

Reclaiming ‘Big Nurse’: a feminist critique of Ken Kesey’s portrayal of Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

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Reclaiming ‘Big Nurse’: a feminist critique of Ken Kesey’s portrayal of Nurse Ratched in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*

Nurse Ratched or ‘Big Nurse’ in Ken Kesey’s counter-culture novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is one of popular culture’s most arresting and memorable images of the nurse. She is, however, deemed to be remarkable primarily for her malice and authoritarianism. This paper argues that such a purely realist reading fails to fully appreciate the significance of the character of Nurse Ratched. A feminist critique of the novel contends that the importance of ‘Big Nurse’ is less related to how realistic/unrealistic or good/bad she is as a nurse. Nurse Ratched is important because she exemplifies all that traditional masculinity abhors in women, and particularly in strong women in positions of power and influence. This paper explores the stereotype of ‘Big Nurse’ and argues that Kesey’s vision of her ultimate ‘conquest’ is not a progressive allegory of ‘individual freedom’, but a reactionary misogyny which would deny women any function other than that of sexual trophy.

Key words: Big Nurse, Ken Kesey, Nurse Ratched, nurses’ image, nurses in literature, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

INTRODUCTION

Nursing has its fair share of heroines in nurses like Florence Nightingale, Mary Seacole, Edith Cavell and others. The heroic qualities of such nurses have been adopted and often hyperbolized into an entire genre of fiction and popular culture, where the nurse has come to represent the angel here on earth. However, for the angel myth to be entirely successful, there must be a counterpoint, a demonic vision amounting to what Hunter calls ‘the translocated ideal’.¹ For many years Charles Dickens’ Sairey Gamp fulfilled this function. While the ideal nurse was synonymous with the ideal mother, Gamp was the wicked-witch, drunk and dishevelled, sadistic and negligent.²

In the iconography of nursing malevolence however,

Gamp was to pale into insignificance beside Ken Kesey’s creation of Big Nurse, Nurse Ratched, in his 1960s counter-culture novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (OFOTCN).³ Such is the power of the image of Big Nurse that Nurse Ratched has become synonymous for all that is bad in nurses and nursing. She epitomizes rigidity, authoritarianism, malevolence, power, control, uncaring aloofness, and in much the same way that Sairey Gamp did, she manages to make ‘professional’ seem a term of abuse.

In discussing the popular image of the nurse with classes of students, I am constantly struck by how unquestioningly Big Nurse is held up as a representation and warning of what can go wrong in nursing if we are not careful, an exemplar of uncaring burn-out or of the kind of person (for the problem is usually located squarely within Nurse Ratched) ‘who comes into nursing just to have control over others’ or who is ‘frustrated and needs a man’. The argument in this paper is that such an unquestioning understanding of ‘Big Nurse’ ignores many important insights into both the popular image of the nurse and the

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role and status of women which can be gained from a more critical and feminist reading of OFOTCN. Showalter notes that such a reading should:

... consider the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and woman-as-sign in semiotic systems.⁴

THE HORROR OF 'BIG NURSE'

Big Nurse as a monstrous woman

Kesey created Big Nurse as a monstrous figure in every respect. Nurse Ratched's presence is seen as intimidating, not only in her omnipresent surveillance of men, but in her near gothic physical proportions. The novel's narrator, Chief Bromden, sees her almost metamorphose in places:

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 blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor (p. 10).⁵

Big Nurse's size is but one of the many ways in which she embodies American machismo's worst nightmare — a powerful woman who is unattracted to them. Physical size is a fairly crude but commonplace representational device to indicate a 'translocation' of the ideals of ideal woman and nurse. The same approach of turning nurse authority figures into what Karpf calls 'the monstrously bureaucratic sister or matron, indifferent to human suffering' (p. 209)⁵ was used successfully for many years in comedies such as the *Carry-On* films where Hattie Jacques played the domineering Matron, and in the Australian television 'soap', *Let the Blood Run Free*.⁶

The ideal woman/nurse should be more petite and physically vulnerable, like the *Carry-On* junior nurses or the 'little' Japanese nurse on the 'disturbed ward' and the two 'whores' from Portland in OFOTCN. (We had to wait until Fay Weldon's *Life and Loves of a She-Devil* for a literary subversion of this convention.)

Several critics have highlighted the significance of Nurse Ratched's large breasts in creating her 'translocated ideal'.⁷⁻⁹ The ideal mother must have ample breasts to indicate both nurturance and sexuality,¹⁰ but, despite the frequent references throughout the novel to the size of her 'extraordinary breasts' (p. 60), Big Nurse 'fails' to deliver on both of these counts. She 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'. Sadly, some nurse commentators seem to have adopted an uncritically sexist stance in relation to Nurse Ratched. For exam-

ple, in the analysis of Kalisch *et al.*¹¹ she is a 'cold, sexless man-hater' — as opposed perhaps to a hot, sexy man-lover we must wonder? In Kesey's misogynistic sensibility, this double denial relegates Nurse Ratched to the moral margins where all of the 'bad women' exist.¹²

Big Nurse as emasculator

The 'bad women' of this novel are the 'ball-cutters', the 'bitches', the 'mothers' (as in 'motherf**ers'), in short, all of the women who have 'caused' the men in the ward to find themselves inmates in an insane asylum, and who by the novel's analogy are responsible for the ills of society. Among the inmates, Harding's 'demanding' wife has robbed him of all social and sexual confidence. Billy Bibbit's overbearing and over-protective mother has 'caused' his stammer and terrified timidity in the presence of women. These 'bad women' are Nurse Ratched's soul mates, the embodiments of everything that was so terrifyingly threatening to the fragile all-American male psyche and to the novel's 'hero' McMurphy. It was to be towards the end of the novel that Big Nurse would get what it clearly intends its audience to celebrate as her 'come-uppance', when she is sexually assaulted by McMurphy and has her breasts forcibly exposed. During theatrical performances and film screenings of OFOTCN, audiences have been reported to cheer loudly at this point.

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 McMurphy and the inmates are capable of conceiving for a woman. McMurphy tries every limited strategy at his disposal to provoke Nurse Ratched into dropping her 'front' and revealing what simply has to be the 'true woman' underneath — the woman who will fall lustfully at the hero's feet. 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.

She pointedly refuses to crumble at his sexual harassment, innuendoes, pinchings and wisecracks, and all of his attempts to 'bug her till she comes apart at those neat little seams' (p. 63).³ Nurse Ratched's most heinous crime it seems is her steadfast refusal to fancy McMurphy, whose claim to being the archetypal 'ladies man' is that he drinks, gambles, fights and is 'overzealous in my sexual relations' (p. 41). I am reminded at this point of Gloria Steinem's reported put-down of an aggressive questioner who demanded to know if she was a lesbian. 'Are you the alternative?', she replied. By refusing the role of sexual con-

quest and by remaining impervious to all of McMurphy's 'charms' and tactics, Nurse Ratched undercuts both McMurphy's own self-proclaimed irresistibility to women and the very essence of masculinity — and by Kesey's definition, society — for in OFOTCN women have no discernible value or societal role other than as sexual trophies and bolsterers of the male ego.

Big Nurse as the embodiment of oppression

I suggest that one of the reasons why Nurse Ratched has become a cultural icon of nursing malevolence is that OFOTCN is often misread as a literal or realist tale of the heroic quest. This is not difficult to do given Kesey's strong linear narrative and attention to detail.

The novel often reads as wonderfully surreal, especially in the passages where the narrator, Chief Bromden seems almost hallucinatory in his visions. However, the strength of narrative also serves to press us into reading the novel as an unproblematic tale of the individual's (McMurphy's) battle against an oppressive society (the hospital). Commentators such as Heatherington¹³ have pointed out the allegorical possibilities of OFOTCN as an archetypal 'wild west' tale where the outlaw metaphorically 'rides into town to sort things out'. McMurphy's entrance to the ward for example, is pure John Wayne:

He sounds big. I hear him coming down the hall, and he sounds big in the way he walks, and he sure don't slide; he's got iron on his heels and he rings it on the floor like horseshoes. He shows up in the door and stops and hitches his thumbs in his pockets, boots wide apart, and stands there with the guys looking at him.

'Good mornin, buddies' (p. 15).

OFOTCN has also been read as a religious story with McMurphy as a Jesus figure, a fisher of men (as in during the fishing trip), who dies so that others (the 'inmates') might live. Such hero figures require a symbiotic relationship with a villain. McMurphy's rebellious anti-authority stance would seem merely petulant were it not for Nurse Ratched's powerful exemplification of all that is stultifying about 'the combine' and what it represents. Once again, Kesey's novel depends for its success on the 'translocation of the ideal' which sees the nurse not as facilitative, empowering, or even moderately helpful, but as almost wilfully obstructive and inflexible. But Big Nurse's crime is far worse than general obstructiveness for what she is obstructing and controlling are the men's traditional and seemingly only ways of being men. She prevents them from smoking, drinking, reading pornography and from watching the World Series baseball on television. She denies

them what Forrey calls, 'these sacraments of masculinity' (p. 225).⁹

Her presence is pervasive and Chief Bromden's paranoia sees her as watching the men's every move:

Practice has steadied and strengthened her until now she wields a sure power that extends in all directions on hair-like wires too small for anybody's eyes but mine. I see her sit in the centre of this web of wires like a watchful robot, tend her network with mechanical insect skill, know every second which wire runs where and just what current to send up to get the results she wants (p. 27).³

The notion of the nurse as close observer here is part of the 'translocation'. While Foucauldian concern with the 'clinical gaze' has made us perhaps over-suspicious of concerned nursing observation,¹⁴ there can be no mistaking the perceived threat that Big Nurse's use of surveillance poses to the men — patients, orderlies and doctors alike. Being kept 'under observation' by a woman is clearly too close for comfort to being 'hen pecked'. McMurphy himself presses this analogy of thwarted masculinity in one of the many passages where, paradoxically, his 'normal' vision of women seems as disturbed as Chief Bromden's 'paranoid' ones:

No that nurse ain't some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is 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 (p. 51).³

The punishing of Big Nurse

The final vicious assault on Nurse Ratched is foreshadowed early in the novel. Harding and McMurphy are discussing the 'problems' of being dominated by women when Harding spells out the nature of man's only 'effective weapon' against strong women — the penis and rape — while challenging McMurphy to say whether he is man enough to use this weapon against Nurse Ratched:

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? (p. 60).³

The scene is thus set for the final confrontation between McMurphy and Big Nurse. Following Billy Bobitt's suicide when he cuts his throat after being reprimanded and shamed by Nurse Ratched, McMurphy attacks her.

This is the 'final showdown' where the Western imagery of the 'man who's gotta do what a man's gotta do' comes to the fore again:

We made him stand and hitch up his black shorts like they were horsehide chaps, and push back his black cap with one finger like it was a ten-gallon Stetson (p. 250).³

Ostensibly provoked by Billy's suicide, McMurphy is not carrying out a lone assault but is actually an ambassador for the inmates and thus for all males. Chief Bromden narrates that when McMurphy set off to attack Big Nurse, 'We couldn't stop him because we were the ones making him do it' (p. 250). This time Nurse Ratched has gone too far and will have to be dealt with in the manner so familiar to McMurphy and all men who see violence against women as a justifiable strategy to ensure their position of power and control. McMurphy's attack on Nurse Ratched is a powerful part of the book's climax, but it is also very revealing in relation to the novel's unrestrained sexism:

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 nipples started from her chest and swelled out and out, bigger than anybody had ever imagined, warm and pink in the light... (p. 250).³

In its celebration of sexual violence and enforced power, this is a chilling rape scenario. McMurphy has indeed resorted to the use of the 'effective weapon' against a woman who poses such a threat to masculinity. But McMurphy's attack serves other purposes. Nurse Ratched is at last revealed as the sexual being that the men always 'knew' that she would be. Her breasts, nipples, femininity, sexuality and vulnerability are now exposed for all to see. The 'front' has crumbled. She has been 'exposed'. The protective white uniform and with it her authority have been torn down. This sexual attack is also significant as it is used to reinforce what is possibly the most offensive aspect of the rape fantasy — that 'secretly' maybe, Nurse Ratched is gaining some sexual pleasure from being forcefully 'mastered' by McMurphy. The imagery of the erect nipples is hardly accidental, nor is it likely to be purely Chief Bromden's psychosis at work.

The ambiguity is introduced that while this physiological reaction could be due to the shock and fear induced by the attack, it is more likely in view of the nipples' being 'warm and pink' that we are to assume that this is a pleasurable sexual response from Nurse Ratched. And this, readers and audiences applaud.

CONCLUSION

It is almost impossible to avoid the long shadow that Big Nurse casts across the image of nursing. She is iconic in both popular and nursing culture as the epitome of all that is deemed to be 'bad' in nurses and nursing. This paper argues for a revisioning of our understandings of Nurse Ratched which recognizes her importance not as the embodiment of bad nursing or bad womanhood, but as a site where the worst excesses of sexism are played out. Even within a narrow realist reading of OFOTCN, the nurse as monster is an inadequate understanding of Big Nurse. Although some critics have highlighted the possibility, it is unusual for readers to consider that Nurse Ratched might be a 'real' character or indeed a victim herself. It is much more commonplace for her to be viewed as being so impersonal and non-human as to be merely a metaphor or cipher for societal oppression of the individual. But Nurse Ratched suffers in the way that almost all of the women characters in OFOTCN suffer, by having no story or biography. Kesey, through indifference or design, gives Nurse Ratched no personal history. She simply is.

Part of the reason for the success of Nurse Ratched as an enduring symbol is explained by Hunter's conception of the 'translocated ideal'. Hunter explains that:

The ideal violated in satires of nurses is the expectation of undemanding maternal love and care, a demand that quickly extends itself to sexual compliance. The nurse ought to be the perfect mother, but she fails as surely as her predecessors did, enforcing rules and saying no (p. 124).¹

I argue that OFOTCN is more of a pubescent parable of male angst, rather than a novel which offers any real contribution to our understanding of either gender relations or the nature of the individual in an increasingly impersonal and corporate world. For the novel to succeed as an allegory of individual freedom confronting the forces of 'the combine', it would surely be reasonable to expect that 'the individual' should be representative of both men and women who would both suffer under such oppression. As it stands, OFOTCN can be said to represent little more than an ultra conservative attack upon women's emancipation and advancement. In a discussion of OFOTCN worthy of McMurphy himself, Maxwell acknowledges this and in a conclusion remarkable for its complete lack of irony suggests that:

Kesey is warning us that some recent developments in American society may serve to weaken masculine individuality, assertiveness, and spirit. It is only in the twentieth century that women in large numbers have become financially independent. Competing with men in the world of commerce has made them necessarily more aggressive and

competitive. In addition the male has lost the role of sole provider, he has lost a large part of his traditional image. ... they have turned over to their wives many of their former duties, such as those of chief disciplinarian, keeper of the budget, and general master of the house. ... Kesey is telling us that once a certain amount of masculinity in the form of authority and individuality is yielded, it is difficult to regain. Perhaps men have given away too much (pp. 143–144).¹⁵

... to the 'ball-cutters' and 'bitches', one is almost tempted to add.

Unpalatable though the book's sexism might be, this is still an important novel for nurses to read. What we must foster, though, are the educational opportunities to engage in critical dialogue around this and other texts which speak to nursing and human concerns. Integrating what I describe elsewhere as 'nursing humanities'^{16–19} into our curricula and practice can enhance nurses' appreciation of the many different ways to engage and read literature, for example, from a feminist perspective, which will ensure that we do not simply accept or expect realist or representational accounts but challenge the many and varied assumptions and questions inherent in a work. As McMahan argues:

Thus we need to help students see that Nurse Ratched is no more to blame for her malice than the black boys are for theirs. The Big Nurse happens also to be the Big Victim when viewed with an awareness of the social and economic exploitation of women (p. 149).²⁰

Nurse Ratched is our sister, and we want her back.

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