Abstract

The dissertation attempts to study the novels of Jerzy Kosinski in the backdrop of the cultural and social contexts of the American nation in the 1970s.

"Nation" and "national identity" are two related phenomena which have become central to contemporary cultural discursive practices. Nation can be considered as a constantly changing social entity. The national identity of an individual is in many ways interrelated to the construction of nation. The construction of a nation and national identity can also be seen as an individual's longing to become a part of a larger group. However, it is not possible to have an absolute understanding of the individual's identification with any larger group or for that matter the nation. Individual identity is, in fact, related to economic, cultural, geographic and social realities. It becomes important to understand the construction of nation in novels because of the "all inclusive" nature of novel form. Jerzy Kosinski's peculiar status in the United States as an immigrant, ethnic and politically conscious novelist then becomes an interesting case in point.

After the introductory first chapter, the second chapter "Theories of nation" discusses various theories regarding the concept of "nation". The attempt here is to give a diachronic account of the concept of nation. Since it is in Europe the nation was realised for the first time, the chapter analyses the construction of nationality and national identity as they are formed there. The
question of individual’s identification with the nation is also part of the concern of this chapter.

An attempt is made to understand the nation from etymological, philosophical, cultural, ideological, social and anthropological dimensions. I have discussed the ideas of early thinkers like Ernest Renan as well as contemporary thinkers like Anthony D. Smith and Eric Hobsbawm on the nation. Benedict Anderson also holds a major position among thinkers on the nation, for his path-breaking insights on imagined communities. Various reasons for the emergence of a nation like religion, geography, language, and history are also discussed in the chapter.

The third chapter “Construction of the American Nation” addresses the problem of analysing the popular concept of American nationality and the difficulty of comparing the popular discourse with a number of writings and a few instances form the popular culture. This issue is looked at from a long term historical perspective as well as a temporally specific perspective. It is observed that there is a characteristic fissure in the conceptualisation of American nation in the 1970s. The history of the United States from the days of colonialism is examined to understand the deviations which the foundational ideals have gone through. The chapter tries to understand why immigrants are attracted towards America and also how these immigrants have changed the social and cultural equations in the nation. Concepts like “Melting-Pot” and the “American Dream” are discussed in detail to grasp the politico-cultural equations in the society including the issue of minorities. The
notion of national identity gets complicated when one approaches a multiethnic society like America.

The fourth chapter "Thousand Faces of America: The Nation in Fiction" traces the depiction of America in fiction from the earlier periods to the present. The attempt in this chapter is to map out the history of American nation in relation to the history of American fiction. "Nation writing the novel" is an idea which is discussed at some length here. Some of the historically important novels like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick* have been taken as representative examples of particular times. Taking the queue from Leslie Fiedler chapter searches for the symbolic pattern and its significance to the depiction of nation in the traditional novels. The traditional themes like pioneering, frontier life, and Puritanism are perceived as representative ideologies of the American way of life in the initial years of the nation. It is interesting to note that the birth of the novel as a new and potent form coincides with the birth of the nation in America. The second part of the chapter is concerned with the thematic and formal characteristics of post world war (II) novelists.

The third chapter further considers the politics of the twentieth century writers and attempted a comparative study of the representative novels of the significant periods in the history of American fiction; namely pre-war and post-war. In order to stress the differences between these two generations William Faulkner's *Light in August*, which can be considered a representative example of the conventional pre-war novel, and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*, which depicts the anguish of the post-war generation, are taken up for
detailed analysis. The chapter views the emergence of ethnic/minority writing as a phenomenal step forward in the history of American fiction and cites Jewish fiction, Women's fiction, African American fiction and African American Women's fiction as characteristic examples of ethnic/minority writing. The peculiarity of these “new” writings is that they project the social, political and ethnic reality in America in a radical way. The novel in the 1970s is specific to particular communities or a particular social context as opposed to the traditional notions of human values as the central concern.

The fifth chapter entitled “Jerzy Kosinski and America” concentrates on the fiction of Jerzy Kosinski and tries to locate him as a true chronicler of his times. It is in the second part of his literary career that one finds Kosinski directing his attention more on American nation. The novels like Cockpit, The Devil Tree, Being There, Blind Date and Pinball are viewed from the angle of their approach to the nation. The approach of each novel is different from the others. In Cockpit, it is the police force as a repressive state apparatus which Kosinski is concerned with. The Devil Tree and Blind Date are testimonials of corporate lives. Kosinski presents a contrastive picture of the classes in these novels. Being There mocks the television watching public who believe at whoever “comes well on TV” is good for the chair of the President in the United States. Pinball is perceived as a novel which goes deep into various manifestations of racial relationships in America. The central characters in Pinball can be seen as “outsiders” or “others” in the American nation, which predominantly consists of a White Anglo Saxon Protestant society.
The chapter analyses Kosinski’s novels with and against such American social constructs and events like the American Dream, Melting-Pot, Civil Rights movements and the Vietnam War. The chapter also tries to observe the concept of nation in his novels and finds that America is an individualistic nation wherein the sacrifices and glory of the past have no value. We find a conscious and deliberate effort to undermine the nationalistic feeling in his novels where the reader is always provided with images of threat and political terror.

In order to arrive at a clear understanding of Jerzy Kosinski’s approach to the nation, the last chapter also includes brief attempts to compare Kosinski with a novelist from his previous generation (Ernest Hemingway) and a contemporary novelist (Joseph Heller). The conclusion also suggests areas for further research in Kosinski’s novels.