

Play of Power and Knowledge in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*

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Abstract:

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest established Kesey as a figure of massive importance in the American counter-culture movement of the sixties. It is also a fundamental work of the anti-psychiatry movement for it identified madness as a social construct and deconstruction of normality. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was published in the same year as Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, another fundamental anti-psychiatric text, and Kesey's text shares many social critiques with this and other works of Foucault. Foucault saw that the relationship between power and knowledge as a vicious circle. Possessing knowledge gave power, which in turn gathered more knowledge to establish the power. The knowledge gathered in this way further reinforces exercises of power. Foucault emphasizes the idea that 'knowledge is power'. The primary focus of this study is to present through a Foucauldian analysis of the novel, that madness is a social construction.

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Most of Foucault's work is vested upon the notion of power in the Society. He has been hugely influential in understanding power and his re-conceptualization of power is recognized as one of his most important intellectual contributions. He uses the term

‘power/knowledge’ to signify that power is constructed through accepted forms of knowledge and scientific truth.

Foucault is of the view that power has penetrated in the behaviour of individuals and that the entire society is structured through what Foucault called ‘power-knowledge’. He elucidated that what society defined as madness was not related to truth but was solely based on power. He expounded his notions on power by using certain other concepts such as confinement, confession, gaze, bio-power and discipline to ascertain his notions of power.

Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* controls the patient through scientific knowledge. She exercises power over the patients by making them believe that whatever she does is for the therapeutic value of the patients. This concept of therapeutic value appears repeatedly in the novel. Nurse Ratched maintains a log book in which the patients spy on each other and writes down information about any piece of information that one hears from the other patient. The person who writes such information would get a star by his name on the roll and would get to sleep late the next day. Nurse Ratched actually does it to get enough evidence about what the patients do but she makes the patients believe that the log book is maintained for the therapeutic interest of the whole ward. 42 Equally important is the fact that, Nurse Ratched made the patients believe that all the disciplinary measures devised by her were completely for the benefit of the patients. To quote,

Please understand: We do not impose certain rules and restrictions on you without a great deal of thought about their therapeutic value. A good many of you are here because you could not adjust to the rules of society in the Outside world, because you refused to face up to them, because you tried to

circumvent them and avoid them. I tell you this hoping you will understand that it is entirely for your own good that we enforce discipline and order. (170)

Consequently, the patients are completely trapped. They are also thoroughly led into the belief that everything is for their therapeutic interest and they would be cured and reach the outside world soon if they adhere to the system. Moreover most of the patients are the ones who were not able to face the outside world. In order to evade their responsibilities they take refuge in the asylum and are into believing the Big Nurse completely. But the entire system begins to rupture at the arrival of McMurphy. The first signs of tension are felt in the ward, when McMurphy's uninhibited laughter engulfs the entire premise. Chief Bromden rightly remarks: "I realize all of a sudden it's the first laugh I've heard in years." (11). This laughter makes Nurse Ratched realize that he would be a potential threat to her dominance. She cleverly identifies his potential threat from the beginning. Likewise, McMurphy also identifies how Nurse Ratched is a potential threat to the patients. He tries to make the patients understand how Nurse Ratched cleverly manipulates them by using various strategies which were based on power/knowledge but in vain. When McMurphy discusses this with Harding, he fails to believe McMurphy. To enumerate:

I've seen thousand of them old and young, men and women. Seen 'em all over the country and in the homes- people who try to make you weak so that they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to...She fooled me that kindly little old mother bit for may be three minutes when I came this morning, but no longer. (54)

Thus McMurphy's first attempt fails as Harding is absolutely taken into belief that Nurse Ratched is the good angel who does everything only for the benefit of the inmates of the ward.

Yet another strategy used by Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is 'Confession'. In the view of Foucault the religious practice of confession had changed from being a spiritual practice to being used to gain power through knowledge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. People were urged to confess to their innermost desires and sexual practices. These confessions later became data for the social sciences, which used the knowledge to construct mechanisms of social control. Thus, Foucault claims that modern confession acts as a form of power-knowledge. In the novel Nurse Ratched holds meeting at regular time intervals to make the patients confess their problems which is later used to control them. To cite,

Also you should feel at ease in your surroundings to the extent you can freely discuss emotional problems in front of patients and staff. Talk she says, discuss and confess. Bring these old sins into the open where they can be washed by the sight of all. And participate in Group Discussion. Help yourself and your friends probe into the secrets of the subconscious. (44)

The clinic in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* functions as a correctional institution. Patients are aware of their constant observation, an example of the 'gaze' keeping the power on the side of the powerful. The disciplinary measures were enforced to an extent that the Nurse Ratched had control over the bodies of the patients which Foucault termed 'biopower'. Moreover Discipline according to Foucault, is seen as a tool of power which regulates the behaviour of individuals in the society. This is done by controlling and organising the space

by architecture etc., of time through timetables and people's activity and behaviour through drills, posture and movement. It is enforced with the help of complex systems of surveillance. According to Foucault, power is not discipline; rather discipline is simply one way in which power can be exercised. He also uses the term 'disciplinary society', discussing its origin and development and disciplinary institutions such as prisons, hospitals, asylums, schools and army barracks.

The correctional function is believed to be hidden behind a facade of medicine: rather, the correction is the medicine in the novel. This is why the Nurse's tools serve a double function as both tools of medical science and disciplinary measures: patients who misbehave are humiliated during the therapy sessions and excessive misbehaviour can lead them to even lobotomy (a process in which parts of brain of a person is removed thereby leaving them nothing but a vegetable). They will subject themselves to discipline, or see their persona destroyed.

Three kinds of patients existed in the ward namely Acutes, Chronics and Psychopaths. But they did not remain the same. Based on the behaviour they were transformed by electric shocks and the like. The highest form of physical subjugation in the novel is lobotomy. It is a process in which parts of brain are removed thus reducing the individual to the state of a vegetable. Almost every patient in the ward was afraid of this process and they knew that any kind of misbehaviour would lead them to be lobotomized. Thus the individuals in the ward were treated like products. One last example of the clinic as a correctional facility is that after his attempted murder of Ratched fails, he is lobotomized and left in a vegetative state. While this 'therapeutic' measure does indeed 'cure' McMurphy's 'violent urges,' it is not beneficial to the patient himself, thereby being debatable of medical value. Thus, this procedure makes

perfect sense as punishment. Instead of attempting to correct the individual, the individual is destroyed by the system.

The problem of focus here is that if people are regarded as mad because of their deviant behaviour. The institutions rather than taking care of the affected with their deviant behaviour, aims at correcting their behaviour.

In the end the system takes its disciplinary revenge on McMurphy, lobotomizing him. Yet it is still him that holds the final victory, as is shown when McMurphy is brought back into the ward after his operation and the other patients refuse to acknowledge that this body belongs to him. The dismissal by the patients of the symbol of Ratched's power shows that McMurphy's resistance was more than just a battle against rules and discipline: it was a successful deconstruction of the discipline that upheld the paradigm of knowledge- power. Nurse Ratched, while alive, has lost the ability to raise her voice or turn her head, thus disabling her discourse and gaze.

Though McMurphy receives the highest punishment he is still victorious. In the process of awakening the consciousness of the patients, McMurphy loses his own life. The epic struggle between Nurse Ratched and McMurphy comes to an end when he is lobotomized. When he is wheeled into the ward as a vegetable the battle has already been won. Most of the inmates are liberated. Though McMurphy is destroyed he is not defeated.

Kesey envisioned the then widespread practice of 'Therapeutic Community' as a way of forcing the internal soul to fit someone else's idea of the ideal external environment. Therapeutic Community became a trick of coercion that pretended to help people for the democratic common good but served only the tyranny of the mediocre majority and the management of the institutions that supported the practice for its own purposes.

The entire institution functioned on power dynamics in which the patients were abused as a way of curing mental illness but of asserting the power and authority of the mental health professionals. To get out of the hospital, or to ease their life within it, they had to show acceptance of the place accorded to them. Moreover the mental patients were crushed by the weight of a service ideal that eased the life for the rest of the people in the outside world. In the context of the institutions therapy meant learning to internalize the moral codes of a particular society, not treatment of an illness. Psychiatry was used as an instrument for social purification masquerading as science with little therapeutic value.

As the novel progresses there is a tussle for power and McMurphy becomes powerful by empowering the inmates with the knowledge of the hold of power over them. For instance, McMurphy leads his men on a more amusing fishing expedition. On their way to the boat, Harding turns to McMurphy with his own startling observation: “Never before did I realize that mental illness could have the aspect of power. Think of it: perhaps the more insane a man is, the more powerful he could become. Hitler an example. Fair makes the old brain reel, doesn’t it? Food for thought there.”(243)

The modern society has burdened us with the norms and code of conduct. Only by conforming to those behaviours one can be considered sane. But this sanity brings along with it a state of being trapped. One has to give up one’s individualism to conform and let themselves be manipulated by those holding power. While, those who claim to be insane chose to be free from this social constraints than chose to be accepted as ‘sane’ and trapped.

Thus as rightly delineated by that modern society is a construction in which the individual is forced to conform under the constant pressure of observation and discipline. What holds this

structure together is, power combined with knowledge, two elements that complement and uphold each other.

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