Chapter I

Introduction

In the beginning, my questions were related to images. It happened to be a long and winding road to the central questions of nation at the completion of the thesis from the raw materials termed images at the beginning of the research. But the journey had to reach this destination, since it is the nation that keeps a vigil in most of the creative endeavours that are being attempted in virtually every part of the world. However, it would be appropriate to mention the way the thesis is given a shape and the ways in which I conceptualised and zeroed down to the question of nation in fiction. This chapter also attempts to give an introduction to the other five chapters in the thesis.

For my MA and MPhil theses I worked on films. I should add that those were fundamentally apolitical approaches. But, among other things, they concerned images. During the period of this research the interest in images had been pushed farther to accommodate innumerable possibilities in various fields; and finally settled on images of the nation as well.

It is the same interest in images that led me to Jerzy Kosinski. Reading Kosinski, without bothering much about the politics that he tries to convey vis-à-vis the politics that is inherent in his style, was a pleasure thanks to the striking images he presents over and over again. Every novel of his
has a stunning image as a central metaphor (the image of the bird with painted feathers in *The Painted Bird*, the tree whose roots grow upwards and whose branches grow downwards in *The Devil Tree*). It is much later, in the second or third reading, when these powerful images made way to other images of disparity and the possibilities of meta-images that I was forced to extend my inquiry and look for a coherent and binding image (Donna playing the piano in *Pinball* is a picture, the next picture in the novel is how the other characters ogle her; how they perceive her physical presence, presenting a picture. An image being followed by an interpretation of it is very typical of Kosinski—I call this process meta-image).

Consequently, my inquiry led to the ideology of fiction wherein I was thinking about the position of a particular novelist/writer in society. For such a study the background of the writer is of prime importance. Kosinski, being an immigrant in the United States, is bound to have a particular notion of the individual in a society. His approach to that society is largely informed by his previous years under the watchful eyes of the totalitarian regimes in Poland and the USSR. Instead of a direct comparison between the totalitarian regime and the federal establishment he went straight into a scrutiny of national identity in the United States in his novels. Nevertheless, the conclusion he reaches is that, in the final analysis in terms of the individual subject’s alienation from power, there was no difference between the totalitarian and “democratic” societies, particularly when it comes to the power tactics of the state. The difference also fizzles out when it comes to the ontological underpinning of the relationship between the nation as a unified power centre
and the individual subject as an insignificant and far removed category from it, whether it happens to be a totalitarian establishment or federal institution. Kosinski understands the construction of nation in these perspectives. As a result, the question of nation has become the central feature of the second part of his career as a novelist. My enquiry, thus, started off with the images, went further on to the images of the nation, and zeroed in on the dimensions of the relationship between the individual subject and the nation.

It is a rather ironic fact that the very idea of nation has created conflicts in many regions of the world such as Northern Ireland and the northern parts of Sri Lanka to name a few. Nation as a philosophical concept is present everywhere, only that its manifestation changes from one geographical locale to another and one people to another resulting in a polity which is unique in all aspects. We understand that the process of formation of nations has never reached completion and that the process will carry on till human beings exist on earth. We also understand that nation is an empirical perception which undergoes changes according to time and various other factors (like economic and social issues). As Anthony Smith puts "it is therefore hardly surprising if an ideal that lacks a central tradition, single prophet or biblical text or canon, should have undergone so many transformations" (Nationalism in the Twentieth Century 13). Thus it is of extreme importance to study nation at a particular point of time since one can only study it specifying a period.

The word "nation" has its roots in the Latin word *natio*. (A detailed discussion of the origin of the term can be found in Greenfeld *Nationalism* 4-
I use the term "nation" in the thesis borrowing largely from Liah Greenfeld's ideas. According to him:

At the time when the word "nation" acquired its modern meaning and became the synonym of the "people", it meant "an elite", specifically referring to "an elite of representatives of cultural and political authority" [...] the equation of the two concepts—"people" and "nation"—signified a conceptual revolution, especially since, prior to this, the word "people" commonly denoted the lower classes and was not most frequently used as a synonym of "rabble" or "plebs". The redefinition of the "people" as a "nation" symbolically elevated the populace to the dignity of an elite. (Greenfeld, "American Nationalism" 19-20)

In order to understand the various facets of the nation and its implication in the present time one needs to first understand nationalism. And nationalism is an umbrella term that can only be understood in relation to the phenomena of national identity or nationality.

Whatever else it is, nationalism is a set of ideas and sentiments which form the framework of national identity. National identity is distinguished from other identities (such as religious or class, for instance) in that the source of identity, in this case, is located with a "people", which is seen as the bearer of sovereignty, the supreme object of loyalty, and the basis of collective solidarity. The "people" is a mass of population whose
boundaries and nature are variously defined, but which is necessarily perceived as, in some fundamental sense, a community of equals, only superficially divided by the lines of class, status, locality and (in certain cases) even ethnicity. This distinctiveness, the specificity of nationalism [...] is strictly conceptual. The only foundation of nationalism in general, the only factor without which no nationalism is possible, is the presence of a certain idea—the idea of the "nation". (Greenfeld, "American Nationalism" 19)

I have attempted to look into these issues more elaborately in the next chapter, "Theories of Nation" where I discuss the basics of the construction of national identity. I have tried to discuss the ideas of nation and nationalism in a diachronic way. Hence the first part of the chapter deliberates on the various theories and theoreticians of nation and analyses the ways in which the nation is being conceptualised and constructed in various countries. In the last part of the chapter my attempt revolves around the problem of the construction of nation (be it actual realisation or theoretical understanding). The question raised here is related to the individual subject's identification with the far-fetched establishment which is being termed as nation. The chapter argues that the individual's identification is not a single dimensional one and that it is not always given to the individual to pick and choose his/her nationality. An attempt is also made in the first chapter to understand the Marxist concept of nation. Even though Marxists are supposed to be internationalists they understand the centrality of the construction of national
identity in the present-day social and political theories. In addition to these, the chapter explores how the idea of nation has been expanded and diversified to fit a variety of geopolitical situations and social needs as well. Such a survey becomes inevitable since there is no “complete” principle and all these various principles have their own lineage according to the situation. Keeping up with the new trends in the studies of psychiatry and politics, an effort is made in this chapter to incorporate the basic concepts of Jacques Lacan and Félix Guattari in terms of the relationship between the individual and nation.

If we look closely at the growth of the American nation in relation to its founding ideals, a rupture can be found in the twentieth century and more precisely in the 1970s. In the third chapter I probe the history of these ideals from the days of the nation’s formation to the 1970s. I go back, in the fourth chapter, to the reasons of this rupture by looking at the ways in which the nation is being depicted in fiction. Taking the cue from the 1970s and the culmination of issues that are part of the 1970s I argue that the immigrant’s conceptualisation of nation is completely different from the “normal” native’s. These issues have now got more relevance in the backdrop of the problems that grew up after the September 11, 2001 attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York. It proves the theory that America has not learned from its past mistakes (such as the numerous attacks it had undertaken on small countries like Vietnam) and that the roots of its doom are spelt out in the state’s own foreign policy and the way it has treated immigrants and racial minorities as the “others” within the boundaries of the
very nation. When we discuss the 1970s the problems of the African American community also gain much importance.

The third chapter “Construction of the American Nation” analyses the construction of America as a nation. It has been the fate of the American nation, it is said, “not to have ideologies but to be one” (Kohn 13). This must be true of every nation, since every nation is primarily a manifestation of an ideology. But when one considers the case of America, one feels that this concept—of nation as the manifestation of an ideology—is more appropriate to America than to any other nation. For, everything that later became part of the American society was constructed later on. That it is a nation was the only certainty at the time when the nationality was conceived in America. The social reality in the United States has grown independently, without any visible relation to the idea of nation.

With regard to the study of the American nation two fundamental issues are addressed in the third chapter. They are namely; one, understanding the popular concept of American nationality, and two, comparing and contrasting the popular construction of nation with a few instances from popular culture. The chapter further probes the origins of the nation, the ideals on which the nation is being built and the reasons behind such an organisation. The chapter brings out the differences between the origins of nation in the United States and elsewhere.

The chapter looks at the problems faced by the immigrants in the United States. There is an attempt to study the various implications of terms of importance like “the American Dream” and “the Melting Pot” in American
society in the chapter. An attempt is also made to differentiate the conceptualisation of the nation according to the native and immigrant perceptions. The third chapter compares the popular notions of American nation with the "outsider's views" of Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco.

The third chapter also tries to discuss the crucial issues that are part of most of the twentieth century enquiries with regard to the American nation like racial disparity and the people's unrest due to the reactions against the Vietnam War. A detailed discussion is attempted by looking at the various facets of the conceptualisation of nation in the 1970s. The chapter tries to argue that from 1970 onwards there is a characteristic fissure in the conceptualisation of the nation in the United States and that there is a distinctive difference from the earlier ideals which were completely shattered by the seventies. It is rather a surprising fact that America sails through as a nation even after all these differences of opinions. Some sociologists (for example Judt) see the traces of nationalism "as a pathological condition of incomplete 'modernity' (Judt 44)" (Krakau 8) and some others believe that nationalism has taken with it the positive traces of modernization and reached a state of post-modernity.

The nations of Western Europe and North America have long reached an advanced point on the road of modernization, or have actually become post-modern societies. Yet nationalism has waned and waxed in and among them for obviously very different kinds of reasons. Others, in contrary perspective, see traces of nationalism. (Krakau 8)
When Englishmen in America, who shared a common history, especially a tradition of rights, laws, and institutions with England, finally wanted to separate because England arbitrarily threatened these very rights, they had to redefine their existence in America in new and different terms. They chose the terms and language of the eighteenth century enlightenment like the "universal", "individualistic", "egalitarian values", "rights of man", "natural rights", "popular sovereignty" and so on.

Several commentators have pointed to the fact that the novel as a form and the nation as we perceive it in the modern sense came into existence almost at the same period of time (Fiedler, *Love and Death* xvii; Brennen 50). The fourth chapter "Thousand Faces of America: the Nation in Fiction" discusses the taking off points through which one can address the much-debated issue of narration of the nation in novel. American fiction on its part has been instrumental in bringing out various facets of the American nation into light. Hence, we have an abundance of interpretations of the nation from the date of the nation's formation itself. These novels have not been unidirectional, on the other hand, there were several kinds of interpretations even at a single point of time itself. The chapter discusses various themes that are being discussed in the American novel with and against the history of the nation. To arrive at a conclusion I have used several masterpieces of American fiction from various ages as points of reference in this chapter. Detailed discussions of the changes that took place in the field of fiction after the Second World War have been included. The last part of the fourth chapter discusses the reasons behind the emergence of a political
consciousness in American fiction. The various ways in which the political/ideological outlook take shape in the novel are also discussed with examples where necessary.

The fifth chapter of the thesis entitled "Jerzy Kosinski and America" concentrates on the works of Jerzy Kosinski. I argue that it is not nationalism that we see in Kosinski, on the other hand we would be able to locate several instances in which he and his characters undermine the nationalism of the United States of America. Through his novels he gives voice to the hitherto suppressed voices within the American nation. This trend can be perceived in perfect unison with other contemporaries in writing fiction. One finds images of threat and political terror repeating themselves in his novels. He constantly presents sub-narratives which make the reader think about the social, historical and schizophrenic aspects of the individual's life in the United States.

It is in the second part of his writing career that Kosinski concentrates more on the political concerns of the American nation. Ideology acts as the leitmotiv in all the novels of this second period. Novels like Being There, The Devil Tree, Cockpit, Blind Date, and Pinball have a perfect vision of the nation built within them. This vision, I shall argue in the chapter, is unique to Kosinski because of his ideological concerns.

It is the borderline between the study of literature and cultural studies that allows one to look at the nature of the relationship between the individual and the nation. The thesis is also a product of the modern studies using the tools of history and sociology. As a matter of fact, it is the intervention of
history and sociology that allows a researcher to contextualise the process of writing and reading and in that process studying literature itself.

If we consider studies in American fiction, not many have attempted to look at the importance of the nation which is being depicted in the novel. It will be a huge project to find out the various ways in which nation is being depicted in the American novel and it would not be feasible for a single PhD thesis. I would not claim that I have attempted such an exhaustive study. In fact, the works of Leslie Fiedler (Love and Death in the American Novel for example) can be seen as attempt in this direction. But Fiedler does not attempt to look at the characteristic narrative devices of the nation in the novel. His attempt to a certain extent is about the particular structure that is presented by the themes in the American fiction. However, my attempt is just a beginning in a direction: which follows Fiedler mostly in methodology and differs mostly when I concentrate more on the basic constructional points like the individual's identification with the nation and relationships between the various racial groups within the American nation. It is the same case with the theory of "nation writing the novel". There are not many critical works attempting the topic. But there are some works and these are related to the third world situations and environment. My attempt in the thesis thus is to fill a gap in the area of American studies and America fiction studies in this respect.