

Organizational Lack or Identity: A Lacanian Perspective on Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Alireza Kargar

Lorestan University

Hassan Abootalebi

Kharazmi University

ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to address gaps in research on whether authorities in a given community establish an organizational identity or lack. It does so by developing a psychoanalytic perspective. In particular, this study employs the Lacanian notion of the Symbolic to explore how the dominant class of a society forms imaginary constructions of subjectivity in Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Kesey's novel, this study illustrates, validates conscious but illusory constructions of the self through the imposing yet highly unconscious and profound impacts of the Symbolic initiated by language acquisition. Upon the arrival of a new patient named Randle Patrick McMurphy, however, the authorities' hegemony is inevitably disrupted by unconscious subjectivity and invariably fails. Therefore, the fragmented, dynamic, and emergent organizational identity constructed by the dominant social ideologies aligned with the Symbolic is inevitably supplanted by organizational lack through the appreciation of social ideologies' delusion. However, since the Symbolic is intolerant of any primacy of thoughts resulting in transgression, McMurphy, the protagonist and the true incentive of this organizational subversion, is terribly treated and jettisoned. Such is how officials in communities shun and suppress any threat from iconoclasts and go to every extreme to keep people ignorant. While such identity can be illusory and (self-)destructive, it also provides the opportunity for liberating the self from the mirage of identity.

Keywords: organizational identity/lack, the Symbolic, the Real, Lacan, Ken Kesey, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Organizational identity has held a prominent role in organizational studies but has recently received increased attention as a fundamental notion of ever-increasing importance. While the organization's central conceptualization and characteristics have bared little change or modification since its emergence over 20 years ago, different approaches to its characteristics and debates attempting to define organizational identity have developed.

Prior studies on the functions and constitution of organizational identity have focused on the concept of identity or how we consciously think about and express individuality. However, these studies are unable to examine less conscious identity processes; therefore, the need to develop and apply a psychoanalytic approach arises. Accordingly, the present study attempts to address this gap and deals with organizational identity, particularly from a Lacanian perspective.

Although Jacques Lacan's approach is built on prior psychoanalytic studies of organizational identity—particularly Freud's, which emphasizes interpretation and intervention—the former insists on language indeterminacy. In doing so, Lacan insists on the instability of identity and desire constructed through language—that is, the impossibility of constructing an individual identity, on the one hand, and of appreciating the true function of organizational identity imposed by social ideologies and rules, on the other (Armstrong 15).

Arguably, the most significant contribution of the Lacanian perspective to organizational studies is in demonstrating that studies on identity have, in fact, focused on the illusory character of all such constructed identities. Irrespective of whether an organizational identity is announced to be unitary or plural, homogeneous or heterogeneous, permanent or temporary, contested or uncontested, it is established on and constructed around the illusion or fantasy that the self can be defined and fulfilled. Moreover, any answers to questions about who we are and what we want as an organization have nothing to do or are even at odds with the answers to questions about who individuals are and what they want. Our freedom in seeking what we desire is circumscribed by societal norms and rules. As a result, organizational identity is nothing short of a *fabricated*, imaginary identity, which, paradoxically speaking, should be suitably called *organizational lack* (Corley et al. 25).

From a Lacanian perspective, such answers for the questions posed above are illusory since they build up a consciously misleading effort to overshadow and underestimate an unconscious lack in the subject that cannot be overcome. In this respect, it is impossible to recognize who we really are and act on what we want, for as soon as we attempt to do so, it becomes apparent that taught answers to these questions fail us. We thus come to realize that what we had desired does not

bring us the satisfaction we seek. All subjects are locked up in and constricted to social rules in their conscious assertion of identity and their effort to fulfill desire. However, revealing the limitations of language and consequently, of social rules, the unconscious interventions inevitably render such efforts futile and make the subject cognizant of these rules' pitfall and fallacy. In this manner, Lacan demonstrates that the division of subjectivity is structural or organizational, rather than personal. Put differently, subjectivity is formed and molded through language, which introduces social ideologies to the subject. Hence, subjectivity formation is a process that is beyond the subject's control. Once it is developed in the subject, it governs and directs the subject without recognizing it.

The problem from this point of view then arises when the subject understands the shortcomings of social ideologies. The subject consequently questions their rectitude, tries to constitute their subjectivity, and obtains what he seeks beyond the layer of social ideologies which is regarded as transgressive, and deserves punishment depending on the magnitude of his transgression.

Before the classical age, domination was achieved through repressive mechanisms that brought about much cost to the ruling government and society. However, with the advent of the modern age, attaining this end has undergone a transformation, supplanted by disciplinary mechanisms that are indoctrinated through the social rules of language. This process of inculcation costs less and proves to be more effective. The outcome of discipline under the guise of social ideologies exercised through language is to produce obedient and useful members of a particular system. Moreover, the subject is constantly exposed to the rules and regulations set by society as unconscious surveillance mechanisms that overall reinforce the dominance of social ideologies over the subject.

According to Lacan, the Symbolic places the subject in a complex web of social relations, which gives rise to his subjectivity and delineates his humanness. Furthermore, the subject's humanness is sustained through constant social interaction with other people, which often deepens over time and gradually brings out interlocking habits and interests from the subject. Such is the exact process through which the Symbolic produces homogeneous, obedient members and, to a certain extent, obviates the necessity of strict control. Social ideologies enforce many rules and regulations which subjects comply with to claim rewards that are framed as vital and valuable. However, there is a flip side to every coin, and this is the case with social ideologies. Social ideologies have a preventive and punitive dimension, which serves as a powerful instrument. Should the use of reward fail, the organization and society can either assert or reclaim dominance by rejecting or threatening to ostracize those who deviate from societal norms. The type and

severity of this shunning by society is directly proportional to the severity of the subject's transgression and the extent of the damage it will have for the society established based on these rules. This particular response to any infringement of the law is employed, on the one hand, to bring into line individuals whose behavior transgresses the established norms and, on the other hand, to prevent inciting transgressive behavior among members of the society which is successfully evaded by isolating the wrong-doer from the other members. Modern forms of punishment differ from their predecessor, as Lisa Downing notes: it is "a historical shift which may be described as the movement from the punishment of the body to the punishment of the soul" (76). Even more critical, social ideologies define social reality for us by structuring our experiences. By providing us with definitions of situations, they elicit from us the behavior that conforms to meanings developed by social norms. Social ideologies then serve both as carriers of social norms and as enforcers of them.

Social ideologies influence subjects in particular ways, conditioning them to perform expected tasks and duties and, in the process, transforming them into docile and useful bodies. Society uses instruments to train its subjects to be useful and deploy specific techniques, tactics, and strategies to impose their control on them.

An acclaimed and renowned novel, Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* is set in a mental institution somewhere near Portland, Oregon. The novel is narrated by Chief Bromden, a Native character of mixed heritage whom everybody thinks is deaf and dumb. He often suffers from hallucinations in which he feels that the room is filled with fog. The institution is run by Miss Ratched, the Big Nurse, a frigid, scrupulous woman with a calm, mechanical demeanor whose peremptory instructions must be obeyed at all costs. Here patients receive shock treatments, which serve as a form of punishment and control. When the story begins, a new patient, Randall Patrick McMurphy, arrives at the ward. He is a 'gambling fool' who has just come from a work farm at Pendleton. Upon his arrival, conditions become less severe and more pleasing for the patients.

In his novel, Kesey portrays discipline and the demanding role of social ideologies in a mental asylum wherein the authorities, in their attempt to maintain the status quo, condition and train the inmates to become obedient subjects. Some strategies employed by authorities to obtain their desired goal and the underlying motives beneath them will be explicated in the subsequent sections.

Lacanian Organizational Identity and Obedience

According to Lacan, the Imaginary refers to a phase in the development of the psyche. The subject is trapped in the illusion that the self is an integrated and stable being, possessing a distinct identity that enables him to control his circumstances, his self, and others. The emergence of the Imaginary, Lacan states, derives from the mirror stage. The mirror image, however, as it is employed in any sense, is a distortion, a "miscognition." The self created and defined around this image is an illusory reflection of the self (*Écrits* 58).

However, the Symbolic Order is evolved around language and context—the structure exposed to and imposed on every subject before birth through a social network of conventions passed on for generations (Fink 14). The most significant step in the process of language acquisition is the act of immersion in the Symbolic Order, which results in the loss of primal fulfillment and unconscious trauma. As such, that which truly and uniquely marks the person is a loss or lack (Ragland 12). Such lack cannot be filled in the Symbolic Order because the Symbolic prompted its existence through differentiating the subject from his environment, thereby robbing him of his primal fulfillment experienced prior to language. As soon as we enter the process of language acquisition, we are able to express ourselves, articulate our desires, assert who we are and what we want at the cost of being fragmented by the Symbolic and alienating ourselves. Put differently, only through the words of others can we express our differentiation and individuality. However, we are unable to discard or move beyond this Order. As a result, we constantly experience fragmentation and alienation in the construction of our self, deferring us to reach our primal satisfaction. In other words, our longing for the original wholeness and fulfillment derived from the immediate experience of the world is always missing in our articulation of the self and renders our desires unattainable. We are thus left with alienating and alienated articulations.

Furthermore, the Symbolic Order is a world of the subject's alienation and separation from the objects in the external world and its environment. This alienation and separation are the indispensable component and the constructive element in creating the subject's independent being, or in other words, his subjectivity. The initiating point of this alienation is the acquisition of language. The use of language implies a loss, a lack since I, the subject, would not need to use specific names if I still felt that I was an inseparable part of those things. At this juncture, the dichotomy between the subject, I, and the object, anything other than me, springs into existence. I am something different and distinct from any other things around me; this is tantamount to my separation and, consequently, my alienation from people, society, and in all, from my surroundings. Through the course of language

acquisition, I get acquainted, and as a result, become compelled to comply with the behavioral, educational, ethical, and religious rules and regulations that constellate and constitute the ideologies of society. I, the subject, consequently, start to mold who and what I am and what my relationship to other people and my environment are (expected to be). Moreover, my attitudes, expectations, definitions, and criteria of concepts like love, trust, value, happiness, bliss, freedom, salvation, and so forth are shaped.

Crucial to the Symbolic is the differentiation between the normal and the abnormal subjects. Normal subjects are those who comply with social norms and are consequently readily controllable. On the contrary, abnormal subjects are the criminals or the mad who cannot assimilate the norms of society or move beyond and independently of them, which endangers the perpetuity and legitimacy of the Symbolic. Therefore, society separates them from normal subjects, first to prevent further transgressions, and second to train these abnormal subjects to assimilate the norms. In the context of Kesey's novel, the society emerged from the Symbolic and its rules, according to Chief Bromden, is "the Combine which is a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside." The Big Nurse, furthermore, is part of this said organization: "under her rule the ward Inside is almost completely adjusted to surroundings" (28). The members of society—especially the abnormal, the Combine inmates—are constantly surveilled and exposed to social norms, the values society determines to render them controllable subjects. There are some forty patients in the ward, along with the nurses and black boys, making it a small society. As the representative of the whole of society, this small society is presided over by a mechanism called "the Symbolic." Social norms and ideologies here in the asylum are imposed on and strictly observed by the mad to assimilate society's norms, conventions, and values.

Social ideologies apply various disciplinary strategies and techniques to facilitate the subjugation of the inmates and maintain power. As Sadan says, "The advantage in power relation is on the side of those who possess an organizational advantage" (46). The authorities obtain this advantage by introducing an organizational identity to reinforce their intended goal and subdue the inmates. The classification of the inmate-subjects that reflects society's ideologies enforces different treatment and tactics in dealing with the subjects based on their position. Chief Bromden describes the patients who have been classified according to their characteristics. Half of the forty patients in the ward are "the younger patients, known as 'Acutes' because the doctors figure them still sick enough to be fixed" and the others are "the Combine's product, the *Chronics*" (Kesey 15). The *Chronics* has three sub-classes, namely, the "Walkers," the "Wheelers," and the "Vegetables." He describes the *Chronics* as "machines with flaws inside that can't be repaired, flaws born in, or flaws beat in

over so many years of the guy running head-on into solid things" (16). Through this classification, society and its authorities can determine how to treat any subject and in what way to prevent potential transgression and uprising.

Social ideologies cannot exercise power completely through surveillance alone; hence, other techniques that consummate the task of imposing power upon the subjects are deemed indispensable. One of these techniques is to justify the values which work simultaneously with surveillance. The norms set by the society and its authorities should be justified and normalized through the subjects' constant exposure to these ideologies so that, on the one hand, they direct and judge their actions and behavior according to these taught norms, and on the other hand, effectively facilitate surveillance.

The other dimension of any institution, such as the asylum in Kesey's work, is the imperative aspect of the rules and regulations which indoctrinate the subjects of accepted actions and values. Several instances in the novel depict the Big Nurse instructing and commanding McMurphy on how to conduct himself in the asylum: "one of the first things is that the patients remain seated during the course of the meeting" (48); "patients aren't allowed to enter the Nurses' Station" (83); "you can't run around here - in a towel" (96), and that "it's against the policy to gamble for money on the ward" (106). She makes it apparent that these are the asylum rules which all the inmates should respect without any exception. When the Big Nurse finds McMurphy in the dormitory during working time, she even threatens him: "you are supposed to be working during these hours. McMurphy, I'm warning you" (144). As illustrated in the scenes and lines from the novel mentioned above, the authorities' intolerance of any form of transgression reveals the instability of the organization's integrity, ultimately explaining why it compels its subjects to maintain the established Order.

Lacanian Organizational Lack and Defiance

The psychoanalytic perspective, especially that of Lacan, acknowledges that this imposed conceptualization on organizational identity by the Symbolic is "illusory" (Gioia et al. 64). It is illusory not because it is factually fallacious but because it is constructed on and ruled by an imaginary Order that can provide us with answers about who we are and what we want.

Take the original definition of organizational identity as the central, enduring, and distinctive characteristic of an organization. This definition has long been assumed to bear the impression that organizational identity is an integrated construct exerting significant force to maintain a consistent and homogeneous organizational identity over time (Whetten 58).

The Real is one of Lacan's most intriguing and most innovative notions. The difficulty in understanding it is partly because it is not a "thing" or even a reality. For Lacan, reality is created and manifested only through the symbols and the signification process. The Real is the unknown, the unfathomable, that manifests itself at the limits of the Symbolic and is in constant tension with it. A further difficulty with grasping Lacan's conception of the Real is that his perception of it drastically changes throughout his career. What follows is a discussion of the development of the notion of the Real from the 1950s through the pivotal period from 1964 to the early 1970s to his late work, where the Real is elevated to the central category of his thought. The concept in the later studies of Lacan is indispensable to understanding the role of fantasy, the *objet petit a*, and *jouissance*.

Lacan defines the Real as the phase of experience that defies or is past symbolization, that which cannot be expressed and depicted by language. This statement aligns with the assumed justification of psychoanalysis and its emphasis on words and the Symbolic. According to Lacan, the Real only becomes a factual reality "to the extent that it becomes a word which hits the target" (71). In this sense, de-centered, self-integrated, and more dynamic organizational identity results from the immersion of the subject in the Real, which is beyond the Symbolic (Brown 68). Being engrossed in the Real initiates the inevitable disruption and subversion of the rules taught to the subject through language, which leads him to question the legitimacy of these rules and his defiance of them. As the subjects constructed by the Symbolic, we confront with such disruptions in the course of constructing our imaginary selves, and our speaking is filled with omissions, misconceptions, and ambiguities that indicate the constant failure of our imaginary construction (Lacan 115). Therefore, it is suggested that concentrating on the Real dimension of organizational identity provides insight into the ulterior mechanism that has not been explored.

A number of studies on the fragmented identity, such as *The Fragmentation of Identity: Post-Structuralist and Postmodern Theories*, speculate identity as complex and characterized by contradictions and tensions. They argue that identity fluctuates between the certainties of the integrated self and the uncertainties of the fragmented self in a contested struggle that provides room for surveillance and liberation (Alvesson and Willmott 89).

Although identity plays a vital role in the constitution of power in society, especially within organizations, it is and will never be total. This is so because the nature of organizational surveillance is disjointed, de-centered, fragmented, and more importantly, prevailing organizational identities are always disputed and disputable as individual identity is disjointed, deviating, and vague (Alvesson and Robertson 65). Liberation from and opposition with organizational surveillance may therefore be

tangled with the ambiguities of individual identity, which disturbs and deteriorates dominant and convergent, organizational discourses (Thomas and Davies 114).

A Lacanian interpretation of organizational identity extends these perceptions by proposing that what may be referred to as suppression to discourse, especially dominant organizational identity often executed by organizational authorities, supports and legalizes misleading self-constructions. It is not just a burden but also a mechanism of subjugation and obedience that results in self-construction, which is parallel to social ideologies, not contrary to them (Humphreys and Brown 55). Put differently, objectification to an alienated and outer identity, such as recognition with the organization's identity, for example, is a description of imaginary self-construction. Such is also the case with resistance. Constructing an identity contradictory to the imposed identity to suppress or subvert organizational identity is also imaginary. Consequently, this counter-identification is as illusory as identification with the dominant identity (Holmer-Nadesan 78).

However, resistance is the indispensable element of the unconscious disruptions and is an integral part of its inexorable failure. Such denotes that the present outline provides innovative understanding to pave the path for rethinking resistance and control in organizations with respect to the nature of organizational identity. Former research results show that the subject's experience in the lack of organizational identity leads to extending individuals' spaces for action and enhancing the probability of defiance on the subject's part. The present framework suggests that organizational identity, which intensifies the experienced lack by the subject and sets the stage for resistance, also provides the potential transgression and emancipation. (Holmer-Nadesan 59).

One way to demonstrate this mechanism is by scrutinizing the interaction of the protagonist, Randle McMurphy, with the imposed organizational identity, a mental asylum, that sought to produce docile, useful subjects. The prior section discussed McMurphy's interactions with one of the asylum authorities, the Big Nurse, who attempted to impose rules and regulations to create uniform, integrated, and easily controllable subjects. This particular section investigates the failure of this imposed organizational identity as it was questioned and weakened by McMurphy's presence in the asylum and the authorities' attempt to address the transgressions of McMurphy and the other inmates in different terms of severity.

The dominant place of surveillance is the Nurses' Station, a room with a huge glass window, where the Big Nurse will "spend the day sitting at her desk and looking out her window and making notes on what goes on out in front of her in the day room during the next eight hours" (4). The Nurses' Station serves as Bentham's

panopticon tower, a disciplinary mechanism that regulates the subjects' actions by inciting and making palpable the ubiquitous fear of transgression and punishment. Whenever they want to do or say something prohibited, the inmates stealthily look at the Nurses' Station. Such is the Panoptic effect, which conditions them to think that they are continually observed, but, in actuality, they "are not really always under surveillance, they think or imagine that they are" (16). McMurphy, an inmate who opposes the imposed organizational identity, breaks the Nurses' huge glass twice and incites Scanlon to break it as well in an attempt to emancipate the other inmates from this fallacy of being constantly surveilled. This can be considered a gesture of symbolic resistance against the system of surveillance the Nurses' Station embodies and against the inculcated omnipotence and legitimacy of the organizational authorities and the rectitude of their imposed organizational identity.

Organizational identity is introduced and induced as an indicator of being normal and depicted as the perpetual human virtue, something bestowed by the celestial creature(s), namely god(s), which ultimately ensures one's salvation. All the tactics and strategies exercised by the organization address to direct the subjects to a predefined path and control or suppress their deviation from it. Put differently, organizational identity is in pursuit of the subjects' welfare as long as it is aligned with the authorities' interests. In so doing, the organizational authorities classify the transgressions in terms of the havoc they can potentially wreak on the organization and its imposed identity and define an appropriate punishment proportionate to the committed law-breaking.

The ruling authorities in Kesey's novel categorize inmates as the Acutes and the Chronics, and further, the Chronics as Walkers, Wheelers, and Vegetables. Strict observation is executed over all asylum inmates; this surveillance consequently "makes each individual a 'case': a case which at one and at the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power" (191). To illustrate this, McMurphy sets out to resist the imposed organizational identity from the moment of his arrival. He has difficulty with the admission shower, which is a ritual in any asylum and must be done at the time of arrival. Although knowing he must comply with the rules as other inmates do, he kept resisting. Observing him constantly, the Big Nurse documents his behavior, transgressions of the rules, and deviations from the established norms. Warning him to respect the rules, the Big Nurse attempts to make him docile. Any transgression committed by McMurphy is followed by a punishment applied by the Big Nurse in her attempt to find whether punishment has prohibitive effects on him. She discovers, however, that the punishments fail to discipline McMurphy. The more serious transgressions he commits, the harsher punishments she imposes on him, such as shock therapy, in an

attempt to put an end to this potential risk to their organizational identity. Keeping an eye on McMurphy and recognizing that other inmates may follow him, the Big Nurse and the staff unanimously agree that McMurphy is not "ordinary." Instead, he is a "disturbing factor" that poses a risk to their induced organizational identity, and he may potentially subvert or shift the current dominant identity. Hence, they decide to perform an operation on him, which supposedly has therapeutic effects. However, the kind of operation performed—lobotomy, which is considered the highest level of punishment in the asylum—reveals to us the authorities' ulterior motives: to render McMurphy docile and finally quell his transgressions guaranteeing the perpetuity of the established organizational identity.

As stated earlier, organizational authorities determine what kind of punishment a particular subject receives. The Big Nurse knows that sending Ruckly to the Seclusion Room is the best choice to prevent his making any further disturbance. She decides to send McMurphy or some other inmates to the Shock Shop since she finds every tried punishment so far futile to make them accept and comply with the imposed organizational identity. In the case of Billy Bibbit, she knows that threatening him by evoking his mother, the Big Nurse's friend, is the most prohibitive technique to prevent him from committing any other transgressions. Apart from all the methods to control the subjects, the organizational authorities segregate a specific class of subjects. The Acutes, who are thought to experience a lack of organizational identity and consequently are highly liable to oppose its authenticity, are separated from the Chronics whose transgressions are considered less dangerous and, as such, not a grave threat to organizational identity. The Acutes are not generally allowed to mingle with the Chronics because of the possibility of the latter's being influenced by the former. "The Big Nurse recognizes this fear and knows how to put it to use; she'll point out to an Acute, whenever he goes into 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*" (18). This fear leads the authorities to structure their imposition to make the imposed organizational identity, on the one hand, more impenetrable, and on the other hand, induce it as the prerequisite of being considered normal. Doing so will make the patients unconsciously more obedient and compliant with the organizational identity imposed upon them.

CONCLUSION

As observed and discussed above, in his novel read from a Lacanian perspective, Kesey makes an effort to unravel the underlying and under-explored mechanisms of organizational identity. Analyzed from a different viewpoint compared to numerous readings of the novel, we can look at both the work and the characters more deeply and consider more aspects that have yet remained unknown. The organizational identity constructs a uniform, integrated, and convergent identity which is readily controllable but at the same time constantly threatened by being supplanted by a fragmented, disjointed identity, which is the inevitable aftermath of the subject's experiencing lack in the imposed organizational identity. This results from the subject's recognition of this imposed identity's inability to help him attain satisfaction. Therefore, the dominant class of the society forms imaginary constructs of subjectivity and suppresses any menace on the part of iconoclasts who do not conform to the norms and endeavors to keep individuals ignorant.

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Alireza Kargar (alirezakargar1984@gmail.com) holds an M.A. in English language and literature from Lorestan University, Iran.

Hassan Abootalebi (abootalebi2010@gmail.com) is currently a PhD student of English Language and Literature at Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran. His main areas of interest are postmodernism and metamodernism.