

# The Vanishing American: Identity Crisis in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*

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Most literary scholars who examine the personality of Chief Bromden in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* quickly point out that the Indian suffers from a debilitating psychosis that prevents his normal participation in society. What the scholars tend to overlook, however, are the circumstances which contributed to Bromden's hospitalization. It is evident from Kesey's treatment of Bromden that the weak self-concept is, in part, a result of Bromden's growing up in a sub-culture that is in its final stage of sociocultural disintegration. Because Bromden is torn between the desire to maintain his Indian heritage and the necessity of developing behavior acceptable to the dominant white culture, he experiences an identity crisis.

Kesey sets Bromden's childhood in the 1920s and 30s, a time when the U.S. government was struggling to decide whether Indians should maintain tribal customs or should adopt white culture. The Dawes Act (1887), which reduced tribal land holdings but allocated 160 acres of land to individual Indians, failed to achieve Indian integration into American culture (Hoxie 95). Many Indians sold their tracts, not realizing that without land, they would be incapable of earning a livelihood. As whites moved onto the former Indian holdings, tribal organization disappeared, and this loss of tribal unity caused a loss of pride in self and in tribal customs. Subsequently, many Indians, unable to manage the money they did receive from land sales, fell into debt and then turned to alcohol. Excessive drinking may have deadened their feeling of loss of tribal identity, but it added another negative characteristic in the eyes of the white community. The government studied contemporary tribal deterioration during the 1920s in an effort to remedy such conditions. The Meriam report, completed in 1928, startled the nation by revealing the poverty of the Indian sub-culture. It called for improvements in education, health, and welfare and also questioned the wisdom of the Dawes Act (Prucha 19). Then, in 1934, the U.S. government tried to combat Indian poverty by passage of the Indian Reorganization Act, known as the Wheeler-Howard Act (Philip 171). Rather than attempting assimilation, this new legislation tried to reestablish tribal

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government and to maintain the disappearing Indian culture by encouraging study of Indian history and arts. This Act prohibited individual land ownership, with all private Indian land being returned to tribal ownership. Reactions to this new Act varied. Factions of Indians and whites alike believed that the new law was a step backward. Others resented that it forced a communistic system while still others considered it a method to segregate a minority group. Some, however, viewed it optimistically as an opportunity to preserve Indian culture.

Growing up during this period, Bromden experiences identity conflicts. As the narrator of the novel, Bromden never reveals his first name. Son of a Chinook Indian Chief, Bromden should have viewed his personal name as important. First of all, in the Chinook tradition, “names are hereditary” and secondly, according to Hubert Howe Bancroft, “The name assumes a personality; it is the shadow or spirit or other self. . . ., between the name and the individual there is a mysterious connection” (245). Bromden, without a first name, seems to lack such an integration. Even his last name, Bromden, has been perverted by patients at the hospital who call him Chief Broom, a derogation of his status as Chief and a ridicule of his floor mopping duties in the hospital ward. Bromden’s failure to reveal his first name seems to be an indication of his problems because other Indians including his father emphasize their first name. From his earliest memories, Bromden remembers that his father, named “Tee Ah Millatoona — The Pine that Stands Tallest on the Mountain” — did live up to his name both physically and psychologically. As a child, Bromden models himself after his father, a strong leader, “a chief hard and shiny as a gunstock” (Kesey 16). The child sees the full-blooded Indian Chief as a giant. As a result, physical size becomes an important concern to Bromden because the way he views his size is deeply connected with the way he views his father’s size. The earliest interactions between father and son are idyllic scenes of Indian life. The father teaches the child to hunt, to find and eat bugs in case of hunger, and to fish. In a flashback Bromden recalls:

the sound of the falls on the Columbia...the woop of Charley Bear Belly stabbed himself a big chinook...the slap of fish in the water, laughing naked kids on the bank, the women at the racks....(73)

Life seems a paradise until white U.S. government agents arrive to purchase the land and waterfalls to build a hydroelectric dam. The first time the whites try to negotiate, Bromden’s father defeats them. However, after much harassment — the Chief is repeatedly assaulted and his hair cut short — the Chief finally succumbs, selling the tribe’s land. Bromden no longer sees a strong father figure but a changed man, one who has been beaten by white government. As his father’s size decreases in the boy’s eyes, so, too, does the child’s size decrease. Identifying with his father,

Bromden explains: "when I saw my Papa start getting scared of things, I got scared too..." (147). The father as well as Bromden develops insecurities when they lose their land and Indian lifestyle.

Bromden's identity crisis is further complicated because he is the son of a white woman. His mother, Mary Louise Bromden, is so dominant a force that the Pine that Stands Tallest accepts her last name, thus relinquishing part of his tradition. Rather than a participant in two cultures, Bromden as a halfbreed becomes an outsider to both. He can no longer admire his Indian father, and he comes to fear his white mother who claims, "we ain't Indians. We're civilized and you remember it" (239). She is the one who coerces Bromden's father into selling the tribal lands; thus, the boy believes that his mother's size increases as his father's size decreases. Even as a 6'8" 270 lb. adult, Bromden talks about his 5'9" 130 lb. mother as growing larger all the time; she got "Bigger than Papa and me together" (186). He views his mother and whites in general as physically dominant while he perceives himself as small and submissive.

As Bromden reaches adolescence and then maturity, he bases his self-concept on the white man's perception of him. Whites view him stereotypically as ignorant and unattractive, and the youth feels pressure to fulfill that image. Whites in the novel show surprise that he speaks English while the blacks claim that Indians can't read or write. Bromden explains that he feels racial prejudice when people look "at me like I'm some kind of bug" (26) or when people "see right through me like I wasn't there" (131). The Chinooks were once a people proud of their physical appearance, especially of their custom of flattening the head which signified high status (Bancroft 227). But Bromden, because white people see him in a negative way, begins to see himself as unattractive. White men had made fun of him as a child, saying "Look how overdone little Hiawatha is... Burnt to a fair turn" (170). Even as an adult, Bromden thinks that his physical appearance is "funny": "An Indian's face and black, oily Indian's hair" (26). Looking in a mirror, he sees a "Face dark and hard with big, high cheekbones like the cheek beneath them had been hacked out with a hatchet, eyes all hard and mean-looking, just like Papa's eyes or the eyes of all those tough mean-looking Indians you see on TV." But Bromden denies self, saying, "That ain't me, that ain't my face...I was just being...the way people wanted. It don't seem like I ever been me" (140). The ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy from Bromden's childhood was that whites thought he was deaf and mute. A descendant of a basically oral tradition, Bromden chooses silence as a survival technique. He explains, "it wasn't me that started acting deaf; it was people that first started acting like I was too dumb to hear or see or say anything at all" (178). Intimidated, confused, and self-deprecatory, Bromden sums up his situation simply: "I was hurt by seeing what happened to Papa and the tribe" (121).

Bromden's predicament is illustrative of that of his entire tribe and race. Kesey's social criticism emerges piecemeal through Bromden's flashbacks about the village. To show the social cohesion once created by Indian traditions, Kesey contrasts former Indian unity with the new alienation accompanying the loss of Indian customs and the development of a white lifestyle. Bromden remembers "the men on the ancient, rickety, zig-zagging scaffolding that has been growing and branching out among the rocks of the falls for years" (182). Traditionally, the falls was an important resource because the Indian economy depended on fishing. The Indians on the Columbia River consumed fresh salmon, smoked fish to store for winter consumption, and traded dried fish for other goods. Even during Bromden's childhood, Indian fishing on the Columbia amounted to 2,000,000 pounds annually (Columbia River 353).

During the 1930s and 40s the U.S. government concluded that the economic condition of the Indians in the Columbia River Basin was substandard compared with that of rural whites, and they further claimed that Indians would be able to raise their standard of living only if the government fully developed the Indians' land and water resources. Whether the government was concerned with improving Indian life or with rationalizing the confiscation of valuable natural resources is still debated. Bromden, for one, sees the motives as follows: "whites wanted the government to put in the dam because of the work and the money it would bring, and because it would get rid of the village" (150). Bromden translates the white's attitude: "Let that tribe of fish Injuns take their stink and their two hundred thousand dollars the government is paying them and go some place else with it" (151). The dam becomes a dominant image within Bromden's flashbacks and nightmares. In one of his visions he recalls the men of the village leaving "to do work on the gravel-crusher for the dam. The frenzied pattern, the faces hypnotized by routine" (39). In another flashback he sees "the U.S. Department of the Interior bearing down on our little village with a gravel-crushing machine" (122). The machinery of the dam and the construction equipment dehumanize and victimize the Indian, the traditional man of nature. In the words of Gary Wiener, just "as the Indians have been displaced by the white man, so too has the river been conquered by the hydroelectric dam, another symbol of" the white Establishment (24).

That Kesey criticizes the white Establishment is all too clear as he points out their ethnocentrism. Instead of recognizing that Indian historical conditions produced values different from, yet just as valid as those of whites, the dominant culture assumes its values to be superior to those of Indians. Bromden recalls the superiority that a white government agent exhibited while visiting the village one hot summer day. The man shook "his head at the rickety clutter of fishracks and secondhand cars and chicken coops and motorcycles and dogs." He referred to the Bromden home as

a hot oven, a "hovel" and refused to enter such "squalor." As a child Bromden tried to defend his traditional "'dobe' " house by saying, "our sod house is likely to be cooler than any of the houses in town, lots cooler!" (180). Not able to respect Indian values, the dominant culture imposes its customs upon the Indians. White supremacy is obvious when Bromden's grandmother dies and government regulations require that she be buried according to white practices. After the required burial, Bromden, his father, and Uncle Running-and-Jumping Wolf dig up her body and give it traditional funeral rites. The Chinooks prepare the body by wrapping it in a blanket, in this case probably one that Bromden's grandmother had woven. Ornaments and small items of personal property are included in the shrouding. Then the body is placed on a platform suspended in the trees within the tribal cemetery (Bancroft 247-248). When the white community learns that the Indians disinterred the body, they respond, "Hanging a corpse in a tree! It's enough to make a person sick." In their attempt to preserve tradition, Uncle R & J Wolf and Bromden's father "spent twenty days in the drunk tank at the Dalles jail... for Violation of the Dead" (241). Kesey emphasizes that efforts to preserve ancient Indian customs are futile within a nation that is predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, and intolerant.

Besides experiencing persecution because of membership in a minority group, Bromden is also the victim of World War II. Although psychologically unstable, he still is assigned to service as an electrician's assistant in Germany and Italy, where he can not deal effectively with the stress of combat. The event that shatters Bromden occurs at Anzio, the site of an Allied beachhead during the fighting in Italy. Bromden relives the agony of that experience: "I saw a buddy of mine tied to a tree fifty yards from me screaming for water, his face blistered in the sun. They wanted me to try to go out and help him. They'd of cut me in half from the farmhouse there" (121). Partly at least because of guilt feelings, Bromden punishes himself with a retreat from reality for not having the courage to try to save his friend.

Bromden's psychological problems are further compounded when he is incarcerated in a mental hospital. Rather than as a therapeutic environment, Kesey exposes the hospital as a chamber of tortures. Bromden receives no help from the hospital because the environment is conducive to mental illness, not to mental health. Only through the support of McMurphy, another inmate of the hospital, does Bromden regain his strength and size and develop some self-confidence.

Most scholars interpret optimistically the novel's ending. M. Gilbert Porter believes that Bromden has been nourished by McMurphy's love and is ready to go "out into the world to help others overcome their fears and troubles" (33). Gary Wiener claims that "Bromden has grown up to the

realization that one cannot keep running away and hiding forever" (26). Such interpretations of affirmation are difficult to accept. While it is true that Bromden's psychological state somewhat improves near the end of the novel, still the staff is not ready to discharge him and he is not strong enough to consider escape.

We know that Bromden has improved to the extent that he has developed awareness of the outside world when he looks out the window one fall evening and sees the countryside for the first time in twenty years. He watches "Canadian honkers" flying South and sees a mongrel dog listening to and pointing at the geese. "When [the dog] couldn't hear them any more either, he commenced to lope off in the direction they had gone, toward the highway..." Bromden hears a car on the highway and watches "the dog and the car making for the same spot of pavement" (143). Stephen Tanner interprets this image as nature (dog) and machine (car) on a collision course (35). The dog, I believe, is connected with Bromden; it has the freedom he lacks, so Bromden vicariously encounters the outside world through the dog's experiences. We never know the dog's fate because the nurses return Bromden to bed before he can see the outcome. Later, when Bromden does have the opportunity to re-enter the real world by fleeing the hospital on the night of McMurphy's party, the Indian does not want to leave, explaining "I don't know where I want to go yet" (257). Even this late in the novel Bromden is not sure of who he is or what he wants to do. McMurphy acknowledges Bromden's identity crisis by saying, "I don't know what you can be Chief. You still got some looking to do." Jokingly McMurphy quips "Maybe you could get you a job being the bad guy on TV rasslin'" (258).

In the final chapter, after mercifully killing McMurphy, Bromden lies back down in bed; presumably he still hasn't decided to flee the hospital. It is Scanlon who warns him of the potential trouble of the investigation over McMurphy's death and who persuades him to leave. His entire life Bromden has allowed others to define and to direct him, and this pattern has not changed. Most recently he has been molded by McMurphy, who is an influence just as strong as that of his tribe, his mother, the army, and the hospital, albeit a positive influence this time. When he does finally escape, he assumes the identity "of a professional Indian wrestler" (272) as McMurphy had suggested. This behavior shows that Bromden just cannot take the responsibility of defining himself and may continue to submit to outside pressures to determine his actions. The escape itself is not executed in a positive way, for Bromden thinks about going back for the others so unsure is he of his new freedom. And Kesey even manipulates the imagery on the last page of the novel so that Bromden runs toward the highway in the same direction the dog had run. This repeated image indicates that like the dog's fate, Bromden's fate is uncertain. He "might"

go to Canada — perhaps to find solitude in the wilderness that no longer exists in the United States. He “think[s]” he might stop in at his old home because he has “heard that some of the tribe have took to building their old ramshackle wood scaffolding all over that big million-dollar hydroelectric dam, and are spearing salmon in the spillway” (272). Bromden certainly is psychologically much improved at the end of the novel, but he is not completely self-reliant nor is he a hero who is ready to fight other people’s battles. As for the tribe, they seem in rebellion against their disintegration, but there is no possibility of returning to their original state in nature. Since history has shown that minority groups tend to be swallowed up by the larger culture, the Indians may literally come to fulfil the description, accepted by Kesey, of the “Vanishing American[s]” (65).

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