

## The Struggle of Patriarchy against ‘the juggernaut of modern matriarchy’ in Kesey’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

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### ABSTRACT

Human societies are always entrapped in internal conflicts for power. In the similar internal conflict between patriarchy and matriarchy, men can outsmart women historically reducing them to the secondary positions in the male-dominated society. However, the coming of the waves of feminist thinking threatened the male authority and power and justified equality and freedom for women. The conventional and stereotypical roles of women were debated and the radical feminism violently challenged male authoritarian control over society; it questioned and problematized the specific secondary gender roles imposed upon women by the patriarchal society and aimed to reverse the principles of male dominance and subordination of women to men as encapsulated in the binary patriarchy and matriarchy. These movements prompted certain male writers to come up with a certain agenda to allegorize this struggle. Ken Kesey’s novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is one of the many that allegories that struggle between a belligerent patriarchy suffocating under a devastating combined power of the juggernaut of matriarchy. The only way whereby the patriarchy can survive against that juggernaut of matriarchy is by using physical and sexual violence. Ken Kesey’s novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* presents the authoritarian matriarchal rule, power and control in addition to its methods of punishment and therapies by paralleling it with the theories of behaviourists psychology. The novel dreams of freedom and emancipation for men from the ruthless Nurse Ratched, ‘Big Mama’, who symbolizes the matriarchal control and authority over men in the ward.

**Keywords:** *Patriarchy, Matriarchy, Fight for Authority, and Violence.*

### Introduction

The value of individual liberty is always stuck in a certain degree of uncertainty in liberal societies which tussle to regulate where precisely liberty should end, and from where the society can exercise its control over human subjects. In the period following the Cold War, the altered attitude of American society to overall liberty and free will added more woes to the value of freedom which came, much before the French Revolution, from the founding fathers.

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Growing conservatism and anxiety about communism during the Cold War period raised doubts about the very idea of Americanism. The altered attitude created a deterrent in the smooth functioning of celebrated ideals of individualism and liberty. The result was the rise of a conformist and conservative society. Andrew Foley rightly says, “American society was in the grip of stultifying moral conformism that threatened to destroy altogether the values of liberty and individuality upon which American democracy had been founded” (33).

The novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* allegorizes the American conservative attitude to individual freedom by presenting to us an authoritarian mental asylum, parallel to the American society, ruled by a mechanical female nurse. She is the core representative of matriarchy and also a symbol of rising power of women; she castrates her children, the grown-up Americans, and subjugates them to medical gaze and behavioural theory.

Kesey’s job as a night attendant in a mental hospital in Menlo Park provided him a microscopic metaphorical picture of conformist American society as parallel to that hospital and its methods of working. The methods of Nurse Ratched are that of reward and punishment like a mother in a family: she appreciates obedience and disciplines and is highly sensitive to any slight violation that would result, often, some kind of hedonistic punishment like lobotomy for the inmates. The only sound that echoed in the ward was the sound of a doorknob that often attracted inmates waiting for something to happen, or somebody to come and challenge the authority of Nurse Ratched; they all wait for a kind of patriarchal messiah, father or God who would come to their rescue and who can emancipate them from the authoritarian prison of big nurse and her two blackguards. Randle Patrick MacMurphy is the cardinal lord who enters the ward with a mission to resist the matriarchal rule of Nurse Ratched. MacMurphy thus becomes a representative of patriarchy reeling under the authority of matriarchy represented by the character of Nurse Ratched, the so-called ‘Big Mama’. The struggle for power and authority becomes an allegorical struggle between matriarchy and patriarchy in a weird world where women dominate men.

### **Setting of the Novel**

In the early pages, Chief Bloom describes an unpleasing uncommonness surrounding the character of Nurse Ratched; it is something which is highly detested by the patriarchal male gaze in a woman. From the beginning, it is made clear that Ratched is a different woman; she is the kind of woman, a loathsome and sternly manly, despised by men; she is exercising power and authority. Her behaviour and actions are so mechanical that she is undeniably beyond the

understanding of patriarchal male ideas or values of what a woman is expected to be. The male sexist gaze of chief Bloom fixes upon the big nurse with terror and awe as:

She slides through the door with a gust of cold and locks the door behind her and I see her fingers trail across the polished steel—tip of each finger the same color as her lips. Funny orange. Like the tip of a soldering iron. Color so hot or so cold if she touches you with it you can't tell which (Kesey 7).

Chief Bloom describes Ratched and her unusual character that contrast the typical and stereotypical description of women. It is something that produces both fear and awe at the presence of some kind of devilish and monstrous authority that has the capacity to wipe out men. These horrors are presented in the novel when the narrative describes:

She's swelling up, swells till her back's splitting out the white uniform and she's let her arms section out long enough to wrap around the three of them five, six times. She looks around her with a swivel of her huge head (Kesey, 8).

For the male gaze, Ratched is not an ideal woman. She is not ideal for she refuses to confirm to the stereotypical roles that patriarchy imposes upon women; there is something manly in her that she as women terrifies men in the ward. Her character questions the patriarchal narrative about women as submissive, irrational and weak. Surprisingly, she is an independent, powerful and self-made woman. The nurse has all the qualities that men are expected to have when they stand on the other side of the shore to judge and make rules for female subjects. She has authority and knows how to control her subjects. The big mama represents an exaggerated form of matriarchal rule, a fearful version of female authority over the world. Her character serves as a stern warning to the male society about what would happen if women were allowed to rule the world. The phobia about the possible rise of female authority and the fall of patriarchy find its perfect representation in the character of Ratched. Her manly power and her sexual unattractiveness are very unusual to be found in a woman. Her character challenges all the male narratives and the nurse thus hardly possesses any quality of ideal womanhood: she is indeed a monstrous woman for the Chief who is afraid of being reproached by her though no mistake of his own. However, the entry of wild criminal MacMurphy, the saviour, intensifies the conflict in the ward by challenging the authority of the big nurse. The big nurse is fully aware of the nefarious plan of MacMurphy to take over her empire from her; she knows he is going to create a ruckus in the well-disciplined ward to accomplish his master plan, that is, "simply actual disruption of the ward for the sake of disruption" ( Kesey, 19).

### **Good Mother/ Bad Mother**

The novel can scarcely be accepted as simply an allegory of freedom. As Philip Darbyshire in his article “Reclaiming ‘Big Nurse’: a feminist critique of Ken Kesey's portrayal of Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*” rightly points out when he believes it seems like “...a reactionary misogyny which would deny women any function other than that of sexual trophy” (198). The attitude of male society towards women is indeed that of ‘sexual trophy’. Historically, women in almost every corner of the world have been seen in a similar context. In the conservative societies and even in the most progressive ones they have been struggling for their rights. Though described as weak and subjugated, women are often presented in the abysmal fantasies of men as possessing miraculous evil power, especially in the myths created by male writers. Mythical male heroes must fight against such evil women to save mankind. If seen in this particular context, the novel appears as an anxious response to the potential rise of female authority and the suppression of male subjects. This allegory thus becomes a futuristic helpless struggle of men against the authoritative juggernaut of matriarchy that would suppress the male desires and their authority over women. The mental ward in the novel represents an actual world dominated by the empowered women. The patriarchy, the most potent tool of male authority, must therefore attack the matriarchy sexually. That is the only resistance they can offer.

On the other hand, the novel also revolves around the idea of good and bad mother. A bad mother or a bad woman is a type of avant-garde, anti-patriarchal being, who, out of her repudiation of the patriarchal gender roles of women, decides to be an independent authority like a man to pursue her share of happiness. She is like a monster who eats the hearts of men after being realized of her insatiable power; she is a witch who feeds upon her children; she betrays her husband; she challenges male authority; she blatantly violates the codes of patriarchal society; she defines her identity far more different from her docile and committed female counterparts like self-made men. Her unattractive body incites feelings of horrors of some loathsome, lunatic, hateful, man-eating monster that eats men with her razor-sharp teeth like Grendel's mother or T-Rex. She has no emotions except the ones that come out of her anger. On the contrary, a good mother is precisely the opposite of this. She is a submissive, docile and venerable creature ascribing to the gender roles and to the authority of her spouse. She is a sex object of the patriarchy. According to Philip Darbyshire, the main flaw in the character of Nurse Ratched is a “translocation’ of the ideals of ideal woman and nurse” (199).

What is expected from her is what patriarchy has decided for women: ‘a sexually vulnerable person’, ‘an ideal mother’ as contrary to ‘cold, sexless man-hater as that of Nurse Ratched.

Philip Darbyshire aptly says:

Nurse Ratched is forced onto the moral margins of humanity because she resolutely refuses to adopt the submissive sexually available role which is the only one other than whore that MacMurphy and the inmates are capable of conceiving for a woman (199).

In other words, the only flaws that the character of Nurse Ratched possesses are individuality and rationality. The patriarchal male vision refuses to acknowledge the principle of individuality to women. Correspondingly, women are often presented as irrational and submissive. The character of Nurse Ratched that represents the powers of matriarchy to subdue and exploit the hitherto dominant patriarchy is a menace to the survival of male authority and power.

### **The Principles of Individual Liberty, Social Conformity, and Matriarchy**

*A Handbook of Literary Terms* defines the patriarchal system as “male-centred and controlled and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all the cultural domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, and artistic” (M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 101). Thus, the patriarchy is not limited merely to the familial sphere but is also extended further in all the areas and disciplines including science which claims to adhere to the principle of objective knowledge. These male-dominated discourses empower men against women and help them naturalize the inferiority of women to men by ascribing them the characteristics like passivity, acquiesce timidity, emotionality, and conventionality. Therefore, it is thought that the concept of gender is a more social construct than a natural way of distinction between man and woman. It is something unnatural that women are made to internalize to justify and naturalize gender roles. As Simon de Beauvoir says, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.... It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine” ( qtd. in M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 101).

The gender roles of women are central to the survival of patriarchal system. Any repudiation of these roles will automatically end the male-dominated society which, in other words, will give rise to matriarchy. The very presence of matriarchy, in any form, is a direct threat to male interests and supremacy, not only in the familial sphere but also in cultural, religious, political-legal, and artistic spheres. The idea of gender that the patriarchal system has coined is thus so crucial to the survival of patriarchy that it may collapse in the absence of predetermined gender

roles. Therefore, patriarchy ensures the internalization of gender roles by women making them look natural and common. Any deviation or resistance to the fixed roles is inhumanly crushed and women are penalized in case of violation. The characters of women must retain substandard qualities as compared to men. Their roles must be delimited to specific spheres. On the other hand, men are understood to be naturally superior and rational. Their authority is of paramount importance for retaining order in society. The rise of female authority is associated with the rise of disorder and bewilderment that may perhaps disrupt the hitherto maintained social order. In other words, women are thus the negative of men and possess all the characteristics and values that men should never possess as more rational beings. Sady Doyle rightly says:

Patriarchy is a cultural and moral hegemony that mandates one specific, supposedly “natural” family structure – a man using a woman to create and raise “his” children, with father exercising indisputable authority over mother and children alike- and on a grand scale builds societies that look and function like patriarchal families, ruled by all powerful male kings and presidents and CEOs and gods (12).

The rise of feminism, as an offshoot of the two decades of struggle for women’s rights, late in the 1960s, threatened to such domination. This is seen as penetration in the power spaces of patriarchy by matriarchy for power balance and equality, arousing fear and anxiety for survival. Kesey’s novel, through the closed lives of inmates in the asylum, visualizes this fear, of symbolic world ruled by a disciplined and authoritarian woman figure like that of Ratched who controls her male inmates with brutal psychiatric methods and forms a system of power which is further part of a bigger system called ‘the combine’. ‘The combine’ in the novel is the ‘juggernaut of matriarchy’.

Female masculinity and their unbelievable power often traumatise men, through many myths, like that of the apocalypse “...carnivorous mermaids, Furies tearing men apart with razor-sharp claws, leanan sidhe enchanting mortal men and draining the souls from their bodies” (Doyle 9). MacMurphy, the male protagonist, must stand against that juggernaut of matriarchy to end the reign of feminine authority and disciplines by confiscating those cardinal and individual spaces of freedom taken away from them by the authoritarian, inhuman, and mechanical Big Mama.

Patriarchy is like a building-like structure to which obedience and submission of women serve as its foundation. In case of internal mutiny or disobedience the structure will surely likely collapse. In simple words, the subjugation of women and her submission to the authoritative will of patriarchy affirms and normalises patriarchal code of conduct for women. What we discover in the character and of Nurse Ratched is a stark violation of these patriarchal values.

She is thus a grave threat to the male authority and must be tamed sexually like all the rebellious and authoritative women have been tamed in the history of mankind. Ironically, in the novel, male inmates in the ward are tamed and tortured in the mechanical prison of the juggernaut of matriarchy. They have been ascribed with the values of irrationality as against rationality; men in the ward are thus incompetent irrational individuals who must depend on the female matriarch to decide what is wrong and right for them. They are thus made helpless and submissive against the authority of the Big Nurse. Their well-being lies in their obedience and adoption of the mechanical lives that the instrument of matriarchy creates for them. Kesey's novel aptly illustrates this helplessness and misery of being subjected and oppressed. The role of MacMurphy thus acquires heroic status like that of any male hero in the popular male myths about female monsters. He must either slay the monster or tame it for the survival of men. MacMurphy is thus a typical representative of the patriarchy that mulls confrontation with the matriarch to take back its spaces of power.

### **The Big Mama in the Novel**

Nurse Ratched is a real horror woman. She is monstrously powerful, self-made, disciplined, and emotionless. She is what men are expected to be. She refuses to be submissive in front of men; rather she rules over them, punishes them for their mistakes, and subjugates them in the same way the patriarchy subjugates women in the society. The role of nurse Ratched is that man of the house who, as head of his home, commands, and acts ruthlessly. The character of Nurse Ratched is exactly opposite to what the narratives of ideal feminism, and so she is demonized in the novel by Kesey. "It is significant that Nurse Ratched has become demonized for being a woman in a position of status and authority who is strong and capable enough to resist McMurphy" (Darbyshire, 199). Chief Bloom describes the big nurse as:

She nods once to each. Precise, automatic gesture. Her face is smooth, calculated, and precision-made, like an expensive baby doll, skin like flesh-colored enamel, blend of white and cream and baby-blue eyes, small nose, pink little nostrils—everything working together except the color on her lips and fingernails, and the size of her bosom. A mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big, womanly breasts on what would of otherwise been a perfect work, and you can see how bitter she is about it (Kesey 8).

She is unattractive, highly individualistic, and demonic representative of the matriarchal rule and authority over men who struggle helplessly against her authority. Therefore, the struggle between Nurse Ratched and the patriarchal representative MacMurphy becomes a symbolic struggle between matriarchy and patriarchy. Nurse Ratched repudiates to be treated as an object



of male gratification. For Kesey, she is, therefore, a bad woman and needs to be assaulted sexually. Despite having patriarchal ‘big breasts’, the big mother “refuses to ‘nurture’ the men on the ward and similarly refuses to express overtly or even hint at the sexual availability which would make her both ‘a real woman’ and almost by definition ‘a real nurse’ ” ( Darbyshire, 199). Chief Bromden is horrified at her. He has felt the power of the big nurse who controls the ward mechanically like a robot. He says:

No that nurse ain’t some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is a ball-cutter. I’ve seen thousands of ‘em, old and young, men and women. Seen ‘em all over the country and in the homes - people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to (Kesey 36).

Nurse Ratched’s control over the ward is shown as authoritarian and totalitarian. Andrew Foley rightly says about Nurse Ratched in the paper “Allegories of Freedom: Individual Liberty and Social Conformity in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*”, “Throughout the novel she is associated with machines, tools, satirical objects and synthetic materials, and her goal is to “adjust” the individual to fit in the group” ( 36).

The matriarchal control in the novel is exercised through “duty, routine, ward policy, discipline and obedience, which she enforces through psychological torture, drugs, physical punishment (ranging from electric shocks to frontal lobotomies) ...” (Foley, 37).

Ratched thus acts like a disciplined mother who is concerned more about the well-being of her children- male patients in the ward, but her fear and dominance are also felt by other doctors in the ward. Her methods are quite like harsh disciplinary values under which an authoritarian mother brings up her children in a family. MacMurphy is like a good father saving his children from a bad mother.

### **Emancipation from the Big Mama**

Nurse Ratched is indeed ‘a ball cutter. She has the hideous power to castrate men. No doubt, that is also why MacMurphy appears like Jesus to the inmates of the ward. He immediately acquires patriarchal heroic stature to stand against the matriarchal authority represented by Nurse Ratched. He is martyred to symbolize the victory of patriarchy over matriarchal authority which is, then, silenced by MacMurphy’s assault on Nurse Ratched. This sexual assault was predicted early in the novel by Harding when he says:

So you see, my friend, it is somewhat as you stated man has but one truly effective weapon against the juggernaut of modern matriarchy, but it certainly is not laughter ... and do you think, for all your



acclaimed psychopathic powers, that you could effectively use your weapon against our champion? Do you think you could use it against Miss Ratched, Mr McMurphy? Ever? (Kesey 60).

‘The juggernaut of modern matriarchy’ can only be silenced by the penis and rape. These are the culturally powerful weapons used by patriarchy in its struggle against matriarchy when it finds its existence in peril. This is exactly what MacMurphy does to save all the male inmates from ‘the juggernaut of modern matriarchy’. Patriarchy is “a series of overlapping and interlocking forms of violence..... It usually comes through fear: fear of being raped, groped, hit, beaten, stalked, targeted for online mob harassment.....” (Doyle 12). MacMurphy’s violence against nurse Ratched then acquires symbolic meaning in the novel. The novel graphically displays this masculine violence as a lesson to women who refuse the social conformity:

Only at the last - after he’d smashed through that glass door, her face swinging round, 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 nip pled circles started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever imagined, warm and pink in the light ... (Kesey 250).

MacMurphy, by exposing Ratched’s feminine body, reveals her womanhood. Ratched’s mysterious aura of feminist power and authority was broken into pieces. Then, she is a common helpless and submissive woman. The violence exposes her body for others to see, and she is relegated as weak as other common women. The physical assault was seen as a victory of the patriarchy against the matriarchy. “Fear of male violence is what reminds women that we are not people yet, and that men are still able to put tight limits on our lives” (Doyle, 5).

### Conclusion

In a broader sense, the novel presents to us a society ruled by women whose cruel and disciplined methods threaten the masculine authority and patriarchy. The values of matriarchy prohibit cardinal impulses of men. MacMurphy is then the patriarchal Christ, saviour of men in the ward though he lacks the qualities of Christ. But his last days and the last supper he had all somehow highlight the role of a messiah like Christ is ascribed to MacMurphy, the outlaw. MacMurphy, the saviour, sacrificed his life so that other patients in the ward, especially Chief Bromden could attain salvation. Bromden then decided to return to his life in the Amazon valley among his fellow Indians. The salvation offered by MacMurphy is thus like the salvation of Christ.

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