Student

Course

Instructor

Date

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ is a book written by Ken Kesey in 1962, and later, a film was made with the same name in 1975. Kesey wrote this book in response to the literary movement. Its purpose was to reject the traditional norms sets by society and to protest against the government's lack of responsibility towards various neglected categories of society. The writers highlighted the issues of insanity, criminals, homelessness, etc. and the role of the government in foreign wars (Boardman). This book is the story of a man who runs off to the asylum to get away from prison grinds. Ironically, he lands in a place where he realized things about the mental institutions he did not know before. He meets the nurse Ratched, who has an ill repute for her innate aspiration to exercise full control and power over the male patients and employees who are under her ascendancy in the psych ward. In the pursuit of pervading her influence, Nurse Ratched has become a figurative expression for all departments of the mental institution. From a broader perspective, she has become a well-known metaphor for the general society and the government. All the institutions, basically striving to control and impose regulatory policies on various groups of people, can regard Nurse Ratched as a flag-bearer for dominating men in this otherwise patriarchal society.

The determination of distinctions between sane and insane states of mind requires Nurse Ratched to define the boundaries between the two conditions and the connotations of two words in a psychological context. Besides Nurse Ratched, all the departments of a mental institution and the society at large must project their collective efforts to discern the demarcations between sanity and insanity. The widely accepted and normatively decent definition will enable institutions to control and designate people in various categories properly. The thematic institutions appear in the novel, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest profess that the categorization of patients is done under the label of 'insane' in the pursuit of their treatment and rehabilitation. In spite of this, it becomes quickly perspicuous in the novel that for any mental ailment, the practices regarding these treatments and rehabilitation are highly retributive and hegemonizing rather than being helpful. All the ways that are being administered for the treatment of patients, for instance, shock treatments, red pills, daily meetings, and the rewards for patients when they spill each other's secrets, are doing more harm than good for the general well-being of the patients. The shock treatment is being done on a table that causes adverse mental effects in the patients, the red pills lead to a memory loss, and the rewards are actually meant for those male patients who pit against each other after being morally distraught in the process of spilling each other's secrets. These ways coerce and make patients habitual of the treatment and worsen their situations instead of making them well.

The classification of men such as Chronics and Acutes demonstrates the intrinsic diminution of human dignity that results as an over-reliance over such categories. The reader gets quickly aware of the fact from the opening of this novel that male patients are broadly labeled under the categories of Acute or Chronics, and they are not addressed by their own names. Being labeled as Acutes or Chronics is the only attribute regarding their personalities, no one cares about the degree or intensity of their mental conditions or their thought processes and personalities. Furthermore, freedom of speech and expression is also remotely allowed in the ward. It seems that democratic group meetings are held, but those are just a disguise and a face-saving technique by the hospital administrators. Outdoor recreational activities are also prohibited, which further denigrate the mental conditions of these patients. The patients are also not exposed to the outside world, which has its own negative consequences. The therapy sessions and various activities are organized with great care, and Nurse Ratched opined in one instance that if someone deviated from the schedule, it would prove to be a great nuisance. Nurse Ratched’s obsession with a strict schedule renders her unable to keep the dignity of her patients intact, but she prefers to keep the ward in complete control, and her work ethic results in the running of the ward resembling a well-oiled machine. There seems to be a great shift in the scenario when Randle McMurphy gets admitted as a patient, and he introduces a behavioral change by treating other patients with utmost dignity. Resultantly, the coldness oozing out from the ignorant categorization of the patients starts to subvert, and a conducive environment begins to prevail in the ward. The patients go for outings and spend time playing and joking. McMurphy's introduction of a changed behavioral pattern nearly transforms the ward. The party scene serves as a climax of the plot where it is revealed on the audience and the readership that insane people can also desire like their normal or sane counterparts. After a radical shift in the behavior of everyone in the ward, male patients start realizing and rediscovering their own human rights and dignities (Wyatt). The realization that they have sacrificed a lot of their fundamental rights in the ward comes as a great blow to many patients, and they start striving for collective healing through changed attitudes.

One of the universal themes of this society is the expected standards of the concept of sanity and insanity. It is extremely hard to define what is sane and what is not. What differentiates these both concepts? Does being sane means doing what the society and its traditions expect of us? Or does it mean being indifferent from society and have an individual identity despite the norms and bounds set by others? The psychiatrists have been trying to find out these answers for a very long time. We, as a society, have limited the roles and responsibilities of the people. So, that does imply it the job of psychiatrists to identify the difference between sanity and insanity. Is it their job to make a person able to survive and reprogram himself to fit better in this flawed society? Or is it their job to bring a person on the journey towards self-realization? These questions make an individual ponder over that do these psychiatrists realize the importance of values and cultural differences, or do they work according to the patient’s environment.

In this story, Kesey has placed various questions while portraying the grind of McMurphy in the Acute/ Chronic Ward. He has raised the subject of sanity and stated that in a society where people have different behaviors and attitudes, why is it expected of them to have the same definition of sanity (Knight). People have a different approach to the concept of freedom and confinement. When we see McMurphy confused over knowing that the majority of the people in the acute ward were on a voluntary basis, we too seek to know the answers. According to their own answer, they believe that they would not be able to do well in the outside world. They are afraid of the difficulties they might have to face out there due to their psychological conditions. They have a fear of being rejected and disowned by society. Ironically, they do not face anything different within those walls of the ward. The methods of treatment that are designed in these facilities undermine the confidence of the men. They are not encouraged to lead their own life as per their wishes and choices. They are not free to define what sanity should mean for them. The definition of madness as perceived by society is all about an authoritarian culture that dehumanizes the individual identities. It replaces the individual's choices of life with an automaton that persists insecure and blind conformity.

Only a few individuals have what it takes to see through this sham. They have the capability of creating their own standards of sanity and defy being the institutionalized robots. They find their way back to humanity and rationality. It is a very hard process in finding out one's purpose in life while dwelling within such facilities. They realized that the world is divided among two concepts; confinement and freedom, i.e., being inside the asylum or being in the world outside. The idea of being free differs from person to person, and some feel safe and secure in confinement. However, some living in these institutions still want to have the freedom to define their individualities and sanity. They want to have a say in the way they want to be treated. Nevertheless, things are quite ugly in the real world, and this story is the depiction of the treatment people receive within the psych wards. It is not just the story of the 1960s; it is the story of the present. Though it had an influence on changing the state of the institutions, the core issue of defining the sanity remained unsolved.

Today, it has been noted that the matter of deinstitutionalization has turned into transinstitutionalization. Patients with mental illnesses remain within these asylums even after a very long time of constant care and treatment. Either they are transferred to the medical hospital, nursing facilities, or prisons. Treatments should be provided in the least restrictive settings. The mentally ill people should be provided with personal autonomy and civil rights. Their treatment methods should be designed according to their values and choices. This book was a huge contribution to highlighting the problems with the psychiatrist treatment system in the United States (Swaine). The mental institutions started reducing unnecessary residents and granted the patients more rights and the ability to decide for themselves when they can rationally. It also encouraged the production of more effective anti-psychotic drugs so that more patients could be treated at their homes while leading a normal life. The concept of shock therapy has now been regarded as dangerous and inhumane.

**Works Cited**

Boardman, Michael M. “‘One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest’: Rhetoric and Vision.” *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1979, pp. 171–83. JSTOR.

Knight, Arthur. “‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’: THR’s 1975 Review.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/one-flew-cuckoos-nest-review-1975-movie-1162586.

Swaine, Jon. “How ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ Changed Psychiatry - Telegraph.” *The Telegraph*, 2011, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/8296954/How-One-Flew-Over-the-Cuckoos-Nest-changed-psychiatry.html.

Wyatt, Sophie. “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest Review.” *Little White Lies*, https://lwlies.com/reviews/one-flew-over-the-cuckoos-nest/. Accessed 7 Dec. 2019.