

**The Mixed Heritage of the Chief:
Revisiting the Problem of Manhood
in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest***

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Ken Kesey's novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* challenges us with the issue of mixed heritage through Chief Bromden's half-breed status. In this we confront the most significant and unsettling conflict of the text. Although few critics have focused on the issue it is complex enough to have been a part of American fiction throughout the twentieth century. Like Faulkner, Kesey sets his character on a symbolic search for the Father: that is, the spark of manhood within himself that flares at the traditional gender definition. The search is complicated, however, by the father's minority status which gives the mother social supremacy. Moreover, Kesey further hinders the search by making the dominant system throughout the story a demanding and outwardly oppressive matriarchy. The combined elements of gender and mixed heritage form the point, I believe, that makes the novel problematic, not only for the reader, but for Kesey himself.*

In an important sense, the family is always the matrix for social and individual identity. We are our family. And in such a context, we need to ask how Chief Bromden can possibly gain back his manhood, in a sense rediscover "the name of the father," when he is rooted in a family which has denied that name, privileging instead the name of his white mother (Bromden). Chief Bromden's problem, in this sense, is the difficulty he faces in attempting to recover the roots of his Native American identity, the identity of his father, that male Indian identity buried deep along the Columbia River in the Dalles.

What the critics seem to have avoided when discussing *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* is that Bromden's "mixed heritage" is at the root of the Chief's problem of identity, accounting, to a large extent, for his schizophrenic narrative. More specifically, the Chief's family history puts him in the precarious position of a son who believes that his roots can only be discovered through his father, a man with an ethnic minority status. The Chief is a son, in other words, attempting to achieve manhood in a world dominated by women in general (one version of the

classic story of the American boy), but specifically by a white mother. As Terence Martin has put it: "The female reduced the male—the white reduced the Indian. The Chief has only to think of his parents to know the legacy of his people" (45). The Chief, that Vanishing American as Kesey calls him, must rediscover not only his legacy as a Native American, but the very roots of his manhood by thinking back through his father, that is through the place of the father, the original territory of the Native American man now overrun by whites. That act of white imperialism in terms of the novel is represented in the first instance by his mother. In this context, we can assume that the Chief's problems would be very different if his mother had been an American Indian.

In a sense, Kesey has given us an Oedipal story with a twist rarely explored by white American novelists, especially before the early 1960s when *Cuckoo's Nest* was written. In the simplest Freudian version of the Oedipal story, if the son is to achieve manhood, he must symbolically kill the father and marry the mother. But what if the father, a member of an ethnic minority, has been marginalized by the mother, a member of the dominant culture? How then does the son recover the authority and power of the father? And how does the son rejuvenate desire for the mother, especially when that mother, in the mind of the son, has become an abstraction, a repressive symbol of the majority culture? These are questions that critics rarely discuss when talking about *Cuckoo's Nest*, yet they are questions central to a full understanding of the novel. They raise issues that help to illuminate the relationship between the racial and sexual identity of the Chief and his narrative perceptions. They help the reader to understand the Chief as an embattled self and as a Vanishing American male.

When the Chief first introduces Big Nurse to the reader, for example, she is carrying her woven wicker bag made by Indians but used by her to carry the tools that she manipulates to maintain her dehumanized control over the ward. Like the Chief's mother, Big Nurse uses the Indian, but is not of the Indian. Yet the reader also realizes immediately that "those big, womanly breasts" (Kesey 5) hidden beneath her starched exterior make Big Nurse something other than a bureaucratic automaton. Those breasts eventually, and inevitably, will need to be exposed. For the Chief, Big Nurse is an abstraction, a projection of the symbolic power that stripped his father of his name, but beneath her starched uniform she must also be a reminder of the carnal body of his origins.

For the Chief though, it is clearly not the memory of his mother that gives him any comfort, but the early childhood memories of bonding with his father. When Big Nurse sends the black boys to shave the Chief

at the beginning of the novel, for example, the Chief thinks of his father, their hunting trips in the early morning fog in the Dalles. For the Chief it is the father who is associated with the womb-like protection of the fog—a temporary, but ultimately unsatisfying, retreat from the threat of Big Nurse's attempts at symbolic castration. In this opening scene, Big Nurse is clearly in control, forcing the Chief away from any possibility of manhood as "she jams wicker bag and all into Chief Bromden's mouth and shoves it down with a mop handle" (Kesey 7).

When Randle Patrick McMurphy appears in the ward, however, the Chief is reminded of the strength of his father: "He talks a little the way Papa used to, voice loud and full of hell..." (Kesey 11). And, as those familiar with the novel know, McMurphy takes on the role of the father for Bromden in order to get Bromden to emerge from the womb-like protection of that fog, to move the Chief to name and remake the father in himself.

Throughout the novel, McMurphy creates strategies (from games to gambling to fishing trips) to get the Chief to understand his full potency, for it is only then that he can name his father. As the Chief finally tells McMurphy, "My Papa was a full Chief and his name was Tee Ah Millatoona. That means The-Pine-That-Stands-Tallest-on-the-Mountain, and we didn't live on a mountain. He was real big when I was a kid. My mother got twice his size" (Kesey 186). Not surprisingly, shortly after this naming, Big Nurse orders a lobotomy for McMurphy, who is then brought back to the ward, "wheeled in this Gurney with a chart at the bottom that said in heavy black letters, MCMURPHY, RANDLE P. POST-OPERATIVE" (269). Like the Chief's father before him, McMurphy has been symbolically castrated here by a white woman and the white establishment. He has become an impotent member of Big Nurse's symbolic order. Only the abstraction of his name remains, controlled by Big Nurse herself.

In this context, the Chief knows that Big Nurse has silenced McMurphy just as the Combine had silenced his father. Big Nurse can now use McMurphy's name for her own purposes, bringing that name under her authority, making that name part of her matriarchal system. In effect, the same thing had happened to the Chief's father when he married the white woman named Bromden. That name became the family name, the father giving up his authority as the mother continued to grow in size. From the Chief's perspective, these events must have led to his belief that the world was dominated not only by whites, but by a matriarchal structure, one that blocked him from easily rediscovering the manhood embodied within his father. At the same time, the Chief also knows that McMurphy "wouldn't have left something like that sit there

in the day room with his name tacked on it for twenty or thirty years so the Big Nurse could use it as an example of what can happen if you buck the system. I was sure of that" (270).

Throughout the novel, the Chief legitimately believes that it is not the name of the father, but Big Nurse, the name of the mother, that defines and represents the ruling symbolic order. His father is "the Other," existing at best at the margins of Big Nurse's discourse, a discourse that the Chief imagines eventually, through his schizophrenic projections, as the abstract order of the Combine itself.

The reader is faced then with a dilemma at the center of Kesey's novel. Not only must the son separate from the mother, but she is being represented within the family romance as the one that needs to be killed, for she is the one who dictates law. The implication, in a larger sense, is that males with fathers of ethnic minority status married to mothers from the dominant culture must travel a difficult and radically indirect route to achieve manhood. In a somewhat confusing pattern, Kesey suggests that sons of "mixed heritage," especially with mothers from the dominant culture, may not be able to achieve manhood in American culture.

It is as if Kesey is suggesting, like Jaques Lacan, that adulthood is achieved by the son when the child moves into the system of language and culture, a symbolic order, that has been defined and represented by the father. For Kesey, however, the dominant discourse experienced by the Chief is the symbolic order controlled by Big Nurse. Into this enters McMurphy and there he is comfortable. It seems he is able, not only to function along the lines of control as established by Big Nurse and her system of language, but also to out-smart her by using her own rules. Outside the showers McMurphy willingly engages in spirited verbal fencing with Big Nurse over the propriety of wearing nothing but a towel in the hall. In an act of complete compliance to Big Nurse's wishes, thereby the controlling language, McMurphy drops the towel, effectively following the rules and challenging them at the same time. McMurphy, through his ability to recognize and function within Big Nurse's discourse, takes the place of the Chief's father and does what he could not do; McMurphy demonstrates how to use the language of the matriarchy to control a dominant female. The Chief, unfortunately, cannot place himself in the context of the father's discourse. As a result, at best, the Chief is "the Other" in a system controlled by the white woman, his mother, Big Nurse herself. The Chief suffers from a lack of voice and language for these reasons.

In this context, we can first believe that there is a possible way out for the Chief. The American Indian voice, like the voice of women in America, can be defined as a voice of the body, a voice distinct from the

abstract law. It is, in a sense, a voice of plenitude and joy, a celebration of the fullness of the body. As Helene Cixous puts it in the context of women: "Let masculine sexuality gravitate around the penis, engendering this centralized body (political economy) under the party dictatorship. Woman does not perform on herself this regionalization that profits the couple head-sex, that only inscribes itself within frontiers. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide.... She goes on and goes on infinitely" (87-88).

Such a voice does not pound to a climax, nor drive to a determined point, but it does offer the richness of intimate experience. In terms of the 1960s, we might understand it best as a voice of polymorphous eroticism. In terms of *Cuckoo's Nest*, it is a voice that the Chief might discover at the margins of Big Nurse's own rigid discourse, a voice of the body and of his own past, the voice of the counter-culture itself. But to discover such a voice, the Chief must also abandon binary thinking about gender. He must substitute phallic power for the polymorphic erotic.

In such a context, we can understand the basic dilemma that the Chief faces and the contradiction in Kesey's own vision. For Kesey has within the logic of the novel legitimately established the father within the family romance as "the Other" equivalent to an ethnic minority overpowered by the dominant culture within the social structure. And he has posed the interesting question of how a son in such a situation can achieve manhood. However, at the same time, Kesey refuses to deny the binary mode of Western thinking about gender, and in fact he sets up an ideological fiction (Big Nurse) that allows him to blame women and to avoid any analysis of patriarchy. "Somehow, in the confused vision of the author and playwright, the refusal of women, an oppressed class, to utterly submit to male-oriented social structures is identified with the attack of white males, the oppressor class, on people of color" (Falk 221-22). It is as if Kesey recognizes that "the Other" must create a discourse and a life of process, a playfulness of the body, a polymorphous eroticism. Yet, at the same time, he accepts the binary thinking of Western consciousness. Kesey seems to embrace a style of polymorphous eroticism, but he will not give up the American myth of nineteenth century individualism, a myth which includes the privileging of the male and the celebration of phallocentrism.

Through much of the novel, McMurphy seems to adopt a strategy that encourages the playfulness of the polymorphous erotic body. Like the counter-culture hero that he is, McMurphy wants the Chief to feel the joy of life by expressing the natural playfulness of his own self. As he puts it early in the novel: "Yes sir, that's what I came to this

establishment for, to bring you birds fun an' entertainment around the gamin' table" (Kesey 12). And the biggest bird of all, the Chief, will eventually not only go on a lark (the name of the boat on which McMurphy takes "his crew" fishing), but learn to fly without fear over that abstract symbolic order called the Cuckoo's Nest.

But at the same time, Kesey seems to insist on a conventional sense of manhood, manhood rooted not in the discourse of the polymorphous erotic body, but in the abstract language of the symbolic order, a form of phallogocentric power. In such a system, meaning always operates within a hierarchial language system. Oppositions are established, and manhood is won when the male presence governs the female absence. In the end, Kesey, too, seems governed by this kind of thinking.

Kesey might like it both ways, but the result is that the Chief's narrative vision, rooted in his mixed heritage and half-breed status, necessarily remains confused and incomplete. Confronted with Big Nurse and her social order, the Chief is powerless. Like the other characters of the novel he has to "either conform to society or become 'mule stubborn' and rebel against it" (Madden 207). He is immobilized.

As a substitute father for the Chief, McMurphy helps him re-write the story of his father by opposing the rigidity of Big Nurse's rules with his own sense of bodily energy. McMurphy, as Kesey would say, goes with the flow, and that flow is the natural rhythm of uncalculated sexual energy, the rhythm of the body and of the land, a rhythm which in itself could help to eliminate the hierarchy constructed within the symbolic order. When Big Nurse attempts to rob McMurphy of his name at the beginning of the novel, for example, she does it within a context that insists upon the fixed structure of her rules. "Please understand, I appreciate the way you've taken it upon yourself to orient with the other patients on the ward, but everything in its own good time, Mr. McMurry. I'm sorry to interrupt you and Mr. Bromden, but you do understand: *everyone...must follow the rules*" (Kesey 28). McMurphy responds with a wink and a grin, resisting her formulation and simultaneously beginning to empower the Chief.

McMurphy also uses the power of touch to help effect this transformation. As the Chief describes it: "I remember (his) fingers were thick and strong closing over mine, and my hand commenced to feel peculiar and went to swelling up out there on my stick of an arm, like he was transmitting his own blood into it. It rang with blood and power. It blowed up near as big as his, I remember" (Kesey 24). And McMurphy's laugh, too, becomes part of an expansive expression of bodily plenitude: "...free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and

spreads in rings bigger and bigger till it's lapping against the walls all over the ward" (Kesey 16).

Kesey seems to offer through McMurphy's gestures the joy of the language of the body and of plenitude that McMurphy himself is capable of creating. It is the joyful language that we might imagine the Native American Indian had when he was still close to the natural world, living near the flow of the Columbia River along the Dalles. Such a language is clearly a threat to the rigidity of the symbolic order controlled by Big Nurse. It is the language of "the Other," an articulation of pleasure like the high school carnival that McMurphy discusses with Dr. Spivey, a celebration of polymorphous eroticism that undercuts the monolithic structure of the dominant culture. Most importantly, such a language does not suggest a phallogentric strategy, but, as Cixous puts it, a joy of the body that could go on and go on infinitely.

Yet McMurphy also reminds the Chief that a man, like a pine on the tallest mountain (Tee Ah Millatoona), must grow big and stand erect in order to defeat the control of the white matriarchy. And it is this kind of image of phallic power rather than the image of polymorphous eroticism that finally dominates the novel. The Chief's narrative story is filled with the language of play, the poetry of the land, even the playful rhymes of his grandmother (Porter 16-17). "McMurphy was teaching me. I was feeling better than I'd remembered feeling since I was a kid, when everything was good and the land was still singing kids' poetry to me," the Chief can claim at one point in his story (Kesey 216). But in the end the story drives toward a climax and so becomes a plot structured in typical phallogentric terms, undercutting the counter-cultural voice.

At this level, *Cuckoo's Nest* moves close to the traditional Oedipal narrative concerned with the son's desire to replace the father and gain the phallogentric power as part of his inheritance. Even in this context, however, Kesey makes the narrative problematic. In order to return to his Native American roots, the Chief cannot marry the mother; he must eliminate her. To marry the mother in terms of the Chief's narrative structure would be to lose the name of the father again. In fact, as Kesey has defined the terms of the narrative, there is, ironically, no way for the Chief to achieve manhood without attempting to destroy the mother. For Kesey, marriage is an impossibility. Manhood for the Chief can only be achieved by a frontal attack on Big Nurse.

The climax of McMurphy's battle against Big Nurse then, as it is filtered through the consciousness of the Chief, becomes unfortunately, but by necessity, an act of violence. McMurphy's "red fingers" penetrate "the white flesh of her throat" in an act equivalent to rape; yet there is a hint of how it might have been otherwise as Big Nurse's breasts are for a

moment revealed: "the two nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever imagined, warm and pink in the light..." (Kesey 267). The image here is of the world of the mother, the feminine body as the Chief would like it to be. But McMurphy's violent attack undercuts such an image, aggravating instead the divisions in the battle of the sexes. Such violence does allow, however, the Chief to attempt to bring to closure his own Oedipal struggle.

When McMurphy is returned to the ward after his lobotomy ordered by Big Nurse, the Chief finally decides to kill him, a killing that not only clearly represents a transfer of sexual energy from McMurphy to the Chief, but also one that signals that the Chief has now assumed the place of McMurphy, his substitute father.

As the Chief describes the killing: "The big, hard body had a tough grip on life. It fought a long time against having it taken away, flailing and thrashing around so much I finally had to lie full length on top of it and scissor the kicking legs with mine while I mashed the pillow into the face. I lay there on top of the body for what seemed days, until the thrashing stopped. Until it was still a while and had shuddered once and was still again. Then I rolled off" (Kesey 270). In a poignant blending of homoerotic love and death, the substitute father is sacrificed for the son so that the son can become the father and so preserve the name of the father. But we must still ask: what precisely has the Chief with his mixed heritage gained in this struggle for manhood? And what does he still lack?

In one sense, the Chief has become McMurphy, although he realizes that in some ways he is bigger than McMurphy. McMurphy's cap is too small for him, for example, and the Chief can lift Big Nurse's control panel which McMurphy could not budge. Like McMurphy, the Chief has become a con artist able to survive on the road as he heads for the Columbia Gorge to see "if there's any of the guys (he) used to know back in the village" (Kesey 272). But if the Chief has saved the name of McMurphy, he has not recovered the place of Tee Ah Millatoona, nor has he come to terms with his white mother. This is particularly disturbing because, as Jack Hicks has said, "Kesey suggests repeatedly that memory, knowing one's individual and collective pasts, is a key to any sense of present or future" (Hicks 173).

Admittedly the Chief has found a voice that allows him to articulate his experience; yet as he says: "It's still hard for me to have a clear mind thinking on it. But it's the truth even if it didn't happen" (Kesey 13). That "truth" is the burning fear and manic roaring of consciousness that makes up the Chief's own narrative, a narrative that has attempted to

unveil through McMurphy the hidden identity of the father. But although we can hear the voice, we cannot locate it anymore than the Chief can locate his own father. In fact, the underside of the novel seems to suggest that the Chief, like his father, is part of that culture of Vanishing Americans. The Chief, in other words, may have discovered a voice, but he remains invisible, a man without a name other than that of Bromden. The reader is exposed to the "truth" of the consciousness of the Chief, but the problem is that the reader has nothing to measure that consciousness against. In this sense, the Chief is imprisoned by the "truth" that he has created. He has achieved his individuality, but it is an individuality in isolation.

And here again we can see the contradiction in Kesey's own vision. The Chief's isolation suggests that he has achieved the nineteenth century version of the American myth of individualism, a myth that Kesey seems to embrace, but one that helped to destroy the Native American. It is a myth about power and about the inability to trust people unless one has control. Kesey's social vision, as we might call it, is bankrupt in such a context. For despite Kesey's good intentions—and that of the counter-culture in general—we see exposed here that the foundation of that vision is not primarily a celebration of social identity or polymorphous erotic pleasure, but rather a further attempt to legitimate male individual identity and phallogocentric control.

Where is the Chief when he is telling the story? Unless he has returned to the Cuckoo's Nest, the Chief seems to be living an invisible life outside of that symbolic order that Kesey has defined through Big Nurse as America and that the Chief thinks of as a matriarchy, an extension of his castrating mother. The hope remains, of course, that the Chief will encounter a different style of life at the Columbian Gorge, perhaps becoming the "father" of an alternative culture, but the underside of the tale hints strongly that the Chief really has no place to go, nor is he sure where he is headed. The Chief remains in fact an indeterminate self much like that bluetick hound to which he compares his narrative. "No tracks on the ground but the ones he's making, and he sniffs in every direction with his cold red-rubber nose and picks up no scent but his own fear, fear burning down into him like steam. It's gonna burn me just that way, finally telling about all this..." (Kesey 13).

The combined issues of mixed heritage and gender definitions leave the reader, and I would suggest, Kesey, stumbling for some sort of satisfying resolution. Yet, there are no clear answers offered within the novel. In the tradition of American fiction Kesey chooses to struggle with these issues but at best only illuminates their complexities. William Faulkner, too, examined these issues in his novel, *Light in August*.

Faulkner's main character, Joe Christmas, is like the Chief in that he cannot escape the notion that all women are trying to control and exploit him. He, too, lives in a confused world where the anticipated safety of being male, thereby dominant in a patriarchy, is denied him because of his mixed heritage and his consequential understanding of social order as a matriarchy.

In seeking resolution both authors ignore the primary cause of the conflict: mixed heritage. They neglect to have their characters personally challenge the system of oppression which labels a minority male as beneath a white female, another victim of the oppressive system. Instead, they skirt the issue, each allowing his main character to regain his manhood simply by claiming it with a six word phrase. Joe Christmas, tired of being a passenger on the roller-coaster of life declares his intention to take control with, "I am going to do something" (Forrey 229-30). While the Chief announces his reentry into manhood with the powerful words, "I been away a long time" (Kesey 311).

Frank Waters' novel *The Man Who Killed The Deer* takes a slightly different track. Like Kesey, Waters develops a main character who feels his manhood is challenged by a matriarchy. Unlike Kesey, Waters chooses to allow Martiniano to recognize and reconcile the source of his conflict: the fact that he has learned the white man's definition of manhood and, later, tries to apply it in matriarchal Indian society. Martiniano relinquishes the fallacy that a man is more powerful than a woman and learns to accept and embrace the strength of the female.

Waters' character grows more than Kesey's. Martiniano does not get sucked into the old patriarchy as does the Chief, instead of wandering, he finds a new peace. By integrating his impressions of gender definitions Martiniano is able to achieve relative reconciliation between his heritage and his perception of manhood. Waters' understanding that a minority male's feelings of oppression, seemingly at the hands of a matriarchy, could well be the result of a larger male-oriented system, has spared the author some of the harsh criticism dealt to Kesey.

Critics such as Robert Forrey have attacked Kesey claiming that he is sexist. Forrey, for example, places Kesey in the machismo tradition of Hemingway and Steinbeck: "...what we have in Kesey's novel is yet another group of American males trying desperately to unite into a quasi-religious cult or brotherhood which will enable them to sublimate their homosexuality in violent athletic contests, gambling, or other forms of psychopathological horseplay" (229-30). But Forrey's important insight is only half the story.

Kesey has given us the vision of a half-breed, a man of color rooted in a mixed heritage, and he has asked the question—how does such a

person, with a dominant white mother, achieve manhood within a heterosexual arrangement? Kesey has begun to explore that question in *Cuckoo's Nest*, but he has failed to understand that such issues of gender and race need to include the insidious structures of patriarchy in their analysis. At the same time, though, the questions that he raises remain important ones, and so reflect the relevance and the uniqueness of Kesey's vision for us today.

Note

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