (66) with his father. Once Stevens started to gain more and more knowledge of the service, and achieved the position of a butler, taking in his father as an under-butler, father would not be able to keep on conversing with his son. For those who had no other language than that of the profession, keeping father-son relationship would become increasingly difficult after such a position change, as Stevens has noticed, even the brief exchange about professional would be carried out in "the atmosphere of a mutual embarrassment" (66).

When Stevens' father realizes that he has now clearly surpassed by his son, and the certainty of death brought no dispute about its reversal, he could express his approval of his son. (101) He can think about what constitutes good fatherhood. Such an unprofessional talk is beyond Stevens though. For Stevens at the time of his father's death, dwelling fully in the world of profession, and becoming the butler his

father approves is the only way he could express his closeness to his father. The sense of triumph Stevens feels can be read as his celebration to have replaced father and to be come one with him.

### **Changed Home**

If professional sphere is the only home that Stevens has, Lord Darlington's death and the sale of Darlington Hall to an American can mean a drastic change of his home environment. Under the new owner, Mr Farraday, most of the house was put "under wraps"(7), and the back corridor, which used to be the backbone of the domestic sphere was closed all together. Most of the other staff has left for other employers(6). Considering the fact that Stevens is now about the same age as his father when Stevens Sr. came to Darlington Hall, it can be surmised that Stevens Jr. remained at Darlington Hall because he has nowhere else to go. Just like his father, Stevens has now past his best professionally, making small but disconcerting mistakes. Darlington Hall is losing its professional function and becoming a museum piece for an American collector, and so is Stevens. This change in his workplace and himself makes him realize, for the first time in his life, that the security he felt in his "professional" home has turned against him. The aging Stevens unable to practice full butler's profession had to pin his hope on the return of Miss Kenton. In his mind, "her exemplary professionalism" (10) is "just the factor needed to enable him to rectify his "faulty staff plan" which he blames for his small errors (5). Rather than satisfying his romantic ambition, Miss Kenton's return is necessary from Stevens as she will bring back the perfect "professional" home. Here Miss Kenton is depicted not so much as a possible lover or wife but a mother, who can realize his secret wish---the return of the housekeeper who had left for another man. Thus when he realizes that there is no possibility of Miss Kenton's return, he had to admit that his "heart was breaking"(252).

Critics have interpreted this admission as his regret of missing the opportunity of having a more personal relationship with Miss Kenton. However I would like to suggest

that here he had finally come to the conclusion that his "professional" home has gone forever, which pains him more than the loss of Miss Kenton as a possible future wife. This reading can explain the last episode of the novel more satisfactorily in my mind. In the last episode, Stevens meets a former butler who has suggested him that the retirement is the best part of a man's life: "You've done your day's work. Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it.... The evening 's the best part of the day."(256) Stevens warms towards this character, as he is "genuinely interested in" Stevens' talk of "Darlington Hall in former days," and "the 'know-how" involved in overseeing large events"(254) as a butler. And it is to this fellow that Stevens can truly reveal his feelings---confessing his innermost worries about his inability to carry on as a proper butler.(257) It is this former butler's understanding and admiration of what Stevens have achieved that makes Stevens take his advise and look beyond the professional life. This former butler brings him to see that whatever has happen to his "professional" home, it can remain as it used to be in his memory as well as in the minds of those who understand its worth. This security made Stevens see that there are other ways to be close to human warmth, namely, through "bantering"(258).

Stevens' workplace has changed, and so is his ability. As he admits, he gave his best to the former employer, Lord Darlington(257). However, with the memory of his lost home in his heart, Stevens is trying to have a new positive relationship with his employer and his workplace. Now, there may not be a lot of time left for Stevens at his workplace or in his life. He knows that his home will never return. And yet, Stevens looks forward to exchange human warmth with his employer. He is no longer a motherless child in need of the lopsided security which the "professional" home offered. Rather than just clinging to the unhomey home, he could finally face the loss of his childhood home and offer human warmth, keeping the memory of his home in himself.

## NOTES

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- 1 Kazuo Ishiguro, "Wave Patterns: A Dialogue with Kenzaburo Oe" *Grand Street* 10.2.38 (1991):77.
  - 2 Look at my previous works in Kana Oyabu, "Far Eastern Dream: On Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills*" in *Studies of Language and Culture* vol.1 pp.187-208., Kana Oyabu, "Change of Life, Change of Tone—Kazuo Ishiguro's *An Artist of the Floating World*" in *Studies of Language and Culture* vol.8 pp.73-98. Also see Barry Lewis, *Kazuo Ishiguro* (Manchester : Manchester U.P., 2000) 7, where Lewis cites Oyabu's Ph.D. thesis.
  - 3 Kazuo Ishiguro, *A Pale View of Hills* (London : Faber, 1982) 183.
  - 4 Lewis,7.
  - 5 Ishiguro, "Wave Patterns", 82-83.
  - 6 Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974), 165, quoted in Lewis' *Kazuo Ishiguro*, 1.
  - 7 Lewis, 2.
  - 8 As Lewis has pointed out, there is "a tug-of-war between a sense of homelessness and being 'at home'". (Lewis, 3) Lewis uses Abdul R. JanMohamed's suggestion that "the notion of exile always emphasizes the absence of 'home'", and it is, paradoxically this sense of lack that may cause Ishiguro's writings "very rooted in a particular house or a particular place" as Pico Iyer has pointed out. (Both critics cited in Lewis, 5.) However, I would like to argue that Ishiguro's condition as a child of expatriot parents is not quite the same as that of politically exiled writers JanMohamed describes in his book.
  - 9 Lewis uses Iyer's definition of "the privileged homeless" for writers such as Ishiguro and Salman Rushdie (Lewis, 5), which he may be happy to extent to Ishiguro's characters. Among Ishiguro's characters, Stevens in *The Remains of the Day* is the only character who may face homelessness in the future in terms of house-ownership, but even in his case, the present state permits him to be a resident in the grand house.
  - 10 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London : Routledge, 1994) 9. Bhabha uses the literal translaword "unhomely" rather than "uncanny"
  - 11 See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny". Standard Edition XVII,p.225
  - 12 See Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny". Standard Edition XVII, p.225
  - 13 Bhabha, 9.
  - 14 See Jacques Derrida, *OF Grammatology* (London : Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) p.44, in which Derrida expands Heidegger's negation of Being in *Zur Seinfrage*.
  - 15 Graham Swift, "Kazuo Ishiguro" *Bomb* (Fall1989) 23.
  - 16 Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London : Faber and Faber,1999,1989) 5. All subsequent reference to this edition.

- 17 One critic has pointed out this fact. (See Adam Parkers, *Kazuo Ishiguro's The Remains of the Day* (New York : Continuum International, 2001) 48.) However, no critic to my knowledge has examined its implication in any critical way.
- 18 Laura Hall, "New Nations, New Selves: The Novels of Timothy Mo and Kazuo Ishiguro" (London : Pluto, 1995) 107.
- 19 When the novel was published, there were criticisms from real butlers that Ishiguro got it wrong about the actual services of butlers. One of the criticisms often quoted is by a Mr. who stated that a bottle of port was never handled by a butler, but passed around from the host to the guests. From the way Ishiguro insists that a figure of butler is used as a metaphor, and that the novel is not about actual butlers, one may infer that Ishiguro may not have known or cared about the detail pointed by the former butler. However, this rule of a butler not handling a bottle of port can be used as an useful information, if one wishes to highlight Stevens' unnecessary insistence on serving personally when such level of serving is not actually required by him.
- 20 Lewis, 1.