"What Dignity is There in That?": The Crisis of Dignity in Selected Late-Twentieth-Century Novels

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Summary

This article offers an investigation of the concept of dignity and of some of the ways in which it has been represented in a number of late-twentieth-century novels. Discussions of dignity centre, on the one hand, upon qualities which the personality reveals in and of itself, and, on the other, upon ethical imperatives relating to how the individual should behave in relation to others. Debates about dignity thus open up questions of ontology, selfhood and the obligations of people towards one another. Two works in particular, in which the concept and status of dignity are explicitly and substantially addressed, are focused upon, Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981). Significantly, both these texts explore the notion of dignity in relation to servitude. What the analysis reveals is that Ishiguro's and Gordimer's novels do not present dignity as an absolute good or as something which may be considered in isolation from the tensions, imperfections and imbalances of human society. Instead, it is shown to be affected by and implicated in the exercise of power, especially in relation to class and race.

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word daar ondersoek ingestel na die begrip van waardigheid en sommige van die wyses waarop dit in 'n aantal romans van die laat twintigste eeu daargestel word. Die bespreking van waardigheid wentel enersyds rondom die kwaliteite wat die persoonlikheid in en van sigself vertoon, en andersyds rondom etiese imperatiewe wat verband hou met hoe die indiwidu in verhouding tot ander behoort op te tree. Die debat rondom waardigheid ontsluit dus vraagstukke rondom ontologie, die wese van die self en mense se verpligtinge teenoor mekaar. Die studie konsentreer veral op twee werke waarin die konsep en status van waardigheid eksplisiet en in detail aangespreek word, naamlik Kazuo Ishiguro se *The Remains of the Day* (1989) en Nadine Gordimer se *July's People* (1981). Dit is opmerklik dat albei werke die idee van waardigheid in die konteks van gedienstigheid ondersoek. Die ontleding toon dat Ishiguro en Gordimer se romans waardigheid nie daarstel as 'n absolute waarde of as iets wat afgesonderd van die spanninge, onvolmaakthede en wanbalanse in die samelewing oorweeg kan word nie. Dit word eerder beskou as iets wat aangetas word deur en betrek word in die uitoefening van mag, veral in terme van klas en ras.

Dignity is a concept with a rich political and philosophical lineage.[1] Most discourses of selfhood, of human value, arise from a desire to acknowledge dignity and to bestow or promote it. Implicitly or explicitly, attempts to construe what Charles Taylor calls an "ontology of the human" (Taylor 1989: 5) tend to proceed from the assumption that it is not possible to confer worth upon the individual without investing him or her with the rights of dignity: "[t]he issue of what one's dignity consists in is no more avoidable than those of why we ought to respect others' rights and what makes a full life" (p. 15). This ethical imperative is evident also in the claim made by Arthur Chaskalson, in a discussion of dignity in relation to the South African constitution, that

> [i]n a broad and general sense, respect for dignity implies respect for the autonomy of each person, and the right of everyone not to be devalued as a human being or treated in a degrading or humiliating manner.
>
> (Chaskalson 2002: 134)

Broadly speaking, there are two aspects to dignity. The one involves qualities which the personality reveals in and of itself: from this perspective, dignity is an achievement of the evolved, autonomous and efficacious individual; a kind of *telos* of the self, to be striven for but perhaps never fully attained. The qualities exhibited by the dignified personality may include "composure, calmness, restraint, reserve, and emotions or passions subdued and securely controlled without being negated or dissolved" (Kolnai 1995: 56). The other aspect of dignity is concerned with the relationship between individuals, with the obligations imposed by the recognition that other people have a right to dignity:

> It is generally held that some fundamental linkage obtains between Dignity and what we somewhat clumsily and misleadingly call "the Rights of Man". A dignified attitude involves respect for such "rights" in others and a claim to one's own "rights" being likewise respected by others .... Dignity and the belief in "human rights" converge in the ethical model of human relationships based on mutual respect ….
>
> (Kolnai 1995: 60)

The "ethical model" as it is presented here is relatively modest in the status it grants to dignity. What Michael Meyer calls "[t]he more egalitarian idea of human dignity" (Meyer 2002: 196) is, however, a great deal more ambitious:

> Roughly put … human dignity is that special moral worth and status had by a human being. One has human dignity regardless of not only (hereditary) social position, but also race, gender, nationality, ethnicity or other markers of social

> hierarchy. This egalitarian account of "human dignity" is arguably a moral high-water mark of modern ethical and political thought.
>
> (Meyer 2002: 196)

As we shall see, it is precisely this assumption of egalitarianism, feeding the concept of dignity, which Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) and Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989) bring into question. For Meyer, dignity is a "moral high-water mark" when it cuts across distinctions such as race and gender and "markers of social hierarchy". In *July's People* and *The Remains of the Day* – both novels where dignity as a concept is problematised and made an explicit and substantial area of investigation within the narrative – the implication that emerges is that dignity as a concept adrift from (or transcending) the defining or limiting categories of human society simply does not exist. In contextualising it, these novels ensure that the concept of dignity is not bland, generalising or diffuse, but is given instead a range of specific, contingent (and even controversial) meanings. Dignity, as represented in these works, is not a universal good, but reflects rather the good and the bad, the mixed legacy, the inequities and imbalances of sociopolitical relations in imperfect societies. Consequently, where morality is compromised, dignity will of necessity be tainted by the same impurities.

Discussions of dignity may be hampered by a notion that it is too broadly commendable a notion to be contentious: it is unlikely, after all, that anyone will be *against* dignity. But a consensual attitude of this kind holds its own dangers: it may lead to the subsuming of a concept such as dignity, with its specific conceptual terrain and ethical obligations, within a broader set of concerns; and thus to a dilution of its meanings. An offshoot of this is that it may become too rarefied to be of practical use. A compelling example of this very scenario may be found in Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (1997). Schlink's novel is a study in the murkiness of moral impulses. Significantly, a discussion of dignity takes place at precisely the point in the novel where the narrator, Michael Berg, faces his greatest dilemma. Only he knows that Hanna Schmitz, on trial for complicity in Holocaust atrocities, is illiterate. The result of her refusal to make this known is that "her defence had been significantly compromised" (Schlink 1997: 136). Michael, presenting his problem "in its abstract form" (p. 140), seeks the advice of his father, a lecturer in philosophy, who links his son's quandary to broader moral and ethical questions: "he went all the way back to first principles. He instructed me about the individual, about freedom and dignity, about the human being as subject and the fact that one may not turn him into an object" (p. 140).

The conclusion which Michael draws from this discussion is that it is not his responsibility to talk to the judge who is presiding over the case, but that there is an obligation upon him to speak to Hanna herself about it. He cannot bring himself to do this, since he feels he must not "deprive her of her lifelong lie, without opening some vision of a future to her" (Schlink 1997: 142). Finding himself unable to heed his father's advice, his dilemma becomes an impasse. The older man's homage to a foundational morality of "first principles" in which, along with freedom and the rights of the individual, dignity must play its part, is therefore not particularly enlightening in this context. Dignity as the father construes it cannot come to Michael's aid because it is couched in terms that are too elevated and hence too far removed from this knotty dilemma in which, as even the father concedes, there is no "appealing solution" (p. 142). It has no pragmatic value in the context of Hanna's dread of the loss of dignity which will ensue if her illiteracy is revealed. This, to her, is worse than any sentence that the court may pronounce.

In *July's People* and *The Remains of the Day*, dignity is lifted down from the moral pedestal upon which Michael's father has placed it. It is presented in these works neither as an uncomplicated virtue nor as an absolute good. Instead, it becomes a problem, a crisis and a site of contestation, implicated in and inseparable from awkward questions of power, race and class. It is revealing that in both novels the problem of dignity is raised in relation to servitude. From the start, therefore, it is made clear that the exploration of dignity is to be conducted within the context of an inequitable distribution of power.

Towards the beginning of *The Remains of the Day*, the narrator, Stevens, discusses dignity in relation to his profession as a butler. Stevens himself is a study in the complexities of dignity. As a character, he evinces the qualities, mentioned earlier, which may be regarded as constituting dignity in an individual: "composure, calmness, restraint, reserve, and emotions or passions subdued and securely controlled without being negated or dissolved" (Kolnai 1995: 56). But the investigation of dignity goes much further than that: there is also a concerted effort (by the narrator and also more broadly within the novel) to link dignity to service and professional conduct. Stevens refers to the Hayes Society, which devises professional criteria for butlers and admits butlers of "only the first rank" (Ishiguro 1989: 31). The Society declares that the "most crucial criterion" in assessing a would-be member is that "the applicant be possessed of *a dignity in keeping with his position* "(p. 33; my italics). Stevens endorses the high standards of the Society and affirms that dignity is the quality which distinguishes "great" butlers from those who are "merely extremely competent" (p. 33).

The phrase "a dignity in keeping with his position" holds within itself the complexities and tensions underlying the quest for dignity. One of the implications it provides is that, where servitude is concerned, there cannot be an intrinsic dignity, but only one that is maintained in the context of one's position and the conditions of service. From this perspective, dignity is neither inherent nor the mark of an evolved self; it emerges instead from the nexus of social relations, class and economics. Stevens's analysis of dignity reinforces this view:

> Of course, this merely begs the further question: of what is "dignity" comprised? ... Mr Graham would always take the view that this "dignity" was something like a woman's beauty and it was thus pointless to attempt to analyse it ... my main objection to Mr Graham's analogy was the implication that this "dignity" was something one possessed or did not by a fluke of nature; and if one did not self-evidently have it, to strive after it would be as futile as an ugly woman trying to make herself beautiful. Now while I would accept that the majority of butlers may well discover ultimately that they do not have the capacity for it, I believe strongly that this "dignity" is something one can meaningfully strive for throughout one's career.
>
> (Ishiguro 1989: 33)

Here Stevens refuses the idea that dignity is something innate, bestowed by "a fluke of nature", like physical beauty. He does not wish, a priori, to close dignity to possibility, to ambition: it is "something one can meaningfully strive for throughout one's career". Yet elsewhere he makes assertions which seem to contradict this. For instance, he declares his support for the view that "butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants" (Ishiguro 1989: 43). Proceeding from this, he declares that "[c]ontinentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of" (p. 43).

These remarks, in addition to exposing humorously the extent to which the butler accepts unquestioningly a number of chauvinistic beliefs, indicate also that he is capable of espousing essentialist views of the most extreme kind. They show that as a character he is a site of contradiction. The views he expresses function as a warning to the reader that Stevens cannot be made entirely consistent with himself and, by extension, it will not be possible to regard the kind of dignity he represents as free of contradiction. The butler holds within himself the problem of dignity, not its solution. The reason for this is that the "egalitarian" ideal of dignity will of necessity always be compromised if the context in which dignity is obliged to express itself is not "egalitarian" – and there is nothing remotely "egalitarian" about Darlington Hall, where Stevens has been in service for so many years.

Michael Meyer, while noting that the butler "manifest[s] an undeniable dignity" (Meyer 2002: 203), argues that

> Mr Stevens possesses his dignity not in spite of the ideology of aristocracy but for reasons directly related to it. He has the virtue of dignity in so far as he acts in accord with the complex social hierarchy of his day.
>
> (Meyer 2002: 203)

Meyer's interpretation makes Stevens identical with his occupation and his dignity identical with his social status. This accords with Stevens's own view that

> [a] butler of any quality must be seen to *inhabit* his role, utterly and fully; he cannot be seen casting it aside one moment simply to don it again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume.
>
> (Ishiguro 1989: 169)

But the situation is more complex than Meyer's comment suggests. Ishiguro's portrayal of the butler ensures that, increasingly, he cannot simply be identified with his role. The journey to the West Country which he undertakes in the Ford motorcar of his present employer, the well-to-do American, Mr Farraday, in order to call on the erstwhile Miss Kenton, now Mrs Benn, has precisely the effect of taking him out of his familiar environment and exhibiting to the reader the responses of people who do not know that he is a butler. He does not cease to be dignified in the sense that he maintains his bearing and reserve, but, significantly, he allows misconceptions to creep in regarding his precise status at Darlington Hall. The novel shows what a great struggle it is for Stevens to remain within his own set of self-definitions, arising out of and in keeping with his position.

There are several factors which contribute to this. The one is that being a butler in the days of the late Lord Darlington is not the same as being a butler in 1956, in the employ of Mr Farraday, whose purchase of Darlington Hall has "taken [it] out of the hands of the Darlington family after two centuries" (Ishiguro 1998: 6). Darlington Hall and the fate of the family function synecdochically in the novel as a representation of the loss of aristocratic power and influence. The changes in society which it represents make Stevens seem an anachronistic figure, and his conception of dignity begins to seem similarly anachronistic: this is because his definitions of self and service have not been flexible enough to adapt to "the complex social hierarchy of his day" (Meyer 2002: 203).

In addition, a complete identification of the man with the role that he plays requires the suppression of the critical faculty:

> Mr Harry Smith's words tonight remind me very much of the sort of misguided idealism which beset significant sections of our generation throughout the twenties and thirties. I refer to that strand of opinion in the profession which

> suggested that any butler with serious aspirations should make it his business to be forever reappraising his employer – scrutinizing the latter's motives, analysing the implications of his views.
>
> (Ishiguro 1989: 199-200)

Stevens dismisses this attitude as "misguided thinking" (p. 200), concluding that "it is, in practice, simply not possible to adopt such a critical attitude towards an employer and at the same time provide good service" (p. 200). However, he is himself no longer able to assume this disinterested position in relation to his previous employer, Lord Darlington. For all his desire to render the kind of service and embody the kind of dignity that are impervious to the vicissitudes of time and history, Stevens finds that this is not possible. Lord Darlington stands condemned by history for pursuing vigorously (albeit with good intentions) a policy of appeasement before the war, which includes "trying to persuade the Prime Minister himself to accept an invitation to visit Herr Hitler" (p. 224) and even proposing that the King should visit Hitler. Although Stevens continues to insist that "Lord Darlington was a gentleman of great moral stature" (p. 126) and that "[n]othing could be less accurate than to suggest that I regret my association with such a gentleman" (p. 126), it becomes evident that his connection to his former employer makes it impossible for him too to escape this censure of the past by the present. This is suggested by the fact that he hides from those whom he meets his association with the former owner of Darlington Hall. For all his reluctance to involve himself in issues that lie beyond his profession, the fact that the years spent in Lord Darlington's service have now been tainted makes his experience of history interrogative rather than passive; it forces him, against his inclination, to "scrutinize" and "analyse". This leaves him bemused since he can no longer inhabit completely his former identity, yet he does not know how to fashion an alternative one. Towards the end of the novel, he unburdens himself to a complete stranger: "I gave my best to Lord Darlington. I gave him the very best I had to give, and now – well – I find I do not have a great deal more left to give" (p. 242). Predictably, dignity is implicated in this existential cul-de-sac:

> at least [Lord Darlington] had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it .... As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that?
>
> (Ishiguro 1989: 243)

This is a crucial moment in the novel. Stevens has never ceased to be dignified and professional in his conduct (and remains so in his attentions to his new employer), but here he recognises that this is not sufficient. Despite all his efforts, his dignity has been compromised by false trust, by devotion and loyalty to a "misguided" employer. It has not been possible to exempt dignity from the stain of the past. In the recognition that there is no such thing as a pure or transcendent dignity lies the revelation that dignity has no sacrosanct or absolute status. Its value is contingent upon the context in which it is expressed.

What emerges by the end of *The Remains of the Day* is that dignity is fluid in status and meaning; and, indeed, it must be so, since the sociopolitical relations which inform it are themselves in a constant state of change. In the novel dignity moves in its meanings and implications between two diametrically opposed conceptions. The one is summed up by the Hayes Society's prescription that a butler should have "a dignity in keeping with his position" (Ishiguro 1989: 33), which ties dignity deterministically to service and to people's allotted positions in the social hierarchy. The opposing view is vociferously expressed by Mr Harry Smith, one of the local men whom Stevens meets in the West Country after his car runs out of fuel. Smith's argument amounts to an explicit politicisation of dignity. Whereas the Hayes Society uses dignity to prop up a conservative vision of a static society, Smith enlists it in his urging of the necessity of political activism and social change. Insisting that "[d]ignity's not just something for gentlemen" (p. 186), he makes it an instrument in the quest for a free society:

> If Hitler had had things his way, we'd just be slaves now .... And I don't need to remind anyone here, there's no dignity to be had in being a slave ....We won the right to be free citizens. And it's one of the privileges of being born English that no matter who you are, no matter if you're rich or poor, you're born free and you're born so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out. That's what dignity's really about ....
> (Ishiguro 1989: 186)

There is nothing particularly contentious about Smith's views, although Stevens rejects them as "far too idealistic, far too theoretical, to deserve respect" (Ishiguro 1989: 194). As we have seen, Smith is not alone in investing dignity with idealism and the grand hope of egalitarianism. Admirable as this is, however, it is telling that, like the Hayes Society, his conception is prescriptive: it has to do with what dignity *should be*, rather than what it *is*. The awkwardness which Stevens feels during this very discussion in being mistaken for a "gentleman" and the relief he experiences the next day when Dr Carlisle discerns his true social status – "I say, I hope you don't think me very rude. But you aren't a manservant of some sort, are you?" (p. 207) – indicate quite clearly that the classless society espoused by Smith is a long way off. The fact that dignity can be employed in the service of such disparate ideologies – one determined to keep things as they are, the other to change them for the better – shows how protean a concept it is, conservative or radical as the case may be, in the service of vastly discrepant moral and political imperatives.

In this respect, there are noticeable affinities between Ishiguro's novel and Gordimer's, for all the obvious differences. In *July's People*, as is characteristic of an interregnum, the clashing imperatives to instigate change and to resist it are pronounced and stark in their oppositionality. Significantly, Gordimer makes it clear that the interregnum refers not only to a political transition: "[t]he interregnum is not only between two social orders but also between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined" (Gordimer 1982: 269-270). Within this investigation of the "morbidity" which marks a society that is, on the one hand, conservative and recalcitrant in the extreme and, on the other, "whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change" (p. 262), the question of dignity is foregrounded. Significantly, it is not presented as a luxury which only a society with an established human rights culture can afford to contemplate, but as a fundamental (and bitter) element in the quasi-apocalyptic struggle which is raging. The battle that is being waged is not about whether dignity is a priority or not; instead, it has to do with the nature of dignity, how it is bestowed and by whom, and of what assumptions it consists.

In *July's People*, Gordimer offers a devastating critique of the "humane creed" (Gordimer 1981: 64), the brand of liberal-humanism which Bam and Maureen Smales embody. Central to this ideology is their belief that it is very important that their servant, July, be invested with dignity. This is an entirely appropriate aspiration on their part, for dignity is "a humanistic virtue of talismanic proportions" (Medalie 1997: 47) and there can be no assertion of human worth, framed in humanist terms, that does not make a space for dignity. But it emerges gradually that the dignity the Smales couple confer upon July is an imposition, inseparable from the power they wield over him. Their conception of dignity as expressed in relation to their servant may be regarded as a version of what Gordimer terms a "false consciousness" (Gordimer 1979: 138). Her explication of this term relates specifically to the limitations experienced by the white artist in South Africa, but may be broadened to refer to the limitations of white experience itself. This "false consciousness" assumes "a white-based value-system which it is fashionable to say 'no longer' corresponds to the real entities of South African life but which in fact never did" (pp. 138-139). It is predicated upon the belief that the white value system is absolute or universal. The universalising of white bourgeois existence and values is precisely the shortcoming that Gordimer depicts in Maureen and Bam and one of the ways in which it is most vividly revealed is in relation to the question of dignity.

The Smales couple has no difficulty in seeing July as a man worthy of and possessing dignity. In one of the early quarrels between Maureen and July, she apologises to him, saying, "[i]f I offended you, if I hurt your dignity ...". The narrator then informs us that "[if] she had never before used the word 'dignity' to [July] it was not because she didn't think he understood the concept, didn't have any – it was only the term itself that might be beyond his grasp of the language" (Gordimer 1981: 72). The suggestion at this stage is that the Smaleses' understanding of dignity is shared by and available to July, and that it is only the word itself that may be foreign to him. As the novel proceeds, however, it is made evident that the ostensibly commendable desire of Bam and Maureen to treat everyone as equal is deeply problematic because it does not take account of (and in fact suppresses, by means of a kind of moral euphemism), the gross inequalities that exist. Their presumption does not acknowledge adequately the fact that July is a servant, with all that that implies. (It is revealing that, although July is so different from Ishiguro's butler, what they have in common is that they both want to be recognised for what they are: servants.) The imposition of dignity upon July is shown to be much more than an act of misguided idealism: it constitutes a denial of the circumstances of July's life – and, therefore, of his true status in apartheid society. From this perspective, it becomes "a form of humanistic chauvinism" (Medalie 1997: 47), a pernicious misconstruing of July's identity under the guise of genuine good intentions:

> How was [Maureen] to have known, until she came here, that the special consideration she had shown for [July's] dignity as a man, while he was by definition a servant, would become his humiliation itself, the one thing there was to say between them that had any meaning.
>
> (Gordimer 1981: 98)

David N. Weisstub has argued that "[t]he difficulty with an absolutist vision [of dignity] is that it carries the definitional closed circle of never agreeing to acknowledge the human experience of dignity being taken away or compromised" (Weisstub 2002: 264). This is precisely what this excerpt conveys, especially in the suggestion that what has been particularly degrading for July has been the "special consideration [Maureen] had shown for his dignity as a man, while he was by definition a servant". Maureen and Bam have, as it were, constructed a July who is ideologically, politically and pragmatically convenient for them; and the creation of this unthreatening figure is buttressed by a conception of dignity which makes no demands upon them. Conferring dignity upon someone should have the effect of raising that person in status and esteem: it should enlarge his or her humanity. Paradoxically, the white couple's attempts to confer dignity upon July produce the very experience which, according to Chaskalson, the bestowing of dignity is meant to abolish – humiliation. This is because they have not taken into account his wishes or the contexts which are important to him.

This is forcibly communicated to Maureen during the final, climactic quarrel with her former servant. July has been asserting himself more and more as he grows accustomed to being in the unwonted position of having power over Maureen and Bam. Now, in the final confrontation, the full extent of the reversal in power relations is made evident. Here, too, dignity plays its part:

> She understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him. But for himself – to be intelligent, honest, dignified for *her* was nothing; his measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others.
>
> (Gordimer 1981: 152)

There could not be a more emphatic refusal than this of the idea of a universal dignity in which all may share. Here Maureen sees the complete collapse of her and Bam's fondly cherished belief that bestowing dignity upon July will (in the specifically humanistic terms in which their "idea of him" is framed) confirm and entrench his humanity. Instead a chasm so great lies between the material conditions and contexts of their lives that dignity, as she understands it and in all its imputed capaciousness, cannot cross it. The dignity she believed she was extending to July has been emptied of all value; it has become another casualty of the "slow certain grind between the past and its retribution" (Gordimer 1981: 36).

However, the same excerpt that reveals this also makes it clear that, just as Maureen's beliefs, based as they are upon universalist assumptions, are untenable, so too is her despair. For there *is* a context in which July's humanity is not defined by the depredations of apartheid or the conditions of servitude, and in which a dignity, framed within the parameters of his own culture, is available to him. But Maureen is excluded from any apprehension of it by "the inevitable, distorting nature of dependency" (p. 60) – whether July's dependency upon them or theirs upon him. Her relationship is with a former servant called July, not with a man called Mwawate, the name by which July is known in his village; and, because she has no purchase on the cultural and social contexts that pertain there, she has not the means to understand how self-definition and dignity are achieved in that environment. But her failure does not mean that they do not exist, as the narrator makes emphatically clear: "his measure as a man was taken elsewhere and by others" (p. 152). Unlike Stevens, Mwawate does have recourse to another identity. Maureen's inability to make her conception of dignity prevail is a void that opens up in her life, not in his. In this adversarial environment in which everything, including dignity, is being contested, she loses the battle because she cannot, finally, endow all humankind with universal dignity, while Mwawate prevails for precisely the same reason. Her defeat is his victory.

Dignity thus becomes a crisis for Maureen, but not for Mwawate: for him, provided it has nothing whatsoever to do with his servitude in Johannesburg, it is a resource upon which he can rely. Yet it is expressed within the context of the conservative social relations of a tribal village. The revolution that is taking place is as much a threat to the continuance of that kind of life as it is to Bam and Maureen – this is clearly suggested by the waning authority of the chief and his fears that his land may be taken by "[t]hose people from Soweto" and the "Russias" (p. 119) and "Cubas" (p. 118). What will happen if the contexts within which dignity is meaningful for Mwawate no longer exist, when his "measure as a man" can no longer be taken as before? Then, surely, dignity will become a crisis for him too. Within the dystopia of *July's People*, there is nothing that is assured of preservation, nothing that survives the "explosion of roles" (p. 117). And dignity – both of self and of status – is implicated in this apocalyptic scenario of unsparing annihilation. Perhaps in a post-apartheid South Africa there will be a new place for dignity, but *July's People* does not take us there and so we cannot know. Within the world of the novel, dignity is bound to crisis.

Towards the end of *The Remains of the Day*, Stevens is called upon by Dr Carlisle to supply his own understanding of dignity:

> "What do *you* think dignity's all about?"
>
> The directness of this inquiry did, I admit, take me rather by surprise. "It's rather a hard thing to explain in a few words, sir," I said. "But I suspect it comes down to not removing one's clothing in public."
>
> (Ishiguro 1989: 210)

Humorously bathetic as this response is, it is not entirely reductive or glib. Someone who knows that it is not acceptable to remove his or her clothes in public has gained at least a rudimentary understanding of the social contract as it operates in Western societies, of the obligations of the self in relation to others. It certainly does not entail a profound understanding of that contract (it is, after all, what small children have to learn) and as such it does not go far, but it has at least the advantage that it would be accepted by almost everyone in those societies and is thus consensually understood and implemented. However, the achievement of this consensus comes at a great cost: it requires the sacrifice of the hope that shared ideas about dignity may reflect a more sophisticated kind of social contract. As soon as one moves beyond an elemental understanding, such as the one provided here by Stevens, the consensus has to be forgone – as is made evident in *July's People* and *The Remains of the Day*. The only compensation is that representations of dignity may then play a part in expressing the complex problems and shortcomings of a troubled social dynamic.

Note

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