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One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest A Chink in McMurphy's Armor

It is commonly believed that One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest is an anti-establishment novel, but McMurphy's motives in defying the establishment, as epitomized by his attitude towards Miss Ratched, may issue from his antagonism to female power. Some instances suggest that McMurphy's gender biased encounters with Nurse Ratched and the inmates, may be considered as part of the capitalist patriarchal ideology he is generally believed to oppose.

"[M]an has but *one* truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy, but it certainly is not laughter. One weapon, and with every passing year in this hip, motivationally researched society, more and more people are discovering how to render that weapon useless and conquer those who have hitherto been the conquerors [...] and do you think, for all your proclaimed psychopathic powers, that you could effectively use your weapon against our champion? Do you ever think you could use it against Miss Ratched, McMurphy? Ever?" (Kesey 68).

Who was McMurphy really rebelling against? "Why! The establishment of course", some critics and readers would say. In fact, more than once has Kesey's first work been lauded as an anti-establishment novel in which McMurphy, the hero, single-handedly, takes up the fatal task of revealing to the institutionalized patients, as well as the readers, what madhouse the American society of the fifties is. The Armageddon between McMurphy, good, and Nurse Ratched, evil, results in the annihilation of the good and the triumph of the evil; however, McMurphy's cause is not lost. After him the inmates learn to stand up for their own rights and get a good distance away from the tyrannical Nurse Ratched, either by transferring themselves to other wards or leaving the hospital permanently. Having read this, some questions are still left unanswered. Why did he not rebel earlier in prison, where even more pressure was inflicted on him? Isn't it a truth universally acknowledged that a prison is a much less tolerable place of imposed residence than a hospital? The rest of the critics, as well as the readers, might be interested to know whether there existed some other motive behind McMurphy's rebellion, except the dismaying establishment: A person perhaps?

A woman? The Big Nurse? The critics, as well as the readers, might also be interested to know whether McMurphy would have fought with the same rage, at the expense of his own life, had the tyrannical Miss Ratched been a tyrannical Mr. Ratched.

In order for the dominant power to maintain its dominance over society, it requires constant control and surveillance over the minutest details of the lives of its subjects. Such control is best exercised by the naturalization 'of the meanings that serve their interests into the "commonsense" of society as a whole' (Fiske 306). This is how certain criteria creep into our lives unawares, through what Althusser calls *ideological state apparatuses*. There are norms regarding every single aspect of our individual and social being. They give meaning to our lives and make us what we are. We usually do not know why we accept them, but we do. The norms do not come naturally. They have been inculcated. They do not necessarily serve humanity's best interest; they serve the dominant class's interests. As a consequence, it might just happen that in the life of an individual a time comes when she/he becomes incapable of abiding by some of these norms. One consequence of such enlightenment might be self blame and fear of madness. The individual might say to himself: 'If what the society believes in is absolute sanity and wisdom, I must be mentally lacking not to be able to abide.' Thus he enters a process of repression and self correction upon the failure of which he might even go so far to commit himself to a mental institution to be *fixed*. This might be how most of the inmates in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* have come to be inmates in the mental hospital. Most of them have volunteered to be cured of their madness.

There seems to be a close affinity between what has been mentioned and a panoptical world the bearers of which are its inhabitants. The Panopticon that Foucault talks about in his *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prison*, was a kind of prison designed by Jeremy Bentham in the eighteenth century. It consisted of a ring of cells built around a central tower from which a supervisor could observe all the cells. The prisoners could not see the supervisor, but they knew that they were being watched and even if they were not, for instance when the guard was taking his lunch in another room or having a conversation with someone, they always had the feeling that someone out there was observing them. Thus they always behaved consciously and cautiously thinking of escape as a remote possibility:

To induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power...this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers. (Foucault 201)

In this sense, the glass station in Kesey's mental hospital is similar to the point of observation in the Panopticon. The nurses sit inside and, while pretending to be preoccupied with their own tasks, they observe the patients. In addition to that, the semi circle in which the inmates sit, facing the Big Nurse, during their therapy sessions, is worthy of note. Just as in the quotation above, the bearers of the power situation are the inmates themselves. They speak about each other's deep dark secrets and attack one another brutally for their shortcomings and abnormalities, while the nurse sits back and watches. She does not have to exert much effort once the inmates start to converse; the task is efficiently carried out by the patients themselves. In McMurphy's words: "The flock gets sight of a spot of blood on some chicken and they all go to peckin' at it, see, till they rip the chicken to shreds, blood and bones and feathers." (Kesey 55) The patient who has been thus attacked, is brought to such public shame that he loses his self-confidence to think clearly about his own situation and that of others. As a result of his distress, he gains a sort of readiness to accept what he is told to do as a relief measure for his plight. He becomes flexible and submissive.

The *ideological state apparatuses*, in a capitalist state are, as John Fiske says, patriarchal, and concerned with the possession of more wealth. They support individualism, and present themselves as socially neutral. Moreover, they all follow the same line under different guises. Schools, hospitals, churches, universities and other institutions seem to perform different functions but, in reality, with the same ideology as their backbone. As a result, it would not really matter where and when one is affected by one of the ISAs. McMurphy has never been to school or church. Some consider this as the exact reason for his rebellious anti-establishment behavior: he has never been exposed to any Ideological State Apparatuses and has never been trained to be submissive and self-corrective. Exposure, though, need not necessarily be direct. Being exposed to those who have been exposed might do the trick.

Being an *ideological state apparatus*, the mental hospital in Kesey's novel displays the same characteristics as a capitalist system. The Big Nurse, whose name is reminiscent of the Big Brother in Orwell's *1984*, is a retired army nurse and a close friend of the supervisor, himself an ex-army official – the army being another Ideological State Apparatus. Nurse Ratched is the seeming supreme power, but only seemingly. The boss, the supervisor, is only heard of once or twice in the story, but as the name implies he is the puppet master, who must, in turn, serve another puppet master and so on. As the hidden hand behind all this, rarely mentioned in the story, the supervisor backs Nurse Ratched's actions or else she would not have been able to run the asylum. It is only too naïve to think that in the closed system of an ISA, one and only one person has all the say. People are all conjoined in a great chain of power, like the blocks of an iceberg. Evidently, only the tip of the iceberg, Nurse Ratched, can be seen. Her invisible methods of exercising control and discipline remain invisible until McMurphy

enters the mental hospital one sunny day to expose, at the expense of his own life, her tricks and make the patients realize how they are being robbed of their freedom:

[H]e grabbed for her and ripped her uniform all the way down the front, screaming again when the two nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever even imagined, warm and pink in the light (Kesey 305).

In her *Sorties*, Helene Cixous discusses the place and position given to a woman in history according to a traditional patriarchal point of view. In the "dual, hierarchized oppositions" (Cixous 264) of Man/Woman, a woman is always on the side of passivity, passion, heart, and submission, whereas the man is on the side of activity, action, head, and mastery. By description and by recourse to the same traditional patriarchal ideology, Nurse Ratched seems to be more of a man than a woman. The only traces of femininity in her figure are her big breasts which she tries to hide under her starched uniform. Through out the novel some remarks, implicit or explicit, are made about her breasts. They seem to be in direct opposition to her character, which is far from feminine. She is powerful and devoid of sympathy. She is bossy and manipulative, in Cixous' terminology, active, a woman of action, uses her head, and is on the side of the violent Master. How do these characteristics go with her femininity? From a traditional patriarchal point of view they do not go together. This is, perhaps, a cause of McMurphy's antagonism who ironically, and despite what has been said about his anti-establishment stance, holds the exact same capitalist patriarchal ideology he is trying to defy.

McMurphy exposes in the novel not only Nurse Ratched's plans but also her breasts, in an action resembling rape (Vitkus 20). He holds no grudges against the invisible supervisor or the ineffectual doctor. He holds no grudges against the patriarchal system or the accumulation of more and more cash either, since he himself has gladly taken part in the activity of overcharging the patients on different occasions such as the fishing trip. However, he has something against the unfeminine woman who holds power over him. One cannot be against something and support it at the same time. This is how McMurphy transforms into an agent of the *ISA* instead of its defier and this is where, I think, lies the chink in McMurphy's armor.

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