Chapter VI

Conclusion: The American Nation through the Novels of Jerzy Kosinski

This thesis has attempted to study the novels written during the second part of Jerzy Kosinski's literary career in relation to the concept of "nation" as it has been dealt with in American history in general and American fiction in particular. I have argued that these novels—*Blind Date, Being There, The Devil Tree, Cockpit, Pinball,* and *Passion Play*—are predominantly "American Novels" and that an inquiry into the deep political aspects of these novels reveals a unique ideology of American national identity—to be precise the American national identity of the minorities of diverse origins. I have also tried to demonstrate that these novels act as a touchstone to the times in which they were written. The other three novels of Kosinski, *The Painted Bird,* *Steps,* and *The Hermit of 69th Street* were left out of this study for these novels, unlike the ones written during the second part of his career, do not have much in common in terms of thematic unity. (These reasons have been elaborated in the fifth chapter.) Kosinski's non-fiction writings like *The Future is Ours Comrade* and *No Third Path* (which were written well before he reached the United States) are also left out because of the same reasons.

After the introductory first chapter, the second chapter presented a chronological account of the philosophy of "nation" and "nationality" as it has evolved through the centuries. The framework I followed in the thesis is to approach the works of the novelist Kosinski in the light of the discussions on
(1) the basic idea of nation and national identity, (2) the history of the novel in the United States and (3) the forms of allegiance of the novel with the ideology of the nation. Since the author's background throws much light on the ways in which he uses the immigrant/deviant's ideology as opposed to the dominant ideology in the society it cannot be omitted from a study of the national identity in his works. The social and cultural background of an individual has so much to do with the formation of his/her national identity. Since any artwork is created by the individual with a class, gender and racial identity, it would not be out of place to look at the background of the artist. Essentially, the thesis tries to approach the novel from the historical and sociological points of view. It tries to place the novels of Kosinski in the backdrop of the social contexts and cultural significations of the time.

Any discussion of the philosophical attributes of the "nation" has to address the question of the individual citizen and his/her identification with the "nation" as a unifying factor. These discussions also have to address the choice of being a subject to a far-flung political system which is the nation state. Chapter two elaborates the assumptions of the theoreticians of various ages like Ernest Renan (eighteenth century) who argued that the nation is primarily a "spiritual principle" (19) and Hobsbawm (twentieth century), who believes that nations are dual phenomena but constructed essentially by the powerful in the social ladder and that to understand these phenomena one has to fundamentally analyse the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people (5-6)). The chapter also examines various ideologies such as Marxism (where nationalism is historically perceived as the
manifestation of European capitalism's need for new markets), structuralism (in particular, the work of the structuralist Marxist Louis Althusser, who analysed the state as an ideological apparatus which is used as a means of domination, an idea which he draws from Antonio Gramsci's fragmented writings) and postcolonialism (Fanon and Bhabha), where a national identity is being termed as one opposed to the Imperial powers.

Even though, the second chapter does not try to give any conclusion for the problems of the individual's identification with the nation it addresses these questions in an attempt to problematise the issue and to prepare the ground for the discussions that follow in the thesis. As a matter of fact, the different schools of thoughts on the concept of nation through ages have failed to propose a conclusive equation vis-à-vis the individual citizen and the nation. One needs to look into other disciplines like psychoanalysis and anthropology for a further understanding of the problem. A brief attempt in this direction can be seen in the second chapter in the discussion of Lacan and a political interpretation of his ideas. The chapter also tries to locate the intricacies of the relation between the subject and the state and concludes that it is even more complex than the relationship between the citizen and the nation. Another point of discussion in the chapter is the modernisation of the citizen and its implications with regard to the politics of relation between the ruler and the ruled.

The third chapter "Construction of the American Nation" moves to the more specific issues related to the conceptualisation of American nation. With respect to the changes that had taken place in the manifestation of the
American nation an issue-based approach is attempted in this chapter rather than a diachronic or factual one.

Moreover, the third chapter tries to track the attitudinal changes in terms of the individual citizen’s identification to the United States of America. The chapter further tries to examine the foundational ideals of the American nation like “liberty” and “equality” as they are presented in “the Declaration of Independence”. It is also part of the concern in the third chapter to study the foundational ethics of the United States in relation to what are termed as the “destructive forces” within the nation. These so-called disruptive elements are scrutinized in relation to the changing realities of the nation in the context of the emerging immigrant population. The impact of the increase in immigrant population can be found in two abstract terms like the “American Dream” and the “Melting Pot”. These concepts are studied accordingly in the third chapter looking at the most minute changes that had taken place to these terms during each historical point in time; special attention being given to the twentieth century and in particular the nineteen seventies. The relation of the national ideals and these abstract terms with respect to the racial and ethnic minorities is also part of the concern in this chapter. A study of the nineteen seventies in isolation would not suggest a characteristic shift in the perception of American national character. However, the national character of the nineteen seventies can be perceived as the outcome of the problems that had emerged after the Second World War and the resulting increase in immigration in the United States. The thesis locates this decade as a period
of transition from grand, age-old and unidimensional society into a society in which differences make their presence felt.

It is argued that in America racial relationships have reached a culmination point. Such an observation can be substantiated citing a few instances from American popular culture. It is a recent trend in the popular culture to discuss the negative side of the American nation. It can be observed that till very recently the popular media like fiction, film and music were part of the mainstream discourse of the American nationality. From the image epitomised as the Garden of Eden the American nation has slowly metamorphosed into an inferno and to a Melting Pot where only the voices of the powerful (read white Anglo-Saxon Protestant in the American context) are heard. Accordingly, the third chapter further arrives at a conclusion that identity of any single group, be it the majority or minority, depends a lot on differentiation. The chapter argues that in the case of the majorities the national identity depends on affirmation and negation, more so with the heightened relationships between the ethnic groups. On the other hand, the identity of the minorities depends a lot on reaffirmation. The human rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s and the resonance of the African national struggles in the United States during the 1970s can be seen in terms of such a reaffirmation.

There is bound to be a difference in the ways in which an "insider" and an "outsider" perceive the nation. ("Outsider" in this context might mean a person whose origins are outside the bounds of the United States and in a more intricate sense anyone other than a white Anglo-Saxon heterosexual
maie.) As Mason puts it, an objective perception of the nation cannot but be from outside for if it is from within there would always be a chance of personal preferences and subjective attributes coming into the picture. As a matter of fact, the American nation can only be perceived from outside, since; the discourses (like texts and images) collectively and independently make America. Thus a study of the perceptions of America from outside the boundaries of the United States of America incurs much importance. Baudrillard’s *America* and Eco’s *Travels in Hyperreality* are two accounts of travellers (even though in actual effect they turn out to be anything other than travelogue writers) from outside and they present clear and unique points of view.

In the light of the discussions of the concept of nation in the second chapter and the American nation in the third, the fourth chapter, “Thousand Faces of America: The Nation in Fiction”, attempts to study how America is represented in fiction. ‘Nation writing the novel’ is an idea which is explored at some length in this chapter. It has been argued that it is not always in an allegoric or symbolic narrative where we find the nation in the novels. Instead, any kind of political attempt in the novel induces the reader to read nation in it. A novel, according to Timothy Brennan, is open to go through such a theoretical framework and in actual effect includes/brings out such a theoretical framework. According to him the novel at the same time “reaffirms” and “creates” the people of a nation (Brennan 50). The fourth chapter looks at the history of American fiction in terms of its various manifestations at various ages. The parallels between the birth of the
American nation (the new nation) and the birth of novel (the new form) are striking. Critics have tried to compare the changes in American fiction with those in the history of the American nation. The fourth chapter also looks at the central metaphors and patterns that are part of the American fiction.

It is an unprecedented occurrence in the history of literature that a single nation expresses its multitudinous faces through ages in the fiction of the United States. Any scrutiny of American fiction will throw light on the infinite number of manifestations of the nation, which sometimes present a pessimistic and at other times positive viewpoints. Every specific period of time in the history of the United States was being represented in the novels of that time and there have also been several ways in which writers conceived this process of creating a nationality through signification. These novels belong to particular times and simultaneously they created the times. The writers have been instrumental in creating as well as reflecting different ways of life and landscapes in their work. Most times the representation of nation in the history of American fiction has been Janus-faced. In a specific point of time itself one can find the presence of an illustrious representation celebrating the United States and its glory, and, an intimidating representation collecting and presenting the depressing features.

Another effort in the fourth chapter is to analyse some of the "classics" of American fiction with regard to their approach to the American nation. Novels such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Moby Dick*, *Light in August* and *Portnoy's Complaint* are taken as representative examples of their respective times. The chapter discusses the history of the American novel with respect to the
treatment of American nation. It touches upon various themes and patterns evolved during the two-centuries long history of American fiction. The chapter also looks at the ways in which the religions in the United States are represented in the fiction: for example, it marks the changes from the conventional to the more contemporary treatment of religions. In an attempt to illustrate the difference between the traditional writers' treatment of the nation and the post world war (II) writers' treatment of the nation, an extensive discussion of two novels is attempted. These novels are Light in August and Portnoy's Complaint written by William Faulkner and Philip Roth respectively.

The second part of the chapter looks at the changes that had taken place in the twentieth century American fiction. It is argued that there is a sea of difference in the attitudes of the conventional pre-war writers and the post world war writers. The difference lies primarily in the fact that these “new” writers started treating their novels as political statements even though one might not find overt declarations to this effect. The argument here is that the way in which the world politics itself is conceived by the novelists had undergone some change. The post world war writers were interested in the politics of the relationship between the powerful and the powerless in a variety of living spaces. This is when the emergence of ethnic writers and writers from the minorities becomes important.

At this point in the history of the Unites States there are two facts worth mentioning. Both these facts are interrelated in a way. After the Second World War, as the world changed its perspectives, there has been an inflow of immigrants from the European countries to the United States. Many of these
immigrants carried along with them the horrid memories of the Holocaust and Nazi brutality. Some of them reached America with the hope that they have reached their preordained destination. Their understanding of the Unites States would have been that it is the nation which keeps up values such as liberty and equality, an impression America has always proudly propounded around the world. Like the eighteenth and nineteenth century perception of America as the Promised Land this also happened to be one of the popular notions of the United States of America outside. This would certainly have been true of the religious rights. The people who had decided to migrate to the United States from the East European countries soon after the Second World War would have been happy about the religious freedom at the first instance for they had been hunted down in the country of their birth mainly because of their religious difference. The writers from such a background perceived the American nation from a distinctive angle. They carried with them the unpleasant memories of the fascist and totalitarian regimes and tried comparing America with the autocratic systems that were prevalent in those countries. Accordingly, their approach was unique in their attitudes towards national identity.

The chapter concludes that there is no single, unified nation emerging through American fiction. But it is fairly certain, the chapter demonstrates, with respect to national identity that any novel is sure to have an ideology which is true to the particular age and which might impart the spirit of the society.
With this understanding of the concept of nation, the American nation and the nation in American fiction, the thesis approaches the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski. The fifth chapter "Jerzy Kosinski and America" looks at the second part of Kosinski’s career closely. Kosinski is admittedly not among the best-known writers of the twentieth century. During the time he was writing he enjoyed much popularity, but after his suicide in 1991, his fame receded greatly. Then, the question, why does one study his novels. The answer to this is that though he may not be a famous writer, he is a very important author in any study of the representation of nation in fiction especially in America.

In Kosinski’s novels the nation expresses itself as a repressive mechanism. He gives voices to the silenced through subnarratives of several kinds like the graffiti on a toilet wall (The Devil Tree 118). In Cockpit it is the brutality of the police force and the secret agency in the United States that is highlighted and critiqued. The novel questions the state’s political and repressive power. Cockpit argues that even though America propagates individual freedom, the individual’s life is always in scrutiny and constant threat. The Devil Tree uses the techniques of allegory and symbolism to its maximum. It presents a bird’s eye view of the difference between the poor and the wealthy in America. Kosinski engages in an enquiry of American capitalism in The Devil Tree.

From Blind Date onwards one can observe a slight change in Kosinski’s approach. He started concentrating more on the racial/ethnic minorities in the United States. Transnationality acts as a leitmotive in Blind
Date and runs through each and every relationship. Kosinski makes the social outcastes (like prostitutes, people from the lower strata of society, transsexuals, dwarfs, children, African-Americans and most importantly the immigrants and refugees) and vagrants articulate while their voices are usually unheard in the discourses of the powerful. Being an immigrant himself helps Kosinski in dealing with the problems of the immigrants. His sympathy towards the “social outcastes,” it is safe to assume, is derived out of his own personal experiences as an immigrant. As Irving Kristol puts it “the Negro today is like the immigrant of yesterday” (1). But, the phenomenon of immigration has not ended even several years after the end of the Second World War. Thinkers such as Herbert Dittgen believe that the current debate on the phenomenon of immigration “represents a new nationalism that is opposed to the traditional American liberalism” (198). The optimism is that Americanism, will imbibe Anglo-Saxon and other national elements, which "are to be blended together by the assimilating power of freedom. This is the origin of the American nationality ... in the colony of free humanity, whose mother-country is the world. The people ... establish the Republic of equal rights ... (Carl Schurz; quoted in Dittgen, 223). It is precisely this kind of assimilation that Kosinski’s characters resist.

Being there in America at a time when most of the people are interested in the Television talk shows is the major theme of Kosinski’s Being There. He questions the authority of the power politics in the United States, especially the Presidential politics. Kosinski is interested in a scrutiny of the totalitarian politics in Being There.
The fifth chapter of the thesis contains a lengthy discussion of the novel *Pinball*. The chapter argues that it is in *Pinball* that Kosinski's actual politics comes out clearly. It is a novel of passion, music and swindle. All the major characters in the novel are the "others" of the American society. Kosinski here looks at the complexities of the ethnic and racial relationship in the United States especially the relation between the African Americans and the whites. However, though he presents these characters and viewpoints in *Pinball* he never tries to be the spokesman of their problems. He leaves the value judgement to the discretion of the reader.

Even though, I have not elaborated the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin anywhere in the thesis; my arguments in the fifth chapter do have their base on his theories of fiction. Bakhtin assumed that the novel as a form utilizes all the (including the suppressed) voices in the society. One also finds in the Bakhtinian conception that (unlike in the post-structural/reader response theories) the author's voice is also of some importance, for Bakhtin argues that the author's voice is one, an important one at that, among the many voices present. Bakhtinian concept of dialogue asserts the presence of several voices (ideologies) existing side by side in the society and these voices are in dialogue with each other. These voices are not in confrontation with each other, and do not result in chaos. I did not pursue this line of inquiry far because that would have changed the whole focus of the thesis. However, a study of these novels from the Bakhtinian point of view holds potential for further research in the field.
It would also have been of much interest if I had tried to locate Kosinski's fiction in terms of the popular novels which came out in the 1970s. One finds several novels based on the stories of powerful tycoons, political leaders and business magnets in this period. An understanding of Kosinski's novels in the backdrop of the non-canonical works would be fascinating. It is not difficult to understand that Joseph Heller's novels try to figure out the intricacies of the democratic materialism of America. His first three novels namely, Catch-22 (1961), Something Happened (1974) and Good as Gold (1976) are about public institutions which are indisputably political in nature. In Catch-22, it was the military bureaucracy (thematicallly comparable to Kosinski's Cockpit) that Heller wanted to scrutinize, in Something Happened it was the Corporate Business (The Devil Tree and Blind Date are Kosinski counterparts in this direction) and in Good as Gold, the United States government itself. In an attempt which would fit in the framework that Irving Howe proposed for the 'Political novel' (Politics and the Novel 17), Heller discusses the role of political institutions in influencing, even controlling the lives and destinies of a large number of persons. Heller provides insights into the working of these power structures in order to bring out their complete social, moral, and political significance. Heller seems to have understood that unlike the previous social and political evils of feudalism and fascism, the new sources which endanger the individual are large and amorphous institutions like multinational cartels, oil companies and bureaucracies. It is in such institutions that destructive power gets concentrated.
If we consider Kosinski’s works as political novels, we find that they are characteristically different in nature and approach. As in the case of novels like *A Farewell to Arms* (Ernest Hemingway) and *The Naked and the Dead* (Norman Mailer) we find a few individuals trying to preserve their identity and their lives in Kosinski’s novels too. If in *Cockpit* it is the giant machine of bureaucracy, it is the meaninglessness of the public’s over dependency on the image making of the television that we find in *Blind Date*. In Heller’s *Good as Gold* also we find almost the same approach to the presidency of the United States as in Kosinski’s *Being There*. For Kosinski, a person stands a better chance of winning the presidential election of the United States if “he comes across well on TV”. Chance in *Being There* is being tipped as the Presidential candidate just because he is impressive on television. The readers of the novel know that Chance actually is not very intelligent or politically informed. Kosinski makes a concealed criticism of the political structure of the presidency in the United States. On the other hand, Heller is overt in his criticism. It can be seen in Gold’s selection as the advisor to the president and his aspiration to write a book on Kissinger. The president in *Good as Gold* is more a metaphor than an actual character in the novel. We find the mocking spirit of Heller when he presents this president as a very busy man. “He has to keep doing so many things a lot faster than he’s able to write about them, even when he’s doing nothing more than writing about all the things he’s supposed to be doing” (49). There are many more instances in the novel which mock the institution of president. When Gold goes to see the president at 11 in the morning as he is given an appointment, he finds him
in deep sleep and he is told that the president is an early riser. "He is up at five every morning, takes two sleeping pills and a tranquiliser, and goes right back to bed for as long as he can sleep" (205). As regards the national identity, Heller's novel ridicules the way it is formed in the United States at the moment. He is critical of the presidential position and all other government structures. Gold in the novel finds his identity through his proposed book on the Jewish Experience in America; if he had not attempted such a work he would have lost his identity forever. On the other hand Kosinski's characters formulate their national identity through their dialogue/context within a social sphere.

In order to see the individual quality in the approach of Kosinski in his novels, one has also to compare Kosinski's themes with those of a writer from another generation. The contrast is also visible in the mode of characterisation. Let us look at another novelist who is proudly associated with heroism and image building, Ernest Hemingway. Even though his novels might move about in the direction of pessimism, it is easy to perceive him as a true representative of the American modernist tradition in fiction. Hemingway's themes for the most part are war and related issues. Many of his novels discussed the horrors of war together with an illustration of human life in the battlefields mostly during the First World War and the Spanish Civil War (like For Whom the Bell Tolls and A Farewell to Arms). However, Hemingway, being truthful to his generation of American writers, maintains humanity, human values and human feelings at the centre of his arguments. One does not fail to notice that, his themes are centred on feelings and
emotions of human beings and their intensity whenever "normality" is threatened. Hemingway believed and placed human values as the most crucial concern for the characters in his novels. Moreover, these heroes (most of whom have an autobiographical relation with the author) rise far above the others who might fumble in the face of adversities. On the other hand, what one finds in Kosinski's novels are human beings removed from the centre position as individuals and presented characteristically in social contexts and critical situations. Kosinski's characters are socially conscious, rounded beings, who might sometimes deserve a position of a hero and at other times the status of a villain (Demostroy in *Pinball* is a perfect example) according to the situation in which they find themselves entangled. In trickiest situations they do not always long for human values, neither are they allegoric representations of all good values one can think of. They are much too informed not to maintain that the ideas of values are arbitrary and that there is no single emotion/feeling which is common to two individuals. Values for them are always already constructed and not needed to be followed in the contemporary circumstances.

This study of Kosinski and of the "nation" does not claim to be complete in any sense. There is a lot to be done in the area of fiction studies with regard to the national identity. There are other areas like the diasporic image of the nation, the power politics of the United States' presidents and the like. My idea was to attempt to fill a gap in American fiction studies, where one does not find many attempts to study the nation as presented in novels. However, my aim was to study fiction using the tools provided by other
disciplines in humanities like history and sociology. The thesis can be seen as a humble beginning in these directions.