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THE MADNESS OF REBELLION: A STUDY INTO INSANITY AS A POWERFUL TROPE IN
KEN KESEY'S *ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST*

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ABSTRACT

The Beat Generation comprised of a group of unconventional authors whose works largely influenced American culture and politics after the war. The Hippie Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s was greatly influenced by the overt self-expression, queer themes and non-conformity of the Beat Generation. Ken Kesey considered himself a link between the both. His own experience as a paid subject to an experiment involving the use of psychedelic drugs and his prolonged stay in the asylum served as a backdrop to his celebrated novel, *One flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962). This paper aims to critically analyse the use of madness as a literary trope in the novel and explore the different purposes the madness of each character serves. The post-war American society was characterised by confusion, fear, moral dilemma and institutional correctness. This study shall bring out the contemporary socio-cultural influences that are reflective in the narrative. While the setting of an asylum provides an exploratory platform to Kesey, the characters serve as a mouthpiece to his rebellious self.

Keywords: American Society, Beat Generation, Hippie Movement, Madness, Rebellion

"If I am mad, it is mercy! May the gods pity the man who in his callousness can remain sane to the hideous end!"— H.P. Lovecraft, *The Temple*¹

Kenneth Elton Kesey, prominently known as Ken Kesey, was born at La Junta, Colorado in 1935. A popular American novelist, essayist, and countercultural figure of the nineteenth century, he considered himself a connecting link between the Beat Generation of the 1950s and the Hippie Movement of the 1960s. He attended Stanford University for a course in creative writing and later served as a paid subject for experiments in a secret study conducted by the U.S. Army. Kesey stayed at the Veteran's Hospital in Menlo Park and reported the effects of the mild drugs that were administered to him regularly. This out of the box experience served as a source of inspiration for his 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He also worked as a medical attendant in the same hospital's psychiatric ward where he closely observed the flaws in the system. His encounters with the inmates of the psychiatric ward altered his perception towards madness

¹ This quote appears in the short story titled "The Temple" authored by H.P. Lovecraft, published in 1920. See <https://www.hplovecraft.com/writings/texts/fiction/te.aspx>

and convinced him that the people tagged as 'insane' were actually locked into a system that was far from being therapeutic. He developed an exceptional insight into their lives and believed that these patients were not insane, but were rather pushed them into asylums by the society because they did not conform to the conventional ideas of 'sanity'. He believed that the hallucinogenic drugs injected to him in the hospital during the experiments were a great escape from reality and made him experience a heightened state of consciousness. This awareness caused him to believe that these mind-altering psychedelic drugs could enable him to see things the way they were supposed to be seen. As Tom Wolfe in his *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968) puts it, "he was in a realm of consciousness he had never dreamed of before and it was not a dream or delirium but part of his awareness" (322). Kesey is well remembered as the hero of this non-fiction book about psychedelic drugs and the book "mockingly compared him to the leaders of the world's great religions, dispensing to his followers not spiritual balm but doses of LSDs to search for the universe within themselves" (NY Times).

The Beat Generation was a literary movement started by a group of unconventional authors who greatly influenced the social, culture and political aspects of American society after the war. During the 1950s, America was recovering from the catastrophic effects of the Second World War. People lived under the fear of communism due to the events like the Second Red Scare. The fear resulted in many people conforming to the prevailing political expectations. The Beat Generation rose to oppose the idea of conformity. They openly experimented with drugs and sexuality and rejected materialism and all forms of conventional values. They had significant influence on the Hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which was largely generated through mass media. Kesey stood between both the generations and impacted both. In his novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), Kesey played with queer themes like insanity, institutional control, emasculation, self-acceptance, etc. but most dominantly, it carried the theme of rebellion against conformity. Not only themes but also the diction involves the use of profane language and offensive names which reflects the attitude of 'Beatniks' as they were explicitly expressive of their thoughts and beliefs. Kesey made use of an unreliable narrator, Chief Bromden who pretends to be deaf and dumb and his narratives are often difficult to believe. In the words of Wolfe (1968), "Kesey accepted that his discovery of the character of Chief Bromden gave him a character from whose point of view he could depict a schizophrenic state of mind and at the same time describe objectively the battle of wills between two other key characters, McMurphy who initiated to fight the system and Nurse Ratched who tried her best to suppress his will and in the end, lobotomized him. Chief Bromden's disturbed mental state and Kesey's imagining of it, presumably with the help of drugs allowed him to elevate the hospital into what he saw as a metaphor of repressive America. Kesey would 'write like mad under the drugs' and then cut what he saw was 'junk' after the effect of drugs came down." (As quoted in NY Times)

Joy (2019) comments that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a symbolic text the Beat generation. Rebels of the Generation were sent to prison or mental asylum in order to make them conform to the authoritarian laws (383). Kesey uses the character of Chief Bromden as his mouthpiece when he says, "If you don't watch it people will force you one way or the other, into doing what they think you should do, or into just being mule-stubborn and doing the opposite out of spite" (Kesey 180). This famous quote summarizes the idea of freedom for the patients. It is a freedom from all kinds of restrictions and the ability to live their lives the way they want. The vision Kesey developed here is characteristically utopian, rebellious and anarchic, quite significantly a part of the revolutionary Beat movement. Chief Bromden continually hints that it was not he who decided to pretend as being deaf and dumb but others who treated him as if he were deaf and dumb. It entrenches the idea of Kesey that a person's demeanour depends upon the society around him. He effectively uses the abnormality of his characters as a dark critique on the society and emphasizes that the inmates of the asylum are not there because there are mad but because they could not cope with the pressures put on them by the society. Kesey played a significant role in the development of the counterculture of the 60's which included all the people who could not conform to the society's narrow standards and who proudly recognised as 'unconventional'.

The chief character in action, McMurphy, is non-conforming to the outer world as well as the asylum itself. He is the very embodiment of rebellion and his gestures are described as more "real" by the narrator. The narrator Chief Bromden describes his laugh joyfully, "This sound real. I realized all of a sudden, it's the first laugh I've heard in years" (Kesey 15).

He is there to bring transformations in the hospital, his personality is charismatic and all the inmates are "stunned" by his laughing. "His gestures, his smile and his talk has reached every man in the ward. He brings in another world with him to the place where life was monotonous and unaltered. Anti-Establishment themes depicted his personal non-conformity through the work" (Joy 388) While other characters are unable to conform to the outer world but manage to 'fit' into the system of the institution, McMurphy cannot conform to any known way of the world. The therapeutic community is there to teach "how a guy has to learn to get along in a group before he'll be able to function in a normal society....society is what decides who's sane and who isn't, so you got to measure up" (Kesey 43) but McMurphy is there to somehow undo all its effects. McMurphy is the 'cuckoo' who is supposed to fly over the nest despite the efforts of the Big Nurse whose name represents a "Ratchet" and whose job is to 'correct' the behaviour of the 'non-conformist' patients. He courageously revolts against the Big Nurse and says, "....the exact thing somebody tells me about the rules....just when they figure I'm about to do the dead opposite" (Kesey 23). McMurphy is clearly shown as different from the other patients. He is not clinically ill and but instead of keeping himself aloof from other patients, he mingles with all of them alike. He becomes the torchbearer for change in the ward and sparks courage in other inmates. With his efforts, "the other patients of the asylum find their voices and become humans instead of just being the numbers on their hospital wristbands" (Nicole). Even though the inmates are separated in the room, McMurphy treats all of them equally. He proved it when he met each and every inmate, "And when he finishes shaking hands with the last Acute, he comes right on over to the Chronics, like we aren't no different" (Kesey 22). It was also one of the salient features of the Hippie movement. They believed in treating everyone as equal irrespective of gender, age or ethnicity. McMurphy is the very representative of counterculture and he tells the inmates the purpose of his arrival, ".... that's what I came to this establishment for, to bring you birds fun an' entertainment...." (Kesey 16). He was accused of a fight in the farm he worked and he acted insane to escape imprisonment. The court gave a judgment that he was a psychopath and he was sent to a mental asylum for examination and therapy. Psychopathy is generally characterised by bizarre and violent behaviour as well as unnatural sexual habits. McMurphy's false judgements by the judges is a sharp critique on the system of judiciary as a whole. A mental asylum was thus, a substitute for a prison. Here, Kesey also establishes a connection between criminality and mental illness, as it was a common perspective of the American society at the time. Moreover, the influence of the Beat Generation is effectively mirrored in the novel through the setting of a mental institution. America's Mental Health Policy of 1950-1960 altered the very perception of insanity in the society:

"America always struggled with difficulties in providing proper care to the mentally ill. After the war in United States, doctors desperately searched for something that would contribute to emptying the asylums as there were too many admissions. It was necessary to reduce the number of patients and to find a cheaper method of treatment. After 1950, mental institutions turned overcrowded and consequently, it became impossible to provide proper care to each patient. It escalated to such extent that mental hospitals could have been easily mistaken for prison camps. A violence among the patients emerged. It was inevitable to make a change." (Bělikova 14)

As a result, a stigma emerged around mental patients and they began to be seen as criminals and violent by instinct. Kesey too established a connection between criminality and mental illness in the novel. The stigma and marginalisation were so intense that the patients themselves began to consider themselves inferior:

"Though I used to think at one time...that society's chastising was the sole force that drove one along that road to crazy, but you've caused me to re-appraise my theory."

"Yeah? Not that I'm admitting I'm down that road, but what is this something else?"

"It is us." He swept his hand about him in a soft white circle and repeated,

“Us.”

McMurphy half-heartedly said, “Bull.” (Kesey 257-258).

In this interesting conversation between Harding and McMurphy, Harding blames the patients themselves as much as the society. He does not blame Nurse Ratched or anybody else after the Group Meeting and believes that he in fact, deserves the uncomfortable and insidious questions. Harding’s perspective is that the world belongs to the toughest and it is the law of nature. The weak rabbits are supposed to be fearful of the strong wolf. The ‘deaf and dumb’ narrator too exhibits a self-stigma against himself. The Big Nurse is a continuous reminder to them of the same. Bromden begins to ‘grow’ into a person who is free of shackles. His stay in the hospital has surely impacted his mind in a negative way and he likes to stay in his illusions that distort the reality for him. McMurphy promises to help him grow back to his normal size and takes him out of his self-created illusions. The true ‘healing of Bromden takes place and he finally escapes from the hospital and enjoys his freedom.

McMurphy enthusiastically takes part in the activities with all the inmates and entertains them with his enchanting laughter and fun-inciting conversations. Although he is sacrificed in the process, “McMurphy is the driving force that causes the characters to reappraise their lives and try to start over” (Nicole). He reawakens their individuality and makes them realize the worth of freedom. The fishing trip that is organised on his demand gives boundless joy and the extraordinary experience of freedom to the inmates, “They could sense the change that most of us were only suspecting; these weren’t the same bunch of weak-knees from a nuthouse that they’d watched take their insults on the dock this morning.” (Kesey 254)

Soon after, McMurphy throws an undercover party involving prostitutes where the wardmates get drunk and enjoy a lot. Harding also accepts his homosexuality. McMurphy becomes successful in bringing back the lost sense of identity and self-reliance among the inmates. Bromden’s words echo the feeling, “I had to keep reminding myself that it had truly happened, that we had made it happen. We had just unlocked a window and let it in like you let in the fresh air. Maybe the Combine wasn’t all powerful. What was to stop us from doing it again, now that we saw we could? Or keep us from doing other things we wanted?” (Kesey 305) Bělíkova compares McMurphy’s influence on the inmates to the influence of the Beat generation on the young Americans, “McMurphy made quite an impression on the men through his appearance, attitude and boldness. To compare it with the Beat Generation, they did not reform the nation completely but they made a first step and they succeeded in a partial amendment of the situation as well.” (39)

The Big Nurse finally commands to perform a lobotomy on him by which he turns into a chronic, paralyzed patient. He can no longer walk or talk and as a result, dies in the mental hospital itself. He turns into a vegetable patient with no free will and opinion and at last, ‘conforms’ to the requirements of an ideal inmate. Bělíkova comments on the dehumanisation of people in the asylums, “In the mental institutions, patients were robbed of their freedom, free will and human features. Dehumanization appeared to be a huge problem. To dehumanize a person means to shatter his independence, individuality, spirit and soul. In the outside society people were similarly robbed of their freedom and independence and they were told how to live their lives. They were symbolically losing their human features living identical lives where men took up white-collar jobs and women became the women took care of the children at home” (25-26). Therefore, this process of dehumanisation wasn’t the legacy of the madhouses. It was a common aspect of the contemporary society. While some people conformed to the ways, others ached for liberty. Their actions exhibited revolt. Kesey’s McMurphy was one of them. McMurphy fights until death for himself and others. His failure brings pathos to the narrative. Although he fought brave to hold on to his sanity, he ultimately, though unwillingly, had to surrender to the powerful. Despite his failures, McMurphy saves the patients from the society symbolised by the Big Nurse.

The notion of conformity and the imposed norms make the psychiatric ward described in the novel a microcosm of the outer world where the tyrannical Big Nurse predominantly represents what the institution and its rules are. She stands for the ‘Combine’ and the narrator states that “....it’s not just the Big Nurse by herself, but it’s the whole Combine, the nation-wide Combine that’s the really big force, and the nurse is just a

high ranking official for them” (Kesey 148). Therefore, the ‘Combine’ very accurately mirrors the outside world which enslaved people mentally. Nurse Ratched is just a small part of a larger arrangement. Bromden reaffirms the notion by commenting, “The ward is a factory for the Combine. It’s for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in schools and in churches, the hospital is.” (Kesey 17)

“When a patient tends to be too rebellious, the authority is able to remodel him into an obedient, submissive person. Nurse Ratched gradually builds her own army of easily controlled people as she dehumanizes the men by cruel procedures. This can be seen as a metaphor for the whole post-war American society. Just like Nurse Ratched, the new American policies gradually created easily manipulated, docile population” (Bělikova 27-28). Ratched uses barbaric practices like lobotomy and electric shocks on patients not as some therapeutic measure but to force them to ‘conform’. She is the allegory of misuse of power and exploitation. Her actions are not restricted to physical measures. She also actively manipulates the inmates through her deceptive caring behaviour. Kesey’s first-hand experience with psychiatric wards and his involvement with the Beat generation resulted in a two-fold critique in his novel. He hits out at the false and brutal practices of the society as well as the mental asylums in a single blow. “He travelled with hippies and spread the ‘reality’ of America through his literary works. They began to break out from the societal framework due to the compressed industrial life. They turned themselves into a collective consciousness mutual realization and acceptance in a group, the ‘all-one’ thought.” (Joy 386)

Kesey also satirizes the deceitful and pretentious nature of the American society through the dubious character of the Big Nurse. “Just like the inmates, Americans had to live a life someone else determined them. They accepted their fate because they felt it was a right thing to do. However, many of them only pretended to rejoice in this way of living which strengthened the society’s position” (Bělikova 30). Apart from Chief Bromden, the patients at the hospital do not realize that they are being manipulated until the arrival of McMurphy. Nurse Ratched pretends to be a decent, calm and caring person in order to ‘control’ them. Her two-faced personality is quite symbolic of the superficial and vain American society. Bromden once witnesses her scolding African-American male nurses but she immediately calms down when she sees patients coming out. Bromden comments casually, “She has to change back before she’s caught in the shape of her hideous real self.” (Kesey 5)

The novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* serves as a critique of the system of institutions and the societal structure as well as a study of the human mind and behaviour. Swain states in *The Telegraph*, “It gave voice, gave life, to a basic distrust of the way in which psychiatry was being used for society’s purposes, rather than the purposes of the people who had mental illness” Dr. Pittman told *The Discovery Channel*. “The hospital has been portrayed as an authoritarian establishment and McMurphy is the very embodiment of revolt. By the effective use of madness as a trope, Kesey ignited the fire of revolt and rebellion. His characters turn out to be his own mouth-pieces when they talk of revolt, sense of power and non-conformity. He created powerful rebels in his literary works, quite reflective of his own rebellious mental make-up, influenced by the Beat Generation and ofcourse, the hippies. Literature has truly been called the mirror of the society. The novel effectively mirrors the socio-cultural characteristics of the contemporary American society. The dehumanisation of mental patients has been compared to the process of creating robotic beings outside the asylum. Therefore, the activities inside the asylum turn out to be a metaphor for the outside world. Kesey’s novel serves as a treatise following the voices of the ‘insane’ who are infact, saner than the society which imprisoned them.

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