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Paranoia as a Postmodern Condition in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*?

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Abstract:

Paranoia or the irrational fear seems to be the hall mark of any oppressive system that perpetuates fear in the minds of individuals and attempts deny them their freedom. Any attempts to control individual emerges from the failures of the postmodern knowledge that tolerate the difference. The article examines the novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest?* and examines how the novel's setting befits paranoia that looms large in the entire novel.

Keywords: American Literature, Ken Kesey, Postmodernism, paranoia

The paper attempts to analyze the novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by considering the term paranoia as a postmodern condition that prevails in most of the American novels since 1960s. The paper proceeds from the analysis of the term paranoia and then examines how the concept suits the novel's settings.

Paranoia is one of the more prominent issues taken up by contemporary North American novelists since 1960. Writers as divergent in matters of style and subject as Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, Robert Coover, Thomas Pynchon, Diane Johnson, Joseph McElroy, John Barth, Kathy Acker, Saul Bellow, Marge Piercy, Don DeLillo, William Gaddis, Ishmael Reed, and Margaret Atwood have also attempted to represent paranoid characters, communities, schemes, and lifestyles; history, technology and religion in their novels, says Patrick O' Donnell in the article titled *Engendering Paranoia in Contemporary Narrative*(181) . Leo Bersani in the article titled *Pynchon, Paranoia and Literature* states that the "the word paranoia has had an extraordinarily complex medical, psychiatric, and psychoanalytic history" (99). Paranoia is a Greek word designating a distracted or deranged mind (101). Pynchon defines it as the "reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible" (100). Once the technical means of control have reached a certain size, a certain degree of being connected one to another, the chances for freedom are over for good". The paranoid intuition is, then, one of an invisible interconnectedness. Technology can collect the information necessary to draw connecting lines among the most disparate data, and the very drawing of those lines depends on what might be called a conspirational interconnectedness among those interested in data collection (102). The idea proposed here gives an edge for those who perpetuate fear with their mastery to manipulate data and the power to have access over it. But it is worth mentioning that paranoia or unfounded suspicions about a hostile environment then creates a turbulence in those who control the data and make them victims of irrational fear that they themselves produce.

According to Lyotard Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities, it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. It's principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventors paralogy(73). It is to be noted that

any totalitarian regime fears this postmodern knowledge. There is a compulsion from their part to legitimize knowledge and produce it. Any attempt to violate their way of thinking viewed as aberration and it has to be persecuted and suppressed. At the same time it brings with it terror in the mind of the oppressor because of their inability to tolerate other knowledge systems which they consider dangerous to their existence, thus making life difficult both for them and those associate with it. Any institutional set up that restrict freedom of thinking is bound to carry this irrational fear and such set up is similar to a lunatic asylum.

It is in this context that the novel *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* acquires its relevance. The very setting of the novel is a lunatic asylum where the patients are strictly monitored and terrorized. It is dominated by Big Nurse, a female of dread authority. According to Tony Tanner she is referred to as the 'combine' or 'system' which is another version of some secret force which controls and manipulates all its members which is so common in contemporary American society (17). This description of Tanner can be extended to any system that believes in curtailing the voices of its members. One of the tactics employed by such set up is that they ensure that no oppositional voice emerge which would question their settings. In order to achieve this end they resort to punishment. Michel Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish* details how this is employed by the institution to keep their power intact. He views madness itself as a means of cultural control which he elaborates in his book *Madness and Civilization*.

In the novel it is detailed that no communication takes place between the Acutes and Chronics. The former is the less affected patient and the latter is one seriously affected. It is achieved by generating fear in the minds of the Acutes that they would turn to be like Chronics if they venture for any uprising.

The Chronics and Acutes don't generally mingle... Chronic side smells worse than a dirty diaper. But I know it isn't the stink that keeps them away from the Chronic side so much as they don't like to be reminded that here's what could happen to them someday. The big Nurse recognizes this fear and knows how to put it to use; she will point to an Acute, whenever he goes in to a sulk, that you boys be good boys and cooperate with the staff policy which is engineered for your *cure*, or you'll end up over on *that* side (17).

Here what is to be noted that the fear that the Big Nurse creates in the minds of the patients also tells the fear that they carry with them. There is always an impending threat that would disrupt their rigid structure and this worries them. Ellis and Rukly are retained in the asylum as a symbol for such ambitious enterprise. They were in the beginning Acutes but later turn to be Chronics. Here their projection itself testifies not the fear of the inmates but the authorities who fear that any time a rebel may emerge.

It is in this context Randel McMurphy 'the manipulator', enters. The first act that he does is to rejuvenate the spirit of the inmates with his hilarious attitude. He asserts "...what I came to this establishment for, to bring you birds fun an' entertainment"(11). He realizes that the first act to be done in a panic stricken world is to bring back laughter, one of the gifts human being forgot in their life. In the essay '*Salvation Through Laughter: Ken Kesey and the Cuckoo's Nest*' Stephen L. Tanner suggests that this differentiate McMurphy and the inmates of the asylum. There is no place for laughter in the Big Nurse's smooth running machinery of manipulation, and the patients are conditioned in such a way that they are afraid of laughter (58). McMurphy views it as the daunting task ahead of him and he says:

That's the first thing that got me about this place, that there wasn't anybody laughing. I haven't heard a real laugh since I came through that door, do you know that? Man, when you lose your laugh you lose your footing (59).

The absence of laughter that the inmates face is the outcome of succumbing to external authority. The associates of machinery that of Big Nurse imagines that suppressing the natural instincts of human beings would bring peace to them. Here, the attempts of McMurphy is to help patients to experience the joy of taking decisions by deciding their own choice in watching programmes and also undertaking trips for their pleasure. Though lobotomized in the end, he kindles the fighting spirit in human beings.

The novel is an indictment that the fear one sow will have to be reaped by them. The lunatic asylum which is the setting of the novel reminds the point that a place where only certain knowledge is imposed will eventually collapse. Moreover, it is a reminder that the "postmodern knowledge" is the panacea to help the world not to become a lunatic asylum. In the absence of this knowledge, it seems, give birth to a paranoid society which suspect one another and dwell on fear.

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