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The Butler and the Minstrel: Profession, Performance and Identity

Both of the novels, *The Remains of the Day* and *Dancing in the Dark*, focus on the lives of their anachronistic main characters whose obsession with their professions dominates their lives to the point where it corrodes their identity and selfhood. Both novels position their protagonists in a time of transition and show their struggle to come to terms with the new realities which they face. Set in the decades of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, in a manor in the English countryside, *Remains*, written by Kazuo Ishiguro, depicts the protagonist's, Stevens, attempt to come to terms with profound changes in his life. Written by Caryl Phillips, *Dancing* is set in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States. Most of the action takes place in Harlem and depicts the entertainment careers of Bert Williams and his partner, George Walker. These performers attempt to escape the tradition of minstrelsy which was the only theatrical role available to blacks at the time. However, once they become successful, they find themselves enshrined in this role which they find racially and personally demeaning.

In the prologue to this novel, the term "performative bondage" is used to describe the way in which black entertainers in Harlem, at the beginning of the twentieth century, catered to white audiences who were fascinated with difference and with the "primitive theatrics" of the "Other" (6). Black performers entertained this audience in ways that were in keeping with this appetite for the "primitive" and in the process found themselves bound to these stereotypes. Although this term is not used again, as the novel unfolds, it becomes apparent that it aptly

describes the way in which the principal characters find themselves similarly objectified and creatively stifled by their audience's expectations. Like these characters, Stevens is also trapped in a kind of performative bondage. Whereas theirs is imposed on them by their audience's inability to see blacks outside of the demeaning racial caricature, Stevens's is unwittingly self-imposed.

Stevens's performative approach to his work is symbolized by his obsession with his dress which he tellingly refers to as his "costume" (10); an attitude that suggests that he unconsciously views himself as performing a role. This is further cemented by his use of the metaphor of acting and clothing to illustrate what he views as the epitome of butlering. Stevens, in comparing great butlers with poor ones asserts:

> Lesser butlers will abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation. For such persons, being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; […] and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath. The great butlers […]. wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstance tear it off him in the public gaze; […]. (43)

For Stevens, being a great butler is akin to playing a part that must be maintained at all times. Only when in absolute privacy, can this role be abandoned. To be truly professional, the butler must inhabit his role at the total effacement of self; he must become his role. Tamaya notes that the British class system mandated role playing and that, "a crucial element of such 'acting' is the rigorous submission of the private self to the demands of the public persona" (48). Stevens's over-identification with his "role" leads to his emotional repression, his objectification and his total lack of professional as well as personal agency.

Applying Homi Bhabha's notion of stereotype, Westerman notes that Stevens identifies so much with this role that he becomes a caricature of the English butler. Westerman goes on to note that not only is Stevens stereotyped, he is also commodified (165). This is evinced after Darlington Hall is sold to the American, Farraday, who seeks to buy into the English tradition that is represented by the house and by Stevens. Faraday underscores his need for authentic English culture by emphasizing to Stevens that he wants "a real English butler." The is ironic in light of the fact that the real substance of British imperialism has dissipated and what he is left with in the form of Darlington Hall and Stevens are the last residues of imperial splendor.

Stevens further essentializes himself by seeking to circumscribe all of his actions with the notion of dignity which he equates with exhibiting grace under pressure, and which he thinks distinguishes the great butler from the mediocre one. Susie O'Brien notes that dignity, as Stevens defines it, embodies the "Victorian values-formality, repression, and self-effacement" and "is predicated on surrendering the dictates of individual conscience and 'natural' human feeling to the authority of a rigidly (if arbitrarily) stratified social hierarchy" (788-790). Applying a post-colonial reading to the novel, O'Brien notes that Stevens resembles the colonized in that his dependence and child-like devotion parallels that which would have been fostered in the colonial subject. She notes that the insidious power structure that this is predicated upon is seen in Lord Darlington's WWII activities and through Stevens, whose lack of personal fulfillment, is proportional to his commitment to his role (789). By highlighting the way in which Stevens's relationship with his employer, Lord Darlington, mimics that of the colonial relationship between England and its colonies, the novel seems to suggest that such relations are detrimental not only to the overtly colonized in other parts of the world but also to those at "home" who invest too heavily in them. Stevens, who literally spends his life in the

home of a British aristocrat who is heavily invested in these imperialist structures, becomes a subaltern in the very heart of English society.

Stevens's emotional repression is evinced in his estranged relationship with his father, who is also a butler, and with Ms. Kenton, the housekeeper at Darlington Hall who leaves for marriage with a less attractive candidate after Stevens fails to acknowledge their mutual attraction. The fact that twenty years after her marriage, Stevens continues to refer to the housekeeper as Ms. Kenton and not by her married title reflects his inability to accept the fact that she is married. Indeed, Stevens sees marriage as a distraction and a threat to the professional efficiency which he so prizes. This underscores the fact that marriage and kinship themes, which are so prominent in traditional British novels, undergo a postmodern deconstruction in Ishiguro's novel. While the style of the novel is quintessentially British in that it is characterized by a detailed treatment of minute details and a sensibility that is reminiscent of the novel of manners in the style of Jane Austen, by de-centering the traditional themes, Ishiguro interrogates this tradition. Thus Ishiguro, who has acknowledged that he is "very much of the Western tradition" and that his influences include Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Charlotte Bronte and Dickens (Mason and Ishiguro 336), draws on this tradition but simultaneously challenges it.

This undermining of the traditional techniques of the British novel is also seen in Ishiguro's use of narrative perspective. *Remains* is monophonic and told from the first person narrative perspective of Stevens. However, while Ishiguro opts for a traditional, representationalist view of reality that privileges the "I' narrator, and that is in keeping with the Victorian worldview to which Stevens subscribes, it becomes apparent that he undermines this narrative perspective by establishing Stevens as an unreliable narrator. This is done ostensibly to critique Stevens as well as his Victorian outlook. Thus, as opposed to undermining the

representationalist view of reality by not using it all, as other modernist writers have done, Ishiguro uses it but at the same time calls it into question by establishing that Stevens's account of events, and his explanation of his motivation for his actions, is questionable.

Ultimately, what Stevens considers to be dignity is revealed to be an obsequious servility devoid of self-respect. Stevens makes this discovery at the end of his visit (or what he refers to as his "expedition") to Ms. Kenton. In keeping with a postcolonial reading of the novel, Stevens's "expedition" (3) can be read as a parody of the master narrative of imperial conquest. This is underscored by the fact that it takes place in July 1956, at the time of the Suez Crisis, which is seen as the incident that signaled the end of British imperial dominance. Stevens's haplessness on this journey-he becomes lost, runs out of gas, does not put fluid in the radiator-can be read as a sign of British imperial haplessness and dissolution. His use of an outdated 1930s guidebook for a trip in the 1950s develops the idea that this is a trip he should have made twenty years earlier. His trip is deflationary and belated and highlights the way he has squandered his life; a fact that he acknowledges at the end of his journey, as he laments: "I can't even say I made my own mistakes […]. what dignity is there in that?" (243).

This is not unlike, Bert Williams, in *Dancing*, who, like Stevens, weeps, after he realizes that he has "foolishly spilled his life" (183). Like *Remains*, the novel is replete with verbal and structural irony. However, unlike *Remains*, it is dialogic and polyphonic. Through a technique of free indirect discourse, the voices of all the major characters, and occasionally that of a minor character, are heard seemingly in a constant discourse with each other. Through their discourse the story is told and interwoven in it are excerpts from the performances of the characters as well as reviews and critiques of these performances which help to set the historical framework of the

story. Told in three "acts," the novel focuses on the private lives of Williams and Walker and shows the very high price they paid for their success.

These two performers first meet on a street corner in San Francisco, they team up and perform together as "plantation darkies," "coons," and primitive "natives" of Africa (29). The derision which they meet with takes a toll on them mentally. This, along with the fact that they barely manage to eke out a living, propels them Eastwards across the United States in search of greener pastures. They change roles along the way. George plays the "straight man" and Bert plays the shuffling, clumsy, dimwitted Negro and discover that the audiences respond more favorably. Against the objections of his partner, Bert decides to wear black-face makeup, reneging on an earlier decision they had taken never to do this. They tour the Vaudeville circuit in New York and their act is so successful, they make their way to Broadway where their play "In Dahomey" becomes the first all-black play shown on Broadway.

While for Stevens, role playing is a metaphor for professionalism, for Bert, who is a professional actor, role playing is very much a conscious and deliberate act and, unlike Stevens, who remains ignorant of his objectification, Bert is very much aware that he is being objectified by his audience. Bert attempts to rationalize this objectification by separating his private self from his public role. He contends that his subjectivity is not determined by his objectification but by his sense of who he is. As time goes by, however, the undignified objectification which he suffers begins to undermine his very sense of self and identity. At the age of thirty, a world weary and despondent Bert is heralded as a success as he achieves the height of fame but his professional success is ultimately a form of personal failure for he has achieved it by conforming to and perpetuating the demeaning stereotypes which the white audience holds of the black man.

In an attempt to resist this objectification, Bert and George journey to England, in the hopes that the English audience will be more receptive to their work.

However, while their tour is a financial success, they receive little of the professional respect they crave for the English audience receives their show in much the same way as the American audience- as a spectacle of song and dance akin to a circus as opposed to a serious artistic performance. Like Stevens' expedition, their journey also proves deflationary. On their way back to the United States, Bert realizes that his relationship with his partner is beginning to suffer for George is anxious to abandon the character which Bert plays and is willing to fight for the chance to play roles that he thinks befits their status as the pre-eminent black performers in the United States. Bert, however, argues that their audience is not ready for for this for they "feel safe watching a supposedly powerless man playing an even more powerless thing" (121). He justifies catering to this need by saying that while the audience may feel this way, what they are in fact watching is art and he and George should try to separate themselves from their audience's perception by "[striving] to be the center of laughter, not the object of it" (121).

In this way, he justifies an argument made by some researchers into the minstrel tradition who have noted that at a time when the cultural climate was very hostile to blacks, many black performers, out of desperation, felt the need to occupy and then try to transform the minstrel roles which were provided for them. This is a form of parody which the critic, David Krasner, uses Edward Said's notion of reinscription to describe (Krasner, *Resistance*, 26). Homi Bhabha also makes the point that the marginalized can assert their subjectivity by manipulating the stereotype. Donald E. Hall, in his book *Subjectivity*, notes that Bhabha discusses the "subjectivity of the individual within a culturally, linguistically, and economically occupied nation or region whose selfhood is a site of both occupation and response" (Hall 115). He notes

that Bhabha maintains that the subaltern can engage in self-conscious masking and mimicry as an act of political subversion for agency can manifest itself in diverse ways. Thus according to Bhabha, "the adoption of a mask or sly role" can be viewed "as an instance of performative agency that unsettles, effects change, and ironizes all notions of *real* identity" (Hall 115). However, Bert's attempts at reinscription fail and he finds it increasingly difficult to separate himself from his role.

The novel interrogates the way in which cultural representation contributes to society's views of individuals. This idea is brought out by a group of affluent "colored gentlemen" who visit Bert and "admonish" him for reinforcing the views that whites have of blacks. Bert becomes defensive and seeks to distance himself from his artistic responsibility by asking them if he should abandon the stage. They reassure him that this is not what they want but that they would like him to perform in desegregated theaters and in the form of a character who is more representative of "the new, twentieth century Negro" (188). As Nowatzi notes, they "do not necessarily object to [Bert's] performance of a black clown; rather they blame him for perpetuating a stereotype that his white audience views as authentic […]" (128). In this way, they stress the need for Bert to assume responsibility for his role and become involved in what Bhabha refers to as "performative agency" (as cited in Hall 115). Ultimately, Bert's lack of artistic autonomy erodes his personality and relationships, and results in his alienation. Eventually, both he and his partner are destroyed by their careers. George collapses on stage while performing and dies months later. Years later, Bert also collapses on stage years and subsequently succumbs to physical and mental exhaustion.

Phillips thus seeks to "interpret" and contextualize Bert's life from the vantage point of a black artist in the twenty first century by presenting a picture of the way in which Bert's

subjectivity was shaped by the historical context of which he was a part. In so doing, he shows the tendency of the dominant discourse to reduce the black artist to a one-dimensional role determined solely by race. He suggests that by accepting this crude essentialism and not seeking to resist it, some black entertainers have been complicit in its promulgation. In an essay entitled "The Burden of Race," Phillips notes that although in present day American society, African-American entertainment has moved from the periphery of American culture and now occupies the mainstream, the legacy of this historical racism still affects the black entertainer. Consequently, many modern black American artists deal with this racism by retreating to racial essentialism (12-13). Through the narrative presented in *Dancing*, Phillips develops the idea that as opposed to promoting artistic freedom and performative agency, such a position stifles it. Thus, the concern is that some of the current performers, like their predecessors, are wittingly or unwittingly limiting their artistic freedom.

These novels illustrate the disastrous consequences for the "Other" when they embrace their prescribed "roles" without question. While Stevens is marginalized by class and Bert by race, the effects are the same. They are unable to make the transition from traditional attitudes and ideologies to achieve personal and professional fulfillment. Both characters are objectified and commodified; their personal relationships suffer as they conflate their private and public personas; they experience profound alienation; and their identity and selfhood is severely undermined by their lack of professional autonomy.

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