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Redefining the Normal: A Close Study of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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Abstract

The 1960s were imbued with a spirit of dissent, rebellion and revolution both on the streets and on paper. The decade borrowed impetus from the one preceding it, thus the movements that had their genesis in the 1950s were ripe in the 1960s: these included the student movement, the women's movements, movements for gay/lesbian/queer rights, civil rights movements, anti-war movements, and disability rights movements. The works produced during this period draw inspiration from the prevailing social upheaval and explore the various fronts on which institutions function to silence and eliminate any threats to their power. Ken Kesey's One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962) is one of them. The novel is situated within a psychiatric ward and explores the semantics of madness and confinement. The novel presents an astute criticism of the deplorable conditions of psychiatric wards but more so it questions the basic premise on which madness is defined. McMurphy's claim of feigning psychosis to escape the mundanity and hardships of farm life, only to be 'committed' (which means that he could not be discharged from the hospital on his will) in a hospital propels us to question the very binary of normal and abnormal or who can be categorised as mad and who cannot. This paper will thus analyse the text by placing it within the theoretical framework of disability studies and the myriad ways in which madness is constructed through a disabling society. It will further explore the multiple attempts of a disabling society to enforce the notions of shame and stigma on people with disabilities.

Keywords: *normal, normate, madness, social-construction, deviant, mental-asylum*

Redefining the Normal: A Close Study of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

The counterculture movement raged during the 1960s as a reaction to the social and political norms of the conservative society of the 1950s (Mckay 2005; Zimmerman 2013). Most of the poets, dramatists and writers writing during this era lived dangerous, adventurous lives, challenging the social norms that were meant to limit their creative zeal. Their works bear evidence to their rebellion. As Richard Gray notes, 'There has been a thin, sometimes invisible, line between their own lives and the lives of their protagonists, disaffiliated from mainstream culture, driven or directed by their own choice to the social margins. And there has been a similarly narrow line between the status of their work as an imaginative document and as a social handbook' (654). Ken Kesey belongs to a group of such writers. Soon after graduating from Stanford University, Kesey volunteered to be a subject in a government-sponsored programme that studied the effects of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), mescaline and other hallucinatory drugs (at the time these drugs were not illegal) to earn some extra money. Following this episode, he worked as an attendant at a hospital's psychiatric ward and it was here that he gathered the material to pen down his pathbreaking novel — *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1962)*.

The novel is situated within a psychiatric ward and explores the semantics of madness and confinement. All the characters in the novel are individuals and not stereotypes of people with mental disabilities; thus every character has a unique history, unique behavioural patterns and unique responses. Despite the individualistic patterns of behaviour, all the hospital inmates share a common routine, which they are bound to follow as per the hospital norms set by the 'Big Nurse' or Miss Ratched. She is a representative of the common social force, which Chief Bromden (a schizophrenic inmate) calls the 'Combine', that is responsible for 'fixing' the men locked up inside this hospital. The routine, mundanity and control of this psychiatric ward is

challenged by Randle Patrick McMurphy, who acts to be mentally disabled in order to escape the seemingly harsh farm life.

The novel presents an astute criticism of the deplorable conditions of psychiatric wards but more importantly it questions the basic premise on which madness is defined. Additionally, the novel also reflects the growing social anxiety of the age when men were at war (the Vietnam War had started in 1955) and women's movements were at full force — the second wave of feminism had taken over America. It is only natural then that sexism and misogyny blatantly blot the pages of Kesey's critically appreciated work.

The readers are introduced to the story through the first-person narrative of Chief Bromden or Chief Broom as called by the three Black Boys of the ward. Chief Bromden, Lars Bernaert notes, is the 'homodiegetic narrator' of the story, which means that he is both a character in the story and the narrator of the events as and when they take place. As the plot proceeds, we learn that he is schizophrenic and while observing the people and their activities around him he often lapses into schizophrenic episodes. Apart from his diagnosed mental disability he has adopted a charade of sensory disability — he acts to be deaf and dumb. This act allows him to navigate the demarcated space of the hospital as he is given access even to those rooms and cabins that are reserved only for the hospital staff. He can garner the most horrific information as 'They don't bother not talking out loud about their hate secrets when I'm nearby because they think I'm deaf and dumb. Everybody thinks so. I'm cagey enough to fool them' (Kesey 1962: 3). Thus, while occasionally his schizophrenia coerces him to lose a sense of things happening around him, his careful act of being deaf and dumb empowers him to see through the lies that the hospital hides behind the nurses' glass wall. His schizophrenia rather than being a hindrance to the plot's development makes it more layered and complex: one narrative is what his physical 'eye' sees while the other layer of the narrative, that is, of his schizophrenic episodes is the voice of 'I', a voice that provides us glimpses into his past, his

fears, his trauma, and the reasons that landed him in the psychiatric ward. However, his physical 'eye' and the 'I' of his conscience are both linked and distorted by the fog. It is only Chief Bromden who can see the fog, it is an integral part of his episodes of schizophrenia, the fog acts as a safe space for him. Whenever the fog starts to fill the room, he starts relapsing into the past whilst being aware that it is the fog that is allowing him to hide from the Big Nurse. Ironically, Miss Ratched uses the fog to fill the ward when she wants to create confusion, making it difficult for the ward inmates to think clearly and thus facilitating the execution of her plans. He says,

> As soon as you let down your guard, as soon as you lose once, she's won for good. And eventually we all got to lose. Nobody can help that. Right now, she's got the fog machine switched on, and it's rolling in so fast I can't see a thing but her face, rolling in thicker and thicker, and I feel as hopeless and dead (Kesey 1962:113).

In the story the fog serves a twin purpose: First, it helps the Chief to hide from the ward aides and the nurses when he does not want to shave, and second, it helps nurse Ratched(as believed by Bromden) to create an acute state of chaos and confusion.

Elena Semino and Kate Swindlehurst, while exploring the embedded metaphors within the narrative of the text in their essay '*Metaphor and Mind Style in Ken Kesey's "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest",* chart the way in which Bromden's use of mechanistic language is reflective of the way he perceives the world differently. They write,

> What is interesting about Bromden is that he seems to oscillate between a figurative and a literal use of machinery images and that this oscillation reflects his paranoid tendencies: when he is relatively calm and happy, the references to machinery tend to be more clearly figurative… when he is frightened and under stress, they reflect his distorted perceptions, his belief that he inhabits a terrifying world in which the

> machinery in everything breaks through its thin layer of skin at every available opportunity (Semino and Swindlehurst 1996: 153).

It is Chief Bromden's knowledge of electronics that he acquired while he was in college and his job in the training camp as an electrician's assistant that has coloured his perception of the world. He believes that the world is being ruled by the Combine, which is 'a huge organisation that aims to adjust the Outside as well as she [the Big Nurse] has the Inside' (Kesey 1962: 28). In his perception, the people in power and the ones recruited by the government are working together to 'adjust' or brainwash all the men to forget their natural instincts and become acquiescent — thus, any form of social deviance, any form of resilience is cruelly crushed. Sefelt (another ward inmate) says, 'Give some of us pills to stop a fit, give the rest shock to start one' (Kesey 1962: 189). This sentence bears evidence to the inhuman treatment being meted out to the patients in these hospitals that claimed to help people.

A major linguistic change occurs in the narrative after a lobotomy is performed on McMurphy. The man who was addressed as the 'big redheaded man with the dreadful cap and the horrible-looking scar' (Kesey 1962: 82) is now reduced to being a lifeless entity; Chief Bromden denies McMurphy his status as a living being — he addresses him as 'it'. Bromden narrates: 'They pushed it into the day room and left it standing against the wall, along next to the Vegetables' (Kesey 1962: 321). This abrupt change in his pronoun is enough for the readers to understand that Bromden is now drowned in hopelessness, he is unable to recognise McMurphy in his vegetative state and finally decides to kill McMurphy. This final act of violence leaves the readers baffled — does Bromden kill McMurphy because his lifeless body reminds him and other hospital inmates of their failure to stand against the Combine or is this a final act of rebellion to break free from the clutches of the Combine once and for all.

McMurphy and Madness

Lennard Davis in his work *Ending Normalcy* (1995*)* writes '...the very term that permeates our contemporary life — the normal — is a configuration that arises in a particular historical moment. It is a part of a notion of progress, of industrialisation and of ideological consolidation of the power of the bourgeoisie' (Davis 1995: 49). He implies that the very term 'norm' or normal varies widely at any given historical time: the binarised categories of the normal and the abnormal are nebulous because the very parameters on which they are measured are unstable and inconsistent. This concept is essential in order to understand, interrogate and place Randle Patrick McMurphy's character in the story. He arrives at the psychiatric hospital located in the state of Oregon to 'escape the drudgery of the work farm' (Kesey 1962:45). During a betting game he brags, 'Another thing: I'm in this place because that's the way I planned it, pure and simple, because it's a better place than a work farm. As near as I can tell I'm no loony, or never knew it if I was' (Kesey 1962: 74). The doctor at the work farm too writes a note for the doctor at the hospital, which says, 'Don't overlook the possibility that this man might be feigning psychosis…' (Kesey 1962: 49). However, from the day he arrives at the ward he starts disturbing the routine or the normalcy of the hospital. The routine that dictates every activity of the hospital inmates appears to be too tedious and repetitive for McMurphy who still considers himself to be an outsider, an anomaly amongst the remaining 40 patients of the hospital — however, for the others it is a part of their lives now. Thus, what is normal for the rest is abnormal and boring for him.

A close study of the text also reveals instances where McMurphy's various actions place him within the category of 'mad' or are enough to send him to confinement if performed at a different historical time for Michel Foucault in his work *Madness and Civilisation* notes, 'In Frankfort, in 1399, seamen were in-structed to rid the city of a madman who walked about the streets naked' (Foucault 2003: 7). Nakedness, during the mediaeval ages was considered as a sign of madness as inappropriate dressing would translate into going against the norm and

the social order, thus categorising a person as deviant. Norm, as Lennard Davis understands, 'implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be a part of the norm. The norm pins down that the majority of the population falls under the arch of the standard bell-shaped curve' (Davis 1995: 29). In *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, we find McMurphy walking out of the washroom door wearing nothing but a towel, much to the horror of Miss Ratched. She lashes out at him, 'You can't run around here — in a towel!' (Kesey 1962: 96). This scene parodies the walk of pride of a naked madman from the mediaeval ages. McMurphy, though not completely naked as he is wearing his undergarment beneath the towel, mirrors the deviant as he is going against the norms of the microcosm called the hospital by not dressing in the hospital uniform.

His claim of not being a loony is also contradicted when it is revealed to him that 'Only Scanlon and — well, I guess some of the Chronics. And you (McMurphy). Not many commitments in the whole hospital. No, not many at all' (Kesey 1962:194). This means that the others can get an AMA (discharge against medical advice) signed whenever they want and are free to leave the hospital at their will, at least theoretically. However, McMurphy is committed, which means that the time of his discharge will be decided by the hospital. He, against his claims of not being a loony, is thus declared as a disturbing factor and described as a man who is not only sick but also 'definitely a Potential Assaultive…the arch type of psychopath?'. His challenge to the power and his potential reason construes him as a threat to the Combine and thus immediately there arises a need to eliminate this threat in order to allow a systemic functioning of the psychiatric hospital. The institution, rather than becoming a safe space that will help him to heal and recuperate, becomes another structure whose chief purpose is to silence and control its inmates.

Erving Goffman in his work *Asylums* (1961) talks about the ways in which patients of psychiatric hospitals react to certain events:

> Persons who become mental-hospital patients vary widely in the kind and degree of illness that a psychiatrist would impute to them, and in the attributes by which laymen would describe them. But once started on the way, they are confronted by some importantly similar circumstances and respond to these in some importantly similar ways. Since these similarities do not come from mental illness, they would seem to occur in spite of it (Goffman 1961: 129).

Similar responses to similar circumstances can be seen in the non-committed patients who are free to leave the hospital but don't due to deep-rooted notions of shame and stigma. Shame, which is forced on them through a reworking of social forces, here called Combine, has made them believe that they do not have the courage to face the world because either they are too weak or their once status as a mental patient will impact their social status in the outside world. In the novel, Billy Bibbit and Dale Harding represent the madness that erupts from societal shame and a constant conflict within the self. For Bibbit, the anxiety is deeply rooted in the shame that his mother's dominance brings upon him, his attempts to end his life are his way of expressing control over his life. For Harding too his emasculation and feeling of repressed sexuality serve to be the underlying reason for his neurosis. Leaving the psychiatric institution would mean returning to the people who instigated the mental illnesses in them in the first place.

Sexism and Misogyny

The novel in its entirety caters to the masculine myth of a messiah-like figure who enters the systematically ruled ward to instigate and propel the patients to raise their voice for freedom if not to save them from the Combine. He is a hero with a charismatic personality, full of laughter and reeking of sexual energy, which is enough to restore normalcy in the ward. We are told that McMurphy has received a 'Distinguished Service Cross in Korea, for leading an escape from a Communist Prison Camp. A dishonourable discharge, afterward, for

insubordination. Followed by a history of street brawls and barroom fights and a series of arrests for Drunkenness, Assault and Battery, Disturbing the Peace, repeated gambling, and one arrest — for Rape' (Kesey 1962: 45). He, however, denies the charges of rape and asserts that the act was consensual, and it was he, in fact, who was deceived by the girl who claimed to be 17 and not 15. The evident contempt in McMurphy's voice for the girl is reflective of the growing social anxieties stirred by the multiple ongoing women's rights movements, which also included the rights of women over their bodies, self and reproduction. These movements both drew and emanated social energies from feminist texts such as *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simon de Beauvoir, *The Feminine Mystique* (1962) by Betty Freida, *The Female Eunuch* (1970) by Germaine Greer, and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970). McMurphy's continuous denial of the charges invites suspicion and raises a fundamental question — whether he is actually lying or is he delusional, thus making him believe that the act of coitus was consensual.

Since his first day at the hospital, he challenges Miss Ratched's authority by closely observing her, ensuring that she knows that she is being watched. He even twists her words and infuses them with double-entendres, which fluster her and extract grins from some of the 'acutes'. The power dynamics between McMurphy and Miss Ratched has been viewed by Daniel J. Vitkus as the celebration of "natural" maleness, which is placed in opposition to a domineering, emasculating representation of the feminine. The central figure in this construction of the feminine is the Big Nurse, an evil mother who wishes to keep and control her little boys (the men on the ward) under her system of mechanical surveillance and mind control' (Vitkus 1994: 66). She emasculates the male patients of the ward by instilling a sense of fear in their hearts. McMurphy labels her as a 'ball-cutter' and iterates it throughout the novel. However, McMurphy constantly reminds the readers of Miss Ratched's denial of femininity by sexualising her body — especially her big breasts. Her breasts and 'expensive

baby doll face' (Kesey 1962:5) are deceptive. Instead of nurturing the patients, she works closely with the social forces to help curb natural male instincts.

Apart from the tyrannical sexualised nurse who metaphorically castrates the men under her care, readers are told that most of the patients are confined within the hospital due to women. Harding is described as 'a flat nervous man' (Kesey 1962: 30) whose inferiority complex arises due to his wife who is 'extremely well endowed in the bosom and that this made him uneasy because she drew stares from men on the streets' (Kesey 1962: 44). Billy Bibbit, a man with a stutter, developed suicidal tendencies after being rejected by a woman he loved, as he recalls 'And even when I pr-proposed, I flubbed it. I said "Huh-honey, will you muh-muh-muh-muh-muh . . ." till the girl broke out l-laughing' (Kesey 1962: 136). The razor scars on his wrist bear witness to his suicide attempts. Though he is attached to his mother, our narrator hints at her tyranny by letting us know that she is a close friend of Miss Ratched. Bromden's helpless confession that he 'can't give you (Billy) a new mother' (ibid) serves ample evidence that he considers Billy's mother to be responsible for his neurosis. She has infantilised him; in fact, the only incident in the novel where Billy doesn't stutter is when Miss Ratched finds him and Candy after they've spent the night together. He says, 'Good Morning Miss Ratched…This is Candy' (Kesey 1962: 313). Thus, while the tyrannical women in his life make him nervous, suicidal and even cause stutter in his speech, Candy reinstalls in him a sense of masculinity. Chief Bromden too in his schizophrenia episodes recalls that his father's character shrank, and he gave up his abilities to fight the forces, which ultimately snatched away their land, due to his mother; he says, 'He was big enough to fight it for a while…. He fought it a long time till my mother made him too little to fight anymore and he gave up' (Kesey 1962: 220).

McMurphy's final act of violence on Miss Ratched is not a mere physical attack but is also a sexual one, as is evident in the following lines:

> …after he'd smashed through that glass door, her face swinging around, with terror forever ruining any other look she might ever try to use again, screaming when he grabbed for her and ripped her uniform all the way down the front, screaming again when the two nippled circles started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever even imagined, warm and pink in the light (Kesey 1962: 318–19).

This act is his final attempt to restore patriarchal order in the ward — the last attempt to establish the victory of the male patients by unveiling Miss Ratched's femininity and fear; it can also be argued that McMurphy in this scene is a mere effigy that carries forward the repressed violent desires of all the hospital inmates as in the earlier part of the novel Harding declares that, 'man has but one truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy' (Kesey 1962: 71).

On the contrary, it can be argued that McMurphy is not a psychotic that he asserts to be and his actions are a part of his plan. However, within the microcosmic world of the hospital his behavioural patterns are far from being normal because as per the norm or the majority, he is the other — the abnormal and the deviant. He can use reason to argue against the unreasonable hospital rules, which extend to the scheduled time of watching T.V, bathing, shaving, eating, recreation, and so on. Thus, in him we see a person who challenges the constructed notions of madness by parodying it vis-à-vis gambling, drinking, physical assaults, and sexual excesses. However, within the asylum he is never normal and never fits into the category of the normate. As Foucault too has studied in his work, the constructed nature of madness implies that the society in itself is fake, unruly, unfair, and unjust, and thus, in such a society the voice of reason is construed as unreasonable (Foucault 2003).

Conclusion

While examining the categories of normal and abnormal, Simi Linton in her critically acclaimed work '*Claiming Disabilities' (1998)* argues, 'As the notion of *normal* is applied in

the social science contexts and certainly in general parlance, it implies its obverse – *abnormal* – and they both become value laden. Often those who are not deemed normal are devalued and considered a burden or problem or are highly valued and regarded as a potential resource (Linton 1998:22). In the controlled hospital setting McMurphy becomes the 'abnormal'. He occupies a liminal position of being a burden for the hospital staff (as a threat that disrupts the normalcy of the hospital) and a potential savior for the inmates (as someone who tries to break the forced routine and monotony of the psychiatric ward). He is thus the 'Big Man' who encourages the 'acutes' and the 'chronics' to vote and ensure that their demands (or basic human needs) are achieved and democracy is finally established. His in-betweenness positions him between a mythic hero and an anti-hero.

Towards the end of the novel, McMurphy's lobotomised brain is incapable of controlling his body and it stands lifeless, incapable of protesting. The body does not protest even when Chief Bromden decides to kill it. However, the act of killing McMurphy can be read as an act of protest, against the Combine; the crime of murder and running away from the hospital can be seen as an attempt to redefine the notions of madness and normalcy. Following this act, the remaining non-committed inmates of the hospital decide to voluntarily leave it. They defy the predefined notions of shame and stigma to govern their decisions and finally end their confinement and exile from the world outside the hospital.

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